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Her Story in *Partonopeu de Blois*

Rereading Byzantine Relations

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Cover image: Mosaic of Parthenope and Methiokos, from the Zeugma Mosaic Museum, Gaziantep, Turkey

Abstract

This thesis investigates the twelfth-century Old French anonymous romance *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to the Greek novel tradition and the Byzantine world. The study focuses on the erotic narrative in the romance and articulations of feminine subjectivity. If we read this text in relation to Byzantine literature, and the Greek novel tradition more generally, we could see new things in the courtly romance. Through the Byzantine relations, the romance constructs room for the female character to be a desiring subject. The two main Byzantine texts that are compared to *Partonopeu de Blois* are, first, Eumathios Makrembolites' novel *Hysmine and Hysminias*, second, the historiographical work the *Alexiad*, by Anna Komnene, who was a Byzantine princess and historian. Another text of importance is Apuleius' Cupid and Psyche-tale, found in his Latin novel *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*. Other than these mentioned texts, other ones are discussed in minor scale, such as Theodore Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* and Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*.

The study is outlined in three analytical chapters, based on different themes: touch, gaze, and voice. In the first chapter, focus is put on erotic narratives. In the second chapter, focus is put on the inscription of a feminine desiring gaze into the rhetorical discourse. In the third chapter, focus is put on the voice, and how speaking is connected to power and desire in the narratives.

If we consider twelfth-century Byzantine literature and the Greek novel into our reading of *Partonopeu de Blois*, we could see forms of feminine agency and power that remain obscure if we do not take them into account. Through this sort of fusion of literary influences, feminine subjectivity is articulated in *Partonopeu de Blois*, which, I demonstrate, should be seen in relation to feminine voices discernible in the Byzantine literary context as well.

Svensk sammanfattning

Den här avhandlingen undersöker den fornfranska, anonyma elvahundratalromanen *Partonopeu de Blois* i relation till den grekiska romantraditionen, från antiken till elvahundratalets Bysans, samt i relation till bysantinsk historiografi. Studien fokuserar på den erotiska aspekten av berättelsen och på uttryck för kvinnlig subjektivitet. Om vi läser den fornfranska texten i relation till bysantinsk litteratur, och den grekiska romantraditionen mer generellt, så kan vi se nya saker i den höviska romanen. Genom bysantinska kopplingar skapar romanen utrymme för den kvinnliga karaktären att vara ett begärande subjekt. De två bysantinska huvudtexter som *Partonopeu de Blois* jämförs med är Eumathios Makrembolites roman *Hysmine och Hysminias* samt *Alexiaden* av prinsessan och historikern Anna Komnena. En annan viktig text för studien är berättelsen om Amor och Psyke ur Apulejus antika, latinska roman *Metamorfoser* eller *Den gyllene åsnan*. Vidare analyseras även, i mindre skala, Theodoros Prodromos *Rhodanthe och Dosikles*, Achilles Tatius *Leukippe och Kleitophon*, Longus *Daphnis och Chloe*, samt Andreas Capellanus *De Amore*.

Studien är disponerad i tre analyskapitel, baserade på olika teman: beröring (*Touch*), blick (*Gaze*) och röst (*Voice*). I det första kapitlet ligger fokus på att jämföra de erotiska berättelsestrukturerna i *Partonopeu de Blois* och *Hysmine och Hysminias*. I det andra kapitlet ligger fokus på hur texterna skriver in en kvinnlig, begärande blick i den retoriska diskursen och i berättelserna. I det tredje kapitlet ligger fokus på rösten och hur talet är kopplat till makt i berättelserna.

Om vi beaktar den bysantinska litteraturen och den grekiska romantraditionen i läsningen av *Partonopeu de Blois*, och således troligen även andra höviska verk, så kan vi se uttryck för kvinnlig agens och makt som annars förblir i dunkel. Genom att använda sig av litterära influenser på olika sätt kan verk artikulera kvinnlig subjektivitet, något som avhandlingen menar gäller i både den fornfranska och bysantinska elvahundratalslitteraturen.

*To a voice of infinite influence,
Anna, my mother*

μνάσεσθαι τινά φαιμι † καὶ ἕτερον † ἀμμέων.¹

*Someone will remember us
I say
even in another time²*

¹ Sappho, fr. 147, quoted from Campbell (1982) 1990.

² Translation quoted from Carson 2002.

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INTRODUCTION

‘Écrire, c’est réinventer l’amour’, writes Julia Kristeva in her three-volume essay on the feminine genius, specifically referring to French author and artist Colette (1873–1954).³ She goes on to state that a subject of desire has found various descriptions and formulations ever since the foundations of Western tradition from Plato’s *Symposium* and *The Song of Songs*.⁴ If aesthetic creation ‘mobilises’ sensuous experience in a simultaneous relationship between desire and language, as Kristeva states, then love is endlessly in the making, along with language itself.

To compose a setting for an imaginary Byzantium is also to reinvent desire and love. In this thesis, I explore the erotic narrative of the anonymous twelfth-century Old French romance *Partonopeu de Blois*, and its possible relation to twelfth-century Byzantine literature, and more generally to the tradition of the Graeco-Roman novel. *Partonopeu de Blois* is a reworking of the tale of Cupid and Psyche, traced back to Apuleius’ ancient Latin novel *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*. In this medieval tale, Cupid has been replaced by the Byzantine empress, Melior, while the French knight Partonopeu has taken Psyche’s place.

I compare this romance primarily with two Byzantine works: Eumathios Makrembolites’ *Hysmine and Hysminias* and Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad*, but also other ancient and medieval intertexts. In light of its use of different intertexts, as well as the Byzantine narrative space, the romance is explored as a reinvention of a feminine subject of desire.

³ Kristeva 2002, 325.

⁴ Kristeva 2002, 325.

Feminine Subjectivity

The study sets out to offer an interpretation of feminine subjectivity in medieval narratives, based on the question: what is a feminine subject of desire? Reading the twelfth-century literary works, I explore this question with the help of feminist theorists such as Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir, and Luce Irigaray. All three reflect in both similar and different ways on the gender asymmetry created in patriarchal culture. Beauvoir describes the modern woman's situation and its relation to history. Irigaray explores the potentiality of women's access to language and desire, by returning to Plato. Kristeva discusses the presence of subjectivity in language from different angles, both in texts from different periods and in gendered, historical contexts. I also find these thinkers useful for a discussion of feminine subjectivity in the Greek and Latin traditions. In other words, their writings on women's subjectivity (or lack thereof) in relation to language and history offer valuable concepts and perspectives to help us understand how feminine subjectivity can be interpreted in the works under scrutiny.

As a point of departure, I take Beauvoir's description of the difficulty for a woman to speak in a masculine discourse from *Le Deuxième sexe* (1949), which actually draws on subjective experience:

La femme apparaît comme le négatif si bien que toute détermination lui est imputée comme limitation, sans réciprocité. Je me suis agacée parfois au cours de discussions abstraites d'entendre des hommes me dire: 'Vous pensez telle chose parce que vous êtes une femme'; mais je savais que ma seule défense, c'était de répondre: 'Je la pense parce qu'elle est vraie' éliminant par là ma subjectivité.⁵

Accordingly, men are not seen as speaking from a special position; theirs is the objective position. Language is thus masculine: men's utterances are automatically interpreted as articulations of truth, and if a woman

⁵ Beauvoir (1949) 1976a, 16. This anecdote has been described by Toril Moi as 'a brilliant invitation to consider what it means to be a woman in a sexist world'; Moi 1999, 222.

articulates a claim to truth she has to deny her sex, her subjectivity. In the masculine discourse, how can a woman speak?

Beauvoir explains this situation in her own modern world, by looking back in history. Women, she argues, have always been defined as an alterity to men, as men's 'other', objects opposed to subjects. Beauvoir reads the situation from an existentialist perspective: to exist is to reach beyond oneself, to find oneself connected with the world and to create one's life in one's own activity. Yet, women have been denied access to such a transcendental subjectivity throughout the course of history as we know it, and have instead been forced into immanent passivity.

Irigaray similarly describes the absence of women's subjectivity in history.⁶ In *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977), she argues for the need to study the tradition, in order to understand the power structures between men and women:

Il fallait donc y faire retour, pour interroger ce qui fait la puissance de sa systématique, la force de sa cohésion, la ressource de ses déploiements, la généralité de sa loi et de sa valeur. C'est dire sa *position de maîtrise*, et de reprise possible des différentes productions de l'histoire.⁷

Regarding the masculine tradition, Irigaray establishes a point of departure in Plato's *Symposium*, but also a possible appropriation of feminine subjectivity. In her reading of Diotima's place in the Socratic dialogue, Irigaray demonstrates how, ever since the foundations of Western culture, women have been excluded from language. In the dialogue, Socrates explains the essence of love by re-teaching his wise teacher Diotima's lesson. Her thoughts are articulated through his voice; she herself is never included in the conversation. Hence, the 'truths' uttered in the dialogue are being questioned: 'Et, en réponse à la protestation de Socrate que l'amour est un grand Dieu, que *tout le monde le dit ou le pense tel*, elle

⁶ This does not entail that they present an equal view on feminine subjectivity.

⁷ Irigaray 1977, 72.

rit. [...] En riant, donc, elle demande à Socrate qui est ce *tout le monde*'.⁸ Women are thus excluded from language, but with Diotima's laughter in Irigaray's reading, this exclusion is threatened, from the subaltern position.

However, the interpretation of such exclusion of women from the Greek tradition can be questioned. The most obvious case to mention in this regard is probably Sappho, who was already a known and celebrated poet of the Graeco-Roman world in Antiquity.⁹ The case of Sappho's poetry of feminine desire brings us to the purpose of this study: to trace a continuous thread of representations of feminine subjectivity through the ancient and medieval literary traditions of the Mediterranean world. As Yopie Prins writes regarding the afterlife of Sappho in English literature, the 'moment of oral performance during Sappho's lifetime is [...] replaced by another kind of performativity: it is the performance of tradition itself that ensures Sappho's afterlife'.¹⁰ In other words, the search for Sappho's voice is not so much a quest for the biographical Sappho, but a tradition of Sappho's lyric, i.e. the tradition of a feminine voice or a feminine subject of desire. In this study, which does not focus on English literature, it is demonstrated that Prins' statement is applicable to medieval Mediterranean material as well. Sappho's poetry, and consequently her voice, is fragmented in the reception she receives, for which cause twelfth-century Byzantine intellectual John Tzetzes laments that 'the passage of time has destroyed Sappho and her works' (ἐπειδὴ παρανάλωμα τοῦ χρόνου ἐγγέγονει | καὶ ἡ Σαπφὼ καὶ τὰ Σαπφοῦς).¹¹ Yet, as Prins points out, 'in this sentence she is named twice as a poet to be remembered: the name survives in a long tradition of recollecting her scattered fragments'.¹² Sappho survives also in the novel genre; Longus is known to have used lyrics from the Lesbian poet in the composition of his *Daphnis*

⁸ Irigaray 1984, 28.

⁹ Regarding the Sappho tradition; see Andreadis 2014.

¹⁰ Prins 1996, 37.

¹¹ Tzetzes is here quoted from Campbell 1990, 50. The translation is also quoted from this source, Campbell 1990, 51. Prins also quotes Tzetzes' lines, see Prins 1996, 37.

¹² Prins 1996, 37.

and *Chloe*.¹³ In Sappho's fragments, we trace a voice articulating a feminine subject of desire, perpetually claiming relevance – not least in the novel tradition upon which we are about to embark.¹⁴

Kristeva connects her analyses of modern literature and her analyses of feminine subjectivity to an ancient and biblical heritage. To write is to reinvent desire and love continuously through time, as it were. Irigaray also formulates a relation between language and subjectivity in this respect, present ever since Antiquity, on which the Western literary tradition is based, but in a more negative way. Irigaray rather seems to argue that – up until modern times – women have been doomed to be subjugated to the language of men, lacking voices of their own. In other words, women have never formulated desire, their sensual experience is unarticulated. In this sense, women can be considered to have been excluded from Western culture, as illustrated by Diotima's inclusion in Plato's *Symposium* – only through Socrates' mouth.

Yet, with Kristeva – and indeed with Sappho – the view of women as excluded from language, and by consequence from history, is challenged. In Colette's writing, Kristeva traces a way out of the situation inside which Beauvoir, in her anecdote, describes herself to be trapped. Colette writes herself out of the position of 'desired object', the position of 'other', to instead 'se confondre seule et uniquement avec le rythme du monde', which then leaves us with the inevitable question: with the articulation of the feminine subject of desire, what remains of love as we have usually known it?¹⁵ In her reading, Kristeva finds a changeable desire along with a varied way of writing, new approaches to the world and others; a transcendent subject in literary representations of feminine desire.¹⁶ To be sure, Colette places herself in a specific time; the feminine subject of her writings belongs to the literary development of the modern period. Nevertheless, this entails that articulations of feminine subjectivity can indeed be traced in masculine discourse.

¹³ Hunter 1983, 62 and 73.

¹⁴ Regarding Sappho's unending relevance in the tradition; see Greene 1996a.

¹⁵ Kristeva 2002, 110.

¹⁶ Kristeva 2002, 109.

I approach twelfth-century Old French and Byzantine literature mainly through the lens of Kristeva's literary readings and theories of feminine subjectivity. The study has two main aims: the first is to acknowledge the history of feminine subjectivity as it is articulated in the literary tradition of the medieval Mediterranean world. The other aim is to investigate the cultural and literary connections between twelfth-century narratives of the Byzantine and Old French courts, through comparative readings. I will demonstrate a possible relation between interpreted Byzantine narrative features in *Partonopeu de Blois*, and works from the Komnenian court. I argue that analysing the relation between these two literary contexts causes us to challenge previous readings of medieval literature from two angles. From the first angle, we may acknowledge a present reception of the Graeco-Roman novel tradition in the twelfth-century Old French romance. From the second angle, rather than seeing medieval literature as representations of a masculine discourse, we may instead read the works under scrutiny as articulations of feminine subjectivity in dialogue with, or rather appropriating, the masculine tradition inside which they are composed.

Partonopeu de Blois and Byzantine Relations

Partonopeu de Blois is a romance that is, as Esperanza Bermejo argues: 'assez difficile à classer'.¹⁷ It is a romance in dialogue with the ancient world, the courtly world – and, perhaps most importantly, the Byzantine world. In this study, we will look at the romance's relation to the Byzantine world, more specifically its literature, to see how these two literary contexts could have been connected.

Partonopeu de Blois survives in seven manuscripts, three fragments and thirty-three extracts.¹⁸ There are three different versions of the plot. In the earliest version, the ending features a triple wedding, and in the

¹⁷ Bermejo 2001, 223.

¹⁸ Eley 2011, 1 and Appendix 1; see also Collet and Joris 2005, 60–62.

other two a single wedding. There is a continuing part following the romance, referred to as the Continuation, containing more heroic adventures.¹⁹ The Continuation is not discussed in this study, since it does not pay any real attention to the relationship between Partonopeu and Melior, which is the focal point for this study. The edition used in my study presents the story based on the existing manuscripts but with Manuscript A (Arsenal 2986) as its main source, which is also considered to recount the original version of the story.²⁰ I focus on this plausibly original version, featuring the triple wedding. Regarding the romance's date, it has been suggested between the years 1170 to around 1185. In her study on the romance (2011), Penny Eley describes *Partonopeu de Blois* as seen 'as a series of versions – or editions – of a story that first went into circulation at the beginning of the 1170s'.²¹

For a long period of time, there was no modern edition of the romance available. The first critical edition was created by A. C. M. Robert and Georges-Adrien Crapelet in 1834, the second in 1967–1970 by Joseph Gildea, and the third in 2005, by Olivier Collet and Pierre-Marie Joris.²² The same year, Eley, Penny Simons, Mario Longtin, Catherine Hanley, and Philip Shaw published the fourth edition: an online edition entitled *Partonopeus de Blois: An Electronic Edition*.²³

Anthime Fourier's chapter on the romance in *Le Courant réaliste dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen-Âge* (1960) is an important work to mention regarding the editorial history and modern reception of the romance. Fourier made the story available to audiences at a time when there was no modern edition to hand. Today, the situation has changed, given the increased number of editions currently available.

¹⁹ Eley argues that the Continuation was composed by the poet of Manuscript A (at least to some extent), i.e. that it is in this way indirectly related to the original version of the romance, see Eley 2011, 191.

²⁰ Eley 2011, 209; Collet and Joris 2005, 9.

²¹ Eley 2011, 6. Regarding the later date, around 1182–1185; see Fourier 1960, 384.

²² Eley 2011, 3–4.

²³ Eley et al. 2005. This edition is not, to my knowledge, accessible online.

The Transmission of Cupid and Psyche

Partonopeu de Blois is clearly influenced by the tale of Cupid and Psyche, but theories vary regarding how this story found its way to the romance poet.²⁴ The tale can originally be found in Apuleius' (ca. 125 to after 164 CE) Latin novel *The Golden Ass*. But how did it get from this ancient novel to the twelfth-century courts?

Apuleius was born in Madauros and belonged to the Roman culture of the Second Sophistic.²⁵ He wrote in Latin, yet he had an intellectual connection with the Greek-speaking world (which indeed was common among Latin-speaking intellectuals), not least from studying in Athens. Plato was central to Apuleius' works. Another important aspect of Apuleius' writings is the Greek literary context of the time, encompassing many of the surviving ancient Greek novels; for example, Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon* and Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, both discussed in more detail below.²⁶

The Golden Ass differs from the Greek novels not only in terms of language, written as it is in Latin, but also in content. Not only does it have the distinctive ending, where the protagonist and narrator Lucius finds himself in devotion to Isis, but in relation to the Greek novels, Apuleius' Latin one is clearly more comical, rather burlesque – a parody of the genre.²⁷ *The Golden Ass* is composed within a Graeco-Roman context, a literary world in which Greek and Latin aesthetic expressions co-exist. As we discuss the reception of ancient Latin literature in the Middle Ages, we risk forgetting its close connection with Greek sources. This differentiating of the Greek from the Latin in studying literary tradition could, I believe, be an explanation for the challenges ascribed to tracing the origin of the tale of Cupid and Psyche in *Partonopeu de Blois*. The Latin and Greek cultures were not separated from one another during

²⁴ It has also been described as a version of Paris' abduction of Helen; see Deveraux 2012, 76; Bermejo 2001; 223. However, I (as many others) find that the Cupid and Psyche story is a clearer inspiration to the plot; see below.

²⁵ Harrison 2017, 345–346.

²⁶ Harrison 2017, 346 and 352.

²⁷ Regarding Apuleius' comic aspect, see for example Winkler 1985, 275.

Antiquity, and especially not during the Second Sophistic, of which Apuleius' novel is a case in point.

The Golden Ass is the story of Lucius, a young Greek man who is curious about both magic and sexuality, leading to the misfortune of him being transformed into an ass. The stories of strong desire and passionate love between young lovers in the Greek novels can be seen to be ridiculed in Apuleius' narrative; desire is comic, lovers are foolish, and obscene humour is frequent.²⁸ As an ass, Lucius goes through a number of trials in his attempt to return to his former human shape, ending up in various unfortunate situations. In the end, Lucius is saved by the goddess Isis, and thus becomes devoted to her.

However, the plot of transformation into an ass is not exclusively found in Apuleius' novel, but also in Greek stories. Graham Anderson states that the 'tale has had a scintillating career in the folktale traditions of East and West alike'.²⁹ Therefore, Apuleius' story of the ass, the earliest surviving source of the Cupid and Psyche story, is part of a shared Graeco-Roman context of tales. In this literary tradition, we could interpret it as though poets are drawing their material from a shared well of sources, and then telling versions of them differently, individually. Such a common ground for narratives from which to draw their motifs can be described, in Carolina Cupane's words, as 'a common narrative koine', referring to how different literary traditions share narrative motifs.³⁰ Although Apuleius' novel is different from the Greek ones, partially due to its parodic dialogue with them, it is nevertheless part of the Graeco-Roman tradition to which the Greek novels also belong, not least due to the first-person narrative voice.³¹

²⁸ Furthermore, Anna McCullough discusses the gender reversals in Apuleius' novel; see McCullough 2012.

²⁹ The transformation into an ass is a plot that is found in one shorter Greek version, possibly composed by Lucian, who was a contemporary of Apuleius, and arguably in the lost Lucius of Patras' *Metamorphoses*; see Anderson 1984, 198.

³⁰ Cupane 2019, 41.

³¹ Harrison 2017, 353. I will return to the first-person narrative voice in the novel from the Second Sophistic below.

Was Apuleius' novel available to the *Partonopeu de Blois* poet? Did the poet draw material from this novel in the composition of his romance? This question has long occupied scholars, since we do not have 'evidence' stating that *The Golden Ass* was known during the twelfth century. In his study on the reception of Apuleius' novel, Robert H. F. Carver demonstrates that it is plausible that it circulated among twelfth-century courtly French poets, and can be interpreted as having inspired romances. At the same time, he illustrates the difficulty of drawing any definite conclusions regarding twelfth-century knowledge of *The Golden Ass*.³²

Building on Apuleius' Greek connection, in 1953, Sikko Pieter Uri suggested that Byzantine connections might have been a source for *Partonopeu de Blois*.³³ This would entail, he argued, that the twelfth-century poet drew his material from the same Greek tale that Apuleius has been suggested to have used.³⁴ Furthermore, Uri suggests a connection between *Partonopeu de Blois* and the now lost Greek tale of Parthenope and Metiochus.³⁵ He then ultimately locates the Greek and Byzantine connection in the Indian tradition.³⁶

Before Uri, *Partonopeu de Blois* had mostly been regarded as influenced by Celtic sources. In Helaine Newstead's study (1946) on the romance's connections to Marie de France's *lais*, she demonstrated how Celtic folklore plays a large part in the composition of the romance, which suggests new readings of the Cupid and Psyche connection, namely as a story located in Celtic tales.³⁷

³² Carver 2007, 61–107. For the specific case of *Partonopeu de Blois*; see 94–101. Gédéon Huet connects the story to folkloric tales, such as those found in Marie de France; see Huet 1923, 152. However, Huet acknowledges an awareness of the story of Cupid and Psyche in many literary contexts and epochs, to which Apuleius is also connected; see Huet 1923, 47.

³³ Uri 1953, 88.

³⁴ Uri refers to the suggestion of Apuleius having been influenced by a certain Aristides of Milete (second century CE); see Uri 1953, 89.

³⁵ Tomas Hägg has contributed substantially to our knowledge of *Methiochus and Parthenope*, see Hägg 2004 and Hägg and Utas 2003.

³⁶ Uri 1953, 94.

³⁷ Newstead 1946. Catherine Hilton also emphasises Marie de France's connection to the romance in Hilton 1984. This is also seen in Huet 1923.

It was argued for a long time that Apuleius was not known in twelfth-century France, and was thus not a possible source for the romance poet. It has been suggested that the writings of the sixth-century Christian author Fabius Fulgentius Planciades, in circulation during the twelfth century, were a source for the Cupid and Psyche story.³⁸ Fourrier claims this to be possible, and, furthermore, he highlights the knowledge of Latin and ancient stories discernible in the text: ‘Le poète de *Partonopeus* possède, en effet, des connaissances étendues, aussi bien dans la littérature en langue latine que dans la littérature en langue vulgaire’.³⁹

Uri suggests that the Byzantine influence can be explained via the Second Crusade (1147–1149). Eleanor of Aquitaine (ca. 1122–1204), famous for her important role in the literary development of courtly poetry in the vernacular, accompanied her husband at the time, Louis VII (1120–1180), on the crusade. Elizabeth Jeffreys has suggested a connection between Eleanor of Aquitaine’s experience of visiting Constantinople during the Second Crusade, and the composition of the *romans d’antiquité*.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the poetry composed at the court of Constantinople could have influenced the first Old French romances. At the court of Blois, where Eleanor’s second daughter Alix of Blois (ca. 1150–1197) lived with her husband Thibaut V (1130–1191), there was much literary production, including perhaps the composition of *Partonopeu de Blois*.⁴¹ Uri writes about the couple’s vivid court, ‘where many poets worked’.⁴² He suggests that the literary situation in Byzantium relates to the French courtly literary scene; in Constantinople, new novels were composed at court and the ancient Greek novels were read continuously.⁴³ In order to fully examine Uri’s theory, and based on E. Jeffreys, it is necessary to say a few words about the twelfth-century literary scene in Constantinople.

³⁸ Fourrier 1960, 386.

³⁹ Fourrier 1960, 391.

⁴⁰ E. Jeffreys 1980, 468

⁴¹ Eley 2011, 196.

⁴² Uri 1953, 88.

⁴³ Uri 1953, 89.

The Greek Novel and the Komnenian Court

During the twelfth century, ancient novels were being read in the literary circles, and poets composed novels inspired by them, developing the genre further. Four novels are extant: Eumathios Makrembolites' *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Theodore Prodromos' *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Constantine Manasses' *Aristrandros and Kallithea* (in fragments), and Niketas Eugenianos' *Drosilla and Charikles*. Suzanne MacAlister describes the twelfth-century interest in novels as a combination of imitation and articulating new voices, which was characteristic of the medieval context:

despite surface impressions, the Byzantine novelists are not attempting a straightforward exercise of imitation. Rather, through their appropriation and manipulation of the ancient discourse, and their integration into it of the voices of other diverse discourses, they create a medium for voicing their own new and special statements which they direct towards a contemporary, twelfth-century, reading of the ancient novel.⁴⁴

The use of ancient tradition in the Middle Ages should be regarded from this perspective: that poetic skill is measured by one's recognition and variation of the common literary heritage. In literary circles (known as *theatra*), references, allusions etc., to ancient texts were sure to be recognised by listening audiences, articulated in a new way, tailored to each occasion. The occasion thus adds new meaning to what is said, as the ancient text is integrated into the twelfth-century courtly context. Ingela Nilsson, in discussing Byzantine texts in terms of displaying a desire to communicate with the audience, states: 'Si nous le considérons du point de vue de la réception et de l'horizon d'attente des lecteurs, nous voyons comment sa signification référentielle et culturelle – sa littérarité – est née de la rencontre entre le texte et son public'.⁴⁵ The reception of ancient literature in the Byzantine culture was appreciated by audiences of

⁴⁴ MacAlister 1994, 278.

⁴⁵ Nilsson 2014b, 17.

literary works. Alexander P. Kahzdan and Ann Wharton Epstein describe the reactualisation of ancient literature as a matter of ‘allusive commentary on current affairs that the literary fiction of the empire masked with antiquated vocabulary and traditional subjects’, which did not pass unnoticed by the receivers.⁴⁶ By the rhetorical use of allusions and the literary tradition, we see, to further use Paul Magdalino’s words from his seminal study (1993) on Emperor Manuel I Komnenos’ reign (1143–1180), an ‘authorial self-confidence’ in literature of the period.⁴⁷

For the readings in this study Makrembolites’ novel *Hysmine and Hysminias* is especially significant. This novel’s erotic narrative appears to create a pattern similar to the one in *Partonopeu de Blois*. In my view, both texts narrate erotic conduct in comparable ways, in the style of the ancient Greek novel tradition. However, both narratives also appear to rework traditional erotic motifs from another angle, by articulating an arguably feminine voice, which I intend to demonstrate in my readings.

Knowledge is scant regarding the author of *Hysmine and Hysminias*.⁴⁸ The novel was possibly composed during the years before the mid-century.⁴⁹ It is the only Komnenian novel written in prose, like the ancient novels. *Hysmine and Hysminias* is divided into eleven books, and told in the first-person narrative voice; Hysminias is the narrator of the text. The story centres around Hysminias and the female character Hysmine, who fall in love and flee from their families when Hysmine is betrothed to someone other than Hysminias. They find themselves on the stormy sea, and are separated when Hysmine is thrown off the ship as a sacrifice to Poseidon. After both become slaves to different owners, they find themselves united again and thus begin to plan how they may become free. In

⁴⁶ Kahzdan and Epstein 1985, 140.

⁴⁷ Magdalino discusses specifically imperial encomia, but he connects these with literature of the time more generally; Magdalino 1993, 429. Regarding the novels specifically, Magdalino describes the literary production as being composed with a ‘a self-conscious artistry of its producers’; Magdalino 1993, 396–397. For further studies on Byzantine poetic self-consciousness, see f. ex. Drpić 2014; Papaioannou 2013.

⁴⁸ Regarding the uncertainty concerning the author and the name; see Nilsson 2001, 12.

⁴⁹ Nilsson 2014b, 58–59; Nilsson 2001, 13. For an overview of theories regarding the novel’s date; see E. Jeffreys 2012, 161–165, where a date is suggested in the 1140s or 1150s; see E. Jeffreys 2012, 165.

the end, they receive their freedom, as well as their parents' approval to marry.

Another pertinent character is Hysminias' friend Kratisthenes, who can be described as a guide to Hysminias in his discovery of desire. In this study, I look at this sort of male friend in the novel tradition, and its narrative function in comparison to the poet-narrator in *Partonopeu de Blois*.

Theodore Prodromos' (ca. 1100–1170) *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* is another important novel in this study. The novel is composed in the fifteen-syllable political verse form.⁵⁰ I discuss the novel in relation to *Partonopeu de Blois*, albeit to a lesser extent than the Old French romance in relation to *Hysmine and Hysminias*. Prodromos' novel is dated around the same time as *Hysmine and Hysminias*. Prodromos composed his work for members of the Komnenian court, such as princess and historian Anna (1083–1153), her brother John (1087–1143), and his son the emperor Manuel.⁵¹ The novel thus forms part of the same literary context as the other Byzantine sources studied; namely, *Hysmine and Hysminias* and the *Alexiad*.

In nine books, *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* tells the story of the young eponymous couple, who at the opening of the story are being held captive by pirates. This story is not told in the first person, but by an extradiegetic poet-narrator, which indeed makes it different from Makrembolites' novel, but similar to *Partonopeu de Blois*. In the section below, where descriptions of masculine beauty are analysed, Prodromos' novel is important since Dosikles' appearance is described by Rhodanthe in detail,

⁵⁰ The political verse is a Byzantine metric form, which is noted at the earliest at the beginning of the eleventh century and became common in Byzantine poetry. All the Komnenian novels are composed in this verse form, except for Makrembolites' novel, which is prose. For a study of political verse and its origins; see M. Jeffreys, 1974.

⁵¹ Nilsson 2014a, 36; Magdalino 1993, 423; Barbara Hill describes Anna's philosophical circle: 'She was interested and involved in commentaries on Aristotle, and may have encouraged and organised the commentators, of whom several are known [...]'; Hill 1999, 169–170. Hill argues, however, that Anna's role as a patron was probably not as important as that of empresses (like her mother Eirene Doukaina and grandmother Anna Dalassene); Hill 1999, 170.

whereas Hysminias – the first-person narrator – never describes his own appearance. Thus, *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* helps us to perceive how idealising the beauty of men from a feminine perspective can be interpreted during this time.

Just as Hysminias has his friend Kratisthenes, Dosikles gets to know a fellow captive at the beginning of the novel, called Kratandros. Kratandros' function appears to be to mirror in reverse the main romantic plot. Kratandros tells Dosikles about how his own love adventure ended in death and misery, which causes Dosikles to recount his own adventure, and thus the narrative advances. Comparing male friends in the Greek novel tradition and the poet-narrator in *Partonopeu de Blois*, Kratandros' narrative function seems to be the same as the poet-narrator's in the Old French romance, who also compares his unlucky situation with the protagonist couple's love story.

Princess and historian Anna Komnene's work, the *Alexiad*, is also significant for this study, mainly in order to determine the meaning of Anna's feminine authorial and first-person narrative voice at the time, but partly to ascertain the novel's connection to other genres. In her work, probably composed sometime around the middle of the twelfth century, she writes about her father, Emperor Alexios Komnenos, who reigned from 1081–1118. Since she writes herself into her text, Anna also contributes to a literary development that plausibly did not pass unnoticed by the audience of her work. Even if one must interpret her literary *I* as rhetorical, Anna's *I* introduces a woman historian into the Greek historiographic tradition for the first time. In my reading of *Partonopeu de Blois*, Anna's work is considered to be an important intertext. Above all, I suggest that the image of her as an author and a powerful, imperial intellectual was possibly known in the West, which might have inspired the poet in his depiction of Melior in the romance. Likewise, I aim to show that by reading these two texts in relation to each other, we can make new interpretations of them, as well as reach a deeper understanding of courtly literature from this time more generally.

As she writes her father (and family) into the collective memory, Anna creates, through her own example, access for women to write

historiography. This work could therefore be regarded, albeit it is also a confirmation of imperial legitimacy, as forming part of a context in Komnenian literary production more generally, in which literary voices form a polyphonic context of both imperial appraisal and social critique. This is comparable to Nilsson's description: 'Plusieurs textes comnènes sont empreints d'un souffle ironique et satirique qui caractérise une littérature de critique sociale ou de critique de l'autorité.'⁵²

The context of Komnenian literature thus opens up space for a discussion about literary subjectivity. In this literary context, one finds textual individuality in the use of tradition.⁵³ Anna, for example, writes a work with allusions to both the ancient epic tradition (seen already in its title's allusion to the *Iliad*) and the tradition of historiography.⁵⁴ Yet, in doing so she articulates what has never before been uttered: the voice of a woman historian.

Makrembolites and Prodhomos also rework ancient tradition into their works, not least traits from Greek novels. One of these novels, which

⁵² Nilsson 2014b, 36.

⁵³ In this context, one could arguably speak of literary subjectivity in poets use of different registers and stylistic variety; Agapitos 2012, 245–248.

⁵⁴ Georgina Buckler demonstrates the importance of Homer in Anna Komnene's work; Buckler 1929, 197–199. The influence of the epic in the *Alexiad* indeed encourages us to acknowledge historiography's relation to other forms of poetic composition, other literary genres. To this end, I find Panagiotis Roilos' discussion on transgressions in the Komnenian novels useful, which highlights the novel's 'ambivalence and mediating interconnections', or 'the mechanism by means of which novelty takes place in literary discursive boundaries and enter the territory of another genre'; Roilos 2005, 19. Moreover, in his study on the medieval Byzantine novel, Roderick Beaton describes twelfth-century writers to 'show versatility, in some cases virtuosity, in their exploitation of different language registers', referring to the choice between "'high" and "middle" register, apparently depending on whom they are addressing'; Beaton (1989) 1996, 14. Regarding these sorts of linguistic experimentations, Beaton further compares the Byzantine situation with that of the vernacular romance's development in the West; Beaton (1989) 1996, 14–15. Regarding the difficulty of analysing Byzantine texts solely based on linguistic registers; see Agapitos and Smith 1992, 18–21. Highlighting the literary aspect of the *Alexiad* could though be nuanced by considering it to – nevertheless – be a, to use Rae Dalven's words, 'invaluable historical document'; Dalven emphasises the importance of Anna's accounts of the First Crusade and Alexios as an emperor; Dalven 1972, 149 and 152.

therefore has an important role in this study, is Achilles Tatius' *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. Not much is known about this author, but the novel is usually dated to the end of the second century CE.⁵⁵ Not only does this suggested date of composition connect the Greek novel with Apuleius but the first-person narrator is another shared feature between them. As Kathryn Chew argues, 'Achilles' use of a first-person narrator initiates fundamental changes to the novel'. Moreover, the first-person narrator in Tatius' narrative results in 'the muting of the heroine's voice'. This novel, Chew further continues, 'cleverly maintains the preceding requirements for the heroine (as object of desire, target of suffering, and keeper of virginity) while focalising the story through the hero'.⁵⁶

Another ancient Greek novel that I find significant for my discussion is Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. This tale differs from the previously mentioned one in its pastoral character.⁵⁷ Regarding the author, little is known but, as Jean Alvares points out, he 'certainly belonged to the Greco-Romanizing elite of the high empire and participated in the literary movement described [...] as the Second Sophistic'.⁵⁸ Tatius belongs there as well, and, according to Alvares, *Leukippe and Kleitophon* 'was probably written close to Longus' time'.⁵⁹ Regarding the Greek novel tradition's interest in the progression from boy to man, Alvares goes on to compare how both novels have a somewhat conflicting relation with the cultural view of socialisation and *paideia*:

Both *Daphnis and Chloe* and *Leucippe and Clitophon* deal extensively with the protagonists' maturation and their relationship to normative erotic experience and Greek *paideia* [...]. In *Daphnis and Chloe*, the protagonists, native Greeks, are saved despite a lack

⁵⁵ Chew 2014, 95.

⁵⁶ Chew 2014, 97–98. For a thorough study of gender and gaze in this novel, see Morales 2014. Another similarity between Apuleius' and Tatius' novel is the importance of Platonism; for a mapping of the importance of Platonism during the Second Sophistic, see Fowler 2017.

⁵⁷ Alvares 2014, 50.

⁵⁸ Alvares 2014, 51.

⁵⁹ Alvares 2014, 51.

of *paideia*, while the over-sophisticated Clitophon, a Hellenized Tyrian, becomes a proper hero *despite* his *paideia*.⁶⁰

Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* can be regarded in relation to *Daphnis and Chloe*, despite the novels' clear differences. As Alvares argues: 'Both present imperfect narrators offering tales of transformation, education, and even salvation [...], and both narrators show a sort of double perspective of events'.⁶¹ In *The Golden Ass*, *Leukippe and Kleitophon* and *Daphnis and Chloe* alike, there is a shared characteristic, namely, in Harrison's words, 'the complex function of the first-person narrative voice' and a 'problematizing of the speaker's identity and voice'.⁶² These novels all seem, by these explorative narrative features, to thematise fictionality in their respective narrative voice's subjectivity. In the twelfth-century texts under scrutiny in this study, the same sort of thematising can be discerned.

Partonopeu de Blois and the Novel Tradition

Uri argues that Apuleius and the poet of *Partonopeu de Blois* both draw their material from the same source: 'the old and new Greek literature'.⁶³ I will investigate this theory, by comparing the romance with the Greek novel tradition. Uri's theory has been rejected by later scholars, although, I believe, not in convincing ways, a point I will return to below. After Uri, *Partonopeu de Blois* has been interpreted as a work belonging to the Western world, yet with allusions to the Byzantine court.⁶⁴ The separation of *Partonopeu de Blois* from Byzantine literature, and, in consequence, detaching the medieval French and Greek literatures from each other, is partly due to the idea of Apuleius belonging to a strictly Latin and Western tradition in its reception. Perhaps the most important contribution of

⁶⁰ Alvares 2014, 51.

⁶¹ Alvares 2014, 52.

⁶² Harrison 2017, 353.

⁶³ Uri 1985, 89.

⁶⁴ There are, for example, possible parallels between the romance's female character Melior and Maria Komnene; see Eley 2011, 34.

Uri's article to the reception of *Partonopeu de Blois* lies in its awareness of how the Latin and Greek literatures of the Graeco-Roman world are closely related to each other. This, according to Uri (and myself), then continues in the medieval literature of the Mediterranean.

However, there is a problem with Uri's study, which has led to his theory being rejected by later scholarship. In her study from 1984, Catherine Hilton gives an explanation of the problems following Uri's suggestion of the plot's Eastern origins:

Uri rejects the notion of Celtic influence, regarding the *Partonopeu* story as ultimately of Indian origin; unfortunately, his method of tracing the sources of the romance confuses literary source-study with folklorism in the search for motifs and tale-types in Greek, Byzantine and Indian tradition. Needless to say, the same method of investigation might have led him to Celtic tradition or, for that matter, to the folklore of almost any Indoeuropean culture.⁶⁵

Uri does not offer enough detail in his article, through comparative readings, to truly connect these different literary traditions. And, although he published his article in 1953, the theory of *Partonopeu de Blois*' relation to Byzantine literature has still not been tested by actually reading these literatures in relation to each other.⁶⁶

In 1964, Thomas H. Brown examined the possibility of Apuleius being the source of the Cupid and Psyche story in *Partonopeu de Blois*, and identifies two sources for it. In contrast to Uri's argument, Brown presents a theory that the tale of Cupid and Psyche is not the result of a Byzantine connection, but a Latin one. According to Brown, the first source of the Cupid and Psyche story, from which the poet of *Partonopeu de Blois* draws his material, is plausibly Planciades' writings, in which he summarises the tale of Cupid and Psyche.⁶⁷ Fulgentius' summary,

⁶⁵ Hilton 1984, 10.

⁶⁶ This could be nuanced by adding Megan Moore's comparative study (2014) of the Old French romance and Byzantine literature to this discussion, on a more general level, but not if we concern *Partonopeu de Blois* specifically; see below.

⁶⁷ Brown 1964, 200.

according to Brown's study, is 'sufficient to supply or suggest at least the scenes and descriptions of *Partonopeus*, which are similar to Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche"'.⁶⁸ The theory of the Celtic influence on *Partonopeu de Blois* is rejected and Fulgentius is established as the source of the tale of Cupid and Psyche. According to Brown, Fulgentius, as we have seen, gives an adequate account of the tale of Cupid and Psyche for the poet to write his romance. However, he adds that in fact Fulgentius' summary is insufficient:

On the other hand, the author of the French romance may have used the original itself because Fulgentius refers to Apuleius and his 'Cupid and Psyche' at the beginning and at the end of his résumé, and from this reference our unknown poet may have been directed to the Latin author's work. I am inclined to believe that the unknown poet of *Partonopeus de Blois* has the original by Apuleius in his possession when writing his romance. Some details appear in Apuleius' 'Cupid and Psyche' and *Partonopeus*, but not in Fulgentius' résumé.⁶⁹

Brown's article argues against the theory of a Celtic origin for the Cupid and Psyche story in *Partonopeu de Blois*, by demonstrating a plausible connection between the romance and Fulgentius, who was known during this time. Brown also entertains the possibility of a knowledge of Apuleius, since Fulgentius mentions him. This would entail that there was at least one copy of *The Golden Ass* available to the poet. I have no reason to object to this theory; indeed, I also find it likely that works of literature were probably circulating during the Middle Ages of which we have no remaining 'evidence' today. Furthermore, as Carver shows, there are several indications in the narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois* that would tempt us to interpret the Cupid and Psyche story, from *The Golden Ass*

⁶⁸ Brown 1964, 200.

⁶⁹ Brown 1964, 201–202.

specifically, to be an influence.⁷⁰ I agree with Cupane, who, in her critique of the general lack of research investigating how narrative motifs were exchanged between different peoples in the medieval Mediterranean, offers a fruitful approach to medieval literary motifs:

Artefacts and technology [...] were not the only goods that circulated across the Mediterranean: ports and market-places were transit points for cultural goods as well. In these and in similar contact zones – knowledge developed beyond the great divides of language, ethnicity and religion. Admittedly, this kind of mobility is far more difficult to identify, which partly explains (but does not justify) the lack of scholarly attention. To be sure, objects are concrete; they still exist and can therefore be touched with hands. The evidence they offer is tangible, whereas literary motifs are immaterial, unsteady entities.⁷¹

Cupane argues that scholars need to understand the literary field as being articulated orally by voices, transmitted through time and space, usually without leaving ‘actual evidence’ of their different paths in manuscripts. The difficulty of detecting the transmission of narratives makes it, in Cupane’s words, ‘overlooked or at least underestimated’.⁷² The difficulty of detecting Byzantine and Greek sources in the twelfth-century French courtly literary context should categorically not be considered a reason to neglect possible Byzantine literary relations in the narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois*.

⁷⁰ Carver points specifically to the subsequent activities that Partonopeu follows as he enters Melior’s palace, the separate meetings that Partonopeu has with his family back home, i.e. his mother, who also persuades him to brighten up Melior’s bedroom, the reaction of Melior as Partonopeu violates the rule, the descriptions of Partonopeu’s new residence and, not least, the first erotic encounter. These are all features in *Partonopeu de Blois* that makes it difficult to believe Fulgentius’ summary to have been the only source for the myth in the romance; Carver 2004, 98–100. Julia Haig Gaisser (2008) highlights the knowledge of Apuleius during the Middle Ages, also during the time from which we have no extant copy of his works; Haig Gaisser 2008, 60–61. The oldest copy in which we find *The Golden Ass* is from the eleventh century, also known as ‘F’; see Haig Gaisser 2008, 45 and 61.

⁷¹ Cupane 2019, 40.

⁷² Cupane 2019, 41.

Brown traces the possibility that Apuleius might have been known and read during the twelfth century. His theory is formulated as an argument against the Celtic theory on the one hand, and against Uri's Byzantine theory on the other. I find no reason to discredit the possibility of Apuleius' novel having circulated in the medieval Mediterranean or the northern French region.

In their article on *Partonopeu de Blois*' relation to Chrétien de Troyes, Eley and Simons find political conflict and potential marriage alliances with the Byzantine imperial court to explain much of the story in *Partonopeu de Blois*.⁷³ Eley and Simons do not consider the Byzantine literary connection in their study, but rather argue that:

the romance can be understood as a gifted poet's response to narratives which are known to have been in circulation, in written or oral form, by 1170: the *roman's d'antiquité* (in particular the *Roman de Troie*, but also *Thèbes* and *Eneas*), *lais* similar to *Guigemar*, *Guingamor* and *Graelent*, and the story of Cupid and Psyche.⁷⁴

Eley and Simons make a strong case for the connection between the Komnenian court and a political situation in the West, charged with conflict between the Capetians and the Plantagenets.⁷⁵ Yet, in terms of literature, these cultures appear separate in their analysis, since the intertextual aspect of vernacular works of the time concerns Old French sources alone.

Moreover, Hilton argues that the poet's use of several traditional themes and material, common in the genre of the time, 'situates *Partonopeu* in relation to the earlier *roman courtois*, especially as written by Chrétien de Troyes'.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, it seems as though the poet of this

⁷³ Eley and Simons 1999, 322–324. See also Eley 2011, 34. For further analyses of how the political situation in and with Byzantium may help in interpreting the romance; see Eley 2011, 210–211 and 158–161. Moreover, Rima Deveraux describes the narrative as a progression towards Western dominance over the East; Deveraux 2012, 101.

⁷⁴ Eley and Simons 1999, 340.

⁷⁵ Eley and Simons 1999, 322–324.

⁷⁶ Hilton 1984, 119.

romance uses themes that are conforming to the courtly narrative ideals in ways that question these ideals:

The anonymous author of *Partonopeu de Blois*, however, did not merely adopt traditional motifs. In addressing some of the major concerns of the genre as it was practiced in the late twelfth century, he used at least one entire romance as a base for his own composition.⁷⁷

In Hilton's study, *Partonopeu de Blois* is described as at once similar and in constant opposition to the works of Chrétien de Troyes, and other related works, such as the *lais* of Marie de France.⁷⁸

If we return to the question of Apuleius, Eley describes *Partonopeu de Blois* as a fusion of sources:

His [the anonymous poet] key innovation was to take the two major currents that dominated vernacular fiction at the end of the 1160s – the *romans d'antiquité* and other narratives based on classical sources on the one hand; the *Lais* of Marie de France and stories derived from Celtic sources on the other – and try to fuse them into a single work of literature.⁷⁹

The idea that 'other narratives based on classical sources' might be intertexts in *Partonopeu de Blois* suggests the plausibility of Apuleius' novel having been known, which may then explain how the Cupid and Psyche story could have been known from this source as well. Eley further notes

⁷⁷ Hilton 1984, 119.

⁷⁸ I suggest that for the allusions to Old French courtly works; see f. ex. Eley 2011; Eley and Simons 1999; Hilton 1984; Newstead 1946. For my specific discussion, I will keep my focus on potential Byzantine connections, which results in limiting the analyses to ancient but mostly Byzantine comparisons. Although I think there to be a clear dialogue between *Partonopeu de Blois* and Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France, which the mentioned scholars demonstrate, I find that, in terms of agency and focalisation, *Partonopeu de Blois* stands out, which can be explained by its possible Byzantine relations.

⁷⁹ Eley 2011, 6

Apuleius' 'unmistakeable echoes' in *Partonopeu de Blois*.⁸⁰ Moreover, in a footnote before closing his article, Brown mentions the fact that:

Apuleius describes a sumptuous banquet prepared for Psyche upon her arrival at Cupid's palace. Invisible servants attend to her needs and wishes during her stay. The poet of *Partonopeus* gives a careful account of a dinner prepared for Partonopeus at Chief d'Oire, and he also makes frequent reference to the invisible servants who care for Partonopeus.⁸¹

This description of the banquet, which is not found in Fulgentius' summary, suggests that Apuleius was known by the poet.⁸² The scene in question is described at considerable length and is ascribed significant importance in the romance.⁸³

The footnote would appear to render the suggested influence of Fulgentius moot. The Apuleius connection is no argument against a Fulgentius connection, yet, the Fulgentius connection is not sufficient to interpret the traces of the Cupid and Psyche story in the romance. A tentative scholarly agreement admits the possibility of Apuleius as a source for the *Partonopeu de Blois* poet – but what does such an agreement entail?

Even though the Apuleian influence is increasingly accepted, the Byzantine one remains overlooked. Uri suggests that Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughter, Alix of Blois, might have provided the poet with some Byzantine novel as a source, which is dismissed by Eley as 'implausible, not least on linguistic grounds'.⁸⁴ Needless to say, the linguistic barriers between the French and the Byzantines were tangible, but they were not

⁸⁰ Eley 2011, 27.

⁸¹ Brown 1964, 202n.12.

⁸² Brown 1964, 202. See also Carver 2004, 98–100 (referred to above).

⁸³ I discuss Partonopeu's entrance into the imaginary Byzantine city and palace in relation to rhetorical ideals and *paideia* in Söderblom Saarela 2018.

⁸⁴ Eley 2011, 203n.46. It should be mentioned, however, that Uri based his idea on theories suggesting that the Byzantine source could have been available through Latin translations; see Uri 1953, 88.

insurmountable. Recent scholarship demonstrates that, due to relations between the French and the Komnenian courts during Emperor Manuel's reign, knowledge of Greek was not as uncommon as one might think. Even if knowledge of Greek was unusual in France, people travelled extensively; if not to Constantinople then often to Italy. Many French people came in contact with the language of the Byzantines.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the Anglo-Norman kingdom seems to have had knowledge of Greek, and French intellectuals such as Abélard and Héloïse were said to know the language as well.⁸⁶ It is true that knowledge of Greek in France was not as common as was the knowledge of Latin or Hebrew. However, given the transcultural nature of twelfth-century Mediterranean society, although linguistic barriers could be an obstacle for a French person interested in Byzantium, they were most certainly not insurmountable. As early as 1982, Carole Becovici-Huard demonstrated that the descriptions of Byzantium in *Partonopeu de Blois* are likely to remind the audience of the romance of actual travel stories from Constantinople.⁸⁷ Interest in Byzantium was substantial at the French courts. In Krijnie N. Ciggaar's study (1996) on Western travellers to Constantinople between the years 962 and 1204, she demonstrates the contact between these two linguistic regions, and France's interest in the Byzantine world:

The monks often travelled widely. The crusades and larger pilgrimages, which were encouraged by church leaders, were international expeditions, often dominated by French ecclesiastics and French nobles. Even French kings sometimes took part in them. Cultural life was flourishing in the 12th century, and if not at the royal court in Paris, the more so at the provincial feudal courts of lesser nobles. An interest in Byzantium as a promised land of love and luxury is a common characteristic of some of the leading families of the country.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Boulhol 2014, 77–78, 80.

⁸⁶ Boulhol 2014, 82.

⁸⁷ Becovici-Huard, 1982.

⁸⁸ Ciggaar 1996, 162.

Beside the nobility, Westerners travelled to Byzantium from many social classes: 'The routes to Byzantium were open to all who had the time, money and in most of the cases permission to travel'.⁸⁹ The Mediterranean region was filled with transcultural exchange. Literary tradition should be seen from this perspective; to pin down a specific 'national' tradition and culture appears difficult in the premodern Mediterranean context:

Travellers to Constantinople and other parts of the Byzantine empire came from different backgrounds and undertook their journeys for various reasons. Royalty and leading members of the nobility were among them. There were ecclesiastics, wandering monks, ambassadors, merchants, pilgrims and many others. A few artists may have taken the road East. Poor emigrants sometimes tried to flee the misery at home. Men, women and children, they all travelled to Constantinople.⁹⁰

Since we have scant surviving evidence of poor people's travels to the East, it is easier to establish the French relations with Byzantine culture among the nobles and clerics. As Cupane argues regarding our need to study the cross-pathing literary material in the Mediterranean without relying solely on surviving physical 'evidence', so Ciggaar writes that the surviving evidence of Byzantine artefacts mostly give us information about wealthy travellers: 'It was not granted to everybody to receive or to purchase precious souvenirs. We do not know what the common French pilgrim or traveller brought home apart from his memories'.⁹¹ In their surveys of premodern history, both Cupane and Ciggaar demonstrate the need to approach the Middle Ages from new angles, in order to get a larger picture. Narratological comparisons can, I believe, be a method that helps us to see history in other ways than by solely relying on surviving concrete artefacts.

⁸⁹ Ciggaar 1996, 161.

⁹⁰ Ciggaar 1996, 163.

⁹¹ Ciggaar 1996, 163.

In the field of Byzantine literature's relation to French medieval romances, Cupane's research holds a position of fundamental importance. Back in 1974, Cupane suggested that the Byzantine novel *Hysmine and Hysminias*, despite its clear relationship with the ancient novel tradition, offers a new figuration of Eros that derives from courtly romances, rather than texts from ancient Greece.⁹² The proposition that courtly romances and Komnenian novels share a literary connection is an important contribution to scholarship dealing with the genre in both of these fields. As previously mentioned, E. Jeffreys has suggested a connection between the first Old French romances and Eleanor of Aquitaine's visit to Constantinople during the Second Crusade.⁹³ To further investigate this type of exchange and its literary traces is crucial for this study. Inspired by E. Jeffreys' investigation, I have adopted the perspective of women's patronage, along with the transcultural connection, in my readings of articulations of feminine subjectivity in the twelfth century. Thus, my argument follows these contributions on intercultural relations in both the romance and the novel during the twelfth century.

In her study (2014) on Byzantine storytelling during the twelfth century, Nilsson highlights that in Byzantium as well as in the West, one finds a similar development in narration on a more general scale.⁹⁴ These similarities are also discussed by Cupane and Bettina Krönung, who talk about medieval Mediterranean intercultural literary works in terms of 'text "networks", producing entangled versions of the same basic stories with a marked tendency to proliferation and flexibility'.⁹⁵ In 2014, Megan Moore published a comparative study of Byzantine and Old French literature, with the aim of investigating 'how [Old French] literature imagines interactions with Byzantium – from its exotic goods to its cultural products – to permit the articulation of noble identities'.⁹⁶ Moore explores

⁹² Cupane 1974, 245. Regarding *Hysmine and Hysminias*' relation to the ancient novel (specifically Achilles Tatius); see Nilsson 2001.

⁹³ E. Jeffreys 1980, 468 (referred to above).

⁹⁴ Nilsson 2014b, 216

⁹⁵ Cupane and Krönung 2016, 4.

⁹⁶ Moore 2014, 6.

how female characters are used for political reasons, but also how they themselves could use politics to attain proper agency.⁹⁷ Moore's readings demonstrate shared literary features between the West and Byzantium, which may suggest a connection between the cultures. *Partonopeu de Blois* is not, though, included in the study.⁹⁸

In regard to this ongoing discussion about literary connections between the French and the Byzantines, the possibility of Apuleius' novel having been known in French during the twelfth century raises at least two questions: firstly, what does this entail regarding the twelfth-century French courts' potential reception of the Graeco-Roman novel literature from the Second Sophistic? Secondly, if we can believe Apuleius to have been read despite a lack of 'actual evidence' that proves this – why is the suggestion that other novels were also circulating met with automatic scepticism? In fact, the possibility of Apuleius, as Brown suggests, or indeed a Greek source, as Uri suggests, having been known during the composition of the first Old French romances has major consequences for how these romances should be understood in relation to the reception history of the ancient novel. Hence, I examine the issue of whether the Komnenian literature is traceable in the narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois*, and thus indirectly the Graeco-Roman novel tradition. I suggest that possibly Greek and Byzantine novels could have been circulating along with Apuleius.

In 2019, Cupane suggested that *Partonopeu de Blois* might potentially have been an inspiration for the late Byzantine romances *Livistros and Rhodamne* and *Kallimachos and Chrysorrhoe*.⁹⁹ Furthermore, I explore the possibility that the narrative's origin could have been inspired by twelfth-century Byzantine novels. In this sense, the romance appears to be sharing 'a common narrative koine', using Cupane's term.

⁹⁷ Moore 2014, 32. Melanie McBride makes a similar interpretation regarding the female characters Lucrece, Melior and Urraque in *Partonopeu de Blois*; accordingly, the female characters use different strategies in order to be empowered themselves; see McBride 2018.

⁹⁸ The lack of *Partonopeu de Blois* from this study is remarked upon by Cupane in her review of it; see Cupane 2016, 375.

⁹⁹ Cupane 2019, 44.

The question regarding from which sources the *Partonopeu de Blois* poet draws his material appears thus to conceal a much bigger issue regarding the reception of ancient Graeco-Roman novels in the Western twelfth century. Apuleius' novel is in Latin, which of course places it in the Latin tradition. Yet, it was composed in a bilingual literary context, at once apart from and belonging to the Greek novel tradition. The methodological problems of Uri's study have, unfortunately, caused modern scholarship to dismiss his theory of the Byzantine connection. Nevertheless, I believe that the approach of reading *Partonopeu de Blois* as continuing the novel tradition is worth more substantial examination.

To this end, Cupane's term 'narrative koine' could perhaps be compared to Panagiotis Agapitos' description of 'transfer' in the Medieval Greek literary context. In his comparative analysis of fictionality in the East and the West, in Byzantine narratives Agapitos detects 'references to the "change" or "transfer" (μεταβολή, μεταφορά) of a purportedly mythological or historically remote subject [...]'.¹⁰⁰ He continues:

Especially the second type of intralinguistic 'translation' forms part of a specific mental attitude to language in the context of Medieval Greek since it refers to the 'transfer' of story matter and not the translation of a specific text.¹⁰¹

In this way, Agapitos makes a difference between Old French translations of Latin stories and Byzantine transfers of story matter. As shall be demonstrated, transfer of story matter can arguably be traced from the Greek novel tradition to *Partonopeu de Blois*. Like this, we will see possible indications of the Old French romance sharing a 'narrative koine' with Byzantine literature.

According to Eley, 'it is still true to say that this romance remains very much a poor cousin to the *romans d'antiquité*, the Tristan romances, the *Lais* of Marie de France and the works of Chrétien de Troyes in terms

¹⁰⁰ Agapitos 2012, 247.

¹⁰¹ Agapitos 2012, 248.

of the amount of critical attention it has attracted'.¹⁰² Although research on this romance has increased, it still lacks the amount of attention that the other mentioned works have received. Considering the number of translations of the romance into different languages that were made during the Middle Ages, this deficit in modern reception does not seem to correspond to the great attention that it was given in medieval Europe.¹⁰³ In France alone, *Partonopeu de Blois* was copied during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and then translated into modern French in two versions during the eighteenth century.¹⁰⁴ The story of Partonopeu and Melior has thus captured a large and widespread audience ever since its first appearance in the twelfth century. If this romance is a prolongation of the Graeco-Roman novel tradition, then the reception of *Partonopeu de Blois* tells us something about how the continuation of this tradition has a significant role in the history of French literature.

Comparing Narratives and Tracing Audiences

In this study I explore the ways in which the romance is connected to the Graeco-Roman novel tradition and the Byzantine world, using a comparative method. The romance is read in light of narratives from the Greek novel tradition and the Byzantine court to present a new and possible interpretation of the erotic narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois*.

This comparison also further develops my discussion regarding feminine subjectivity in twelfth-century narratives. The comparison between the actual texts focuses on narrative form, as well as on themes regarding gender, power, and desire. The comparative analyses in the thesis are thus made thematically; focusing firstly on the erotic motif of

¹⁰² Eley 2011, 5.

¹⁰³ Translations of the romance survive in English (two versions), German (two versions), Catalan and Spanish (including a play from the seventeenth century, by Ana Caro), Italian, Dutch (two versions), Icelandic and Danish (two versions), see Collet and Joris 2005, 62–63.

¹⁰⁴ Collet and Joris 2005, 60–62.

sexual initiation, then on the matter of gaze, and finally on the matter of voice. The comparative method will permit a better understanding of some aspects of the Old French romance, by placing them in relation to the Byzantine world and Byzantine literary sources. This comparison might help us to better understand not only *Partonopeu de Blois*, but also the Byzantine sources, since the interpretations of *Partonopeu de Blois* are inevitably interpretations of the texts with which the romance is compared as well. By comparing these texts, articulations of feminine subjectivity may be discernible in *Partonopeu de Blois*.

Not unlike twelfth-century Byzantine literature, courtly literature in France can also be described in terms of combining tradition and variation, or ancient literary tradition adapted to medieval social contexts. In his analysis of Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*, composed for Marie de Champagne (1145–1198), Don A. Monson argues that the text treats social questions by using different sources. His description can be read more generally as being about courtly literature's combination of textual sources and cultural norms:

These [the sources] comprise two main traditions: that of the vernacular love literature and that of the ideas and practices of feudal society. The first of these traditions is easily verifiable in the poetic texts; the latter, that of the non-literary and perhaps even non-verbal 'social intertext,' is more difficult to pin down, but no less real. Together they make up the non-clerical, vernacular sources that we have called 'courtly'. [...] The social problems raised generally concern conflicts between these traditions or, in some cases, contradictions within one of them.¹⁰⁵

As we will see, *Partonopeu de Blois* appears to be an example of the same combination of traditions. By combining different traditions within the text, norms and literary motifs are seen from different angles; the subjectivity of the text is thus perceivable, articulating itself in relation to cultural and literary topics. Further, Albrecht Classen describes

¹⁰⁵ Monson 2005, 239.

courtly love as mainly dealing with ‘the individual in the social environment’, rather than ‘pure emotions’.¹⁰⁶ Love, as a topic, can be used to illuminate a variety of matters in the cultural context where the literary work is composed and performed. *Partonopeu de Blois* itself can be described in terms of having its own tradition, considering its three different endings as well as the Continuation, for which reason Eley defines it as a ‘romance in the making’: as though, never finished, the romance always remains open for new entries and variations.¹⁰⁷

Courtly literature is occasional, composed in a context of social discussions. June Hall McCash describes the appearance of vernacular romances, *lais*, and lyric in terms of ‘a new wave’, that:

will sweep Europe as an integral part of a new courtly culture that widens the intended audience, patronage, and even the *person-nages* of its literary texts to include those who are not warriors and clerics. The inclusion of women in a central role becomes the sine qua non of the new literature.¹⁰⁸

Hall McCash further describes women’s patronage to be the distributive cause of the ideas of courtly love. During this time, she writes: ‘we begin to see women asserting their roles as preservers of history and as arbiters of courtly taste’.¹⁰⁹ During this period ideas of love are discussed in the contemporary vernacular literature, and consequently also themes relating to love; themes of power and the ability to act out one’s desire. Women play an important role in this moment of literary development, both in the West and in Byzantium.

My argument is that we do not only see a similar situation regarding women’s participation at the French and Byzantine courts that is traceable in the works under scrutiny, but that there is perhaps also a shared feminine perspective between them, and that there exists a

¹⁰⁶ Classen 2004, 3.

¹⁰⁷ I refer to the title of Eley, 2011. For an examination of the different endings; see Simons and Eley, 1998.

¹⁰⁸ Hall McCash 2008, 46.

¹⁰⁹ Hall McCash 2008, 49.

common idea about Byzantine imperial women in the West, defining these royal women as admirable. This is best outlined by studying narrative perspective (focalisation) and by discussing the audience perspective.

Speaking of courtly love without considering the oral context of literature is futile, since the ideas relating to the term ‘courtly love’ belong, in Monson’s words, to:

the social milieu in which they originated, the aristocratic circles of the feudal courts. Whether or not they reflect the social practices of the courts, they are embodied in a large corpus of vernacular love literature produced in that milieu, literature in which social consideration play an important role. By far the most pervasive image in the love lyrics of the troubadours and trouvères, for example, is the ‘feudal metaphor’, which compares the relationship of the lover to his lady with that between a vassal and his lord. Not without reason, some scholars have seen in courtly love a ‘feudalization’ of love.¹¹⁰

Courtly love can be described as a literary motif that deals with aristocratic behaviour and questions of aristocratic identity within feudal culture.¹¹¹

A comparison between the social context of aristocratic circles in the Byzantine and Western courts is worthwhile. As Anna Komnene is an example of a woman who participated in these circles in Byzantium, then Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughters Marie of Champagne and Alix of Blois can be seen as equally important in the West.¹¹² Every one

¹¹⁰ Monson 2005, 238.

¹¹¹ According to Georges Duby, courtly love worked as an instruction for young men into aristocratic culture; see Duby (1988) 2010, 80. Erich Koehler describes courtly love in sociological terms, according to whom courtly love ‘est compris comme un facteur d’ordre dans la société’; Koehler 1964, 38. Moreover, Herbert Moller describes courtly love from its social aspect as well, as an education for young aristocrats. Thus, the female part is seen from a masculine perspective, an instrument in his social learning; see Moller 1960.

¹¹² One could further note that the literary circles of these latter three women were not completely detached from each other, considering how Marie and Alix were married

of the courtly women mentioned (Anna included) had acted as patrons to composers of philosophical and/or poetic works at their respective courts.

Eley presents a theory of *Partonopeu de Blois*' origins. The first version, of around 12,000 verses, was according to her 'composed in the early 1170s', and is 'closely related to extant manuscript A'.¹¹³ This version, along with the Continuation, seems to be linked to the House of Blois, more specifically to Count Thibaut V and his wife Alix, i.e. the aforementioned second daughter of Eleanor and Louis VII.¹¹⁴ Even though we cannot know for certain who composed *Partonopeu de Blois* or to whom the text was attributed, it seems as though the circle around Eleanor and her daughters can be linked to it, since these three women were involved in much of the vernacular literature composed during this time. Eleanor and the Byzantine empress, Bertha of Sulzbach (named Eirene through her marriage to Emperor Manuel), did meet during Eleanor's visit to Constantinople during the Second Crusade, as well as exchanging letters with each other while the French camped outside the city walls.¹¹⁵ Bertha-Eirene was also a patron of poets, and could thus be assumed to have had some literary interest, as well as the other courtly women mentioned.¹¹⁶ Ralph V. Turner describes how the women met at banquets and receptions:

In theory, respectable Byzantine ladies were expected to be seldom seen and never heard in public. The empress's quarters in the palace were under her sole control, guarded by eunuchs, and men were

to two brothers and perhaps also considering how, when Alix' daughter entered the Fontevrault convent, her grandmother Eleanor lavished her with gifts. There are no records of Eleanor having seen her daughters after she divorced Louis VII, however, perhaps such a gesture could tell us something of a potential bond remaining between them; see Wir 1999, 136 and 167. In their article on Eleanor's female descendants, Miriam Shadis and Constance Hoffman Berman state that the idea of Eleanor not having seen her daughters after the divorce is 'probably overstated'; see Shadis and Hoffman Berman, 2003, 181.

¹¹³ Eley 2011, 190. Manuscript A consists of 12082 verses (it is, though, incomplete).

¹¹⁴ Eley 2011, 190–204.

¹¹⁵ E. Jeffreys 1980, 472–473.

¹¹⁶ E. Jeffreys 1980, 473; see also M. Jeffreys and E. Jeffreys 1994, 50–51.

never supposed to enter—not even the emperor, unless with her permission. Yet in the twelfth century, Byzantine women, except for unmarried girls, were no longer so secluded as in earlier centuries, and the empress and her guest Eleanor likely joined their husbands in the evening to dine with them in the emperor's quarters.¹¹⁷

The empress and the queen thus appear to have been in contact, although we do not know the extent or the content of the communication between them.

With our knowledge of patronesses' importance to twelfth-century literary production, the audience perspective is an important aspect of analysing women's potential reception of the works at hand. Furthermore, considering the audience's significant role in the composition of romances generally, I find Peter J. Rabinowitz' division of audiences, which Roberta Krueger uses in her investigation of women readers in Old French romance, useful in order to analyse the texts' relation to their audiences.¹¹⁸ Rabinowitz divides audiences into four categories:

- 1) The *actual audience*: this consists of the actual people receiving the work, 'over which the author has no guaranteed control'.
- 2) The *authorial audience*: this is the hypothetical audience, rhetorically created by the author (or poet). 'Since the structure of a novel is designed for the author's hypothetical audience we must, as we read, come to share, in some measure, the characteristics of this audience if we are to understand the text'.
- 3) The *narrative audience*: this is the narrator's imitated audience. The actual audience must '*pretend* to be a member of the imaginary narrative audience for which [the] narrator is [composing]'.
- 4) The *ideal narrative audience*: this audience is idealised from the narrator's perspective. It 'believes the narrator, accepts his judgements, sympathizes with his plight, laughs at his jokes even when they are bad'.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Turner 2009, 81.

¹¹⁸ Krueger 1993, 26–27.

¹¹⁹ Rabinowitz 1977, 126–134.

By applying the different configurations of audiences concerning a literary work, I intend to better assess the addressees of *Partonopeu de Blois*, and how the narrative can be interpreted within its literary tradition and context. Most frequently, I will discuss the narrative audience, the authorial audience, and the actual audience. With these methods, the literary work can be read in its communicative, dialogical aspect. I have chosen to not always specify the audience category as I go along; only when I find it to be relevant for the analysis, i.e. when the audience appears to contain different levels correspondent to Rabinowitz' categories do I discuss them as such.

Krueger studies how gender is treated in Old French romance, considering the significant role that women's patronage played at medieval courts and the potentially large group of women consuming the works.¹²⁰ Krueger asserts that one work can have different receptions, depending on the audience:

Romance's authorial audience includes both men and women united in class but divided by gender. This fundamental division creates a profound split in reception. Noblemen may have shared a common literary heritage, but [...] their position within it – and its meaning for them – is not the same.¹²¹

Krueger's approach, both to romances in general, and to *Partonopeu de Blois* in particular, is useful in the analysis of the texts' relation to their courtly contexts, specifically regarding the study of probable women audiences. Krueger notes that *Partonopeu de Blois* displays different views on love, through elaborations with the audiences:

Far from being a neutral arena, the narrative audience is a sexually charged arena of conflicting attitudes, political positions, beliefs, and feelings. The underlying male/female tensions in the authorial audience are often accentuated within the narrative audience. When

¹²⁰ Krueger 1993.

¹²¹ Krueger 1993, 26–27.

the *Partonopeu* narrator laments his lady's indifference and compares it to his heroine's ultimate acceptance of her lover, he dramatizes the gap that separates the poet's conception of love and the woman's acceptance of it.¹²²

Joan M. Ferrante studies women's participation in the literary production of the medieval period. According to her, romances could have had the same function as did works of history or hagiography, but their inherent messages were less overtly propagandistic than other works; 'therefore perhaps less threatening, but nonetheless an effective way of making the same points, even to audiences less receptive to such messages, and making them in a language accessible to a much larger audience'.¹²³ In this manner, romances can be considered as ways for women to obtain access to public speech. Another useful aspect to this perspective of medieval romances is Dennis H. Green's term 'sponsorship' in relation to women's participation as co-creators of texts, which is a development of Ferrante's discussion of women's patronage. According to Green, women are often 'sponsors' of a literary work through the interactive, dialogical activity of listening to and thus discussing a romance:

The sponsor of a work can be said to play a creative role in literature as well as the author himself, but sponsorship plays a much wider role than this. In the Middle Ages it was one of the few realms where women were allowed a public voice, even if only indirectly, an opportunity which enabled them to exercise cultural, and at times, political influence.¹²⁴

Ferrante's and Green's definitions of romance literature as 'co-composed' by the women in the audience, along with Krueger's similar notion of divided audiences reflected within the works, are important to my approaches to medieval literature. I read the material at hand as part of a

¹²² Krueger 1993, 27. This matter is further discussed under the section 'The Male Friend' in this thesis.

¹²³ Ferrante 1997, 107.

¹²⁴ Green (2007) 2011, 204.

conversation, and thus as occasional works that require consideration of the performative aspect in order to interpret them. Below, I will describe my theoretical framework and methodological choices more deeply.

Subjectivity in Language and Texts

Beauvoir relates the difficulty for women to speak in a masculine discourse to a dialectal situation in which women become men's negation. Thus, feminine identity is formed as negativity, as something other than masculine (or human) identity, and a feminine discourse becomes, in essence, something 'other' than the 'objective truth'.¹²⁵ In her description of her own situation, Beauvoir writes that she could not claim that her utterance would have been truth, without at the same time erasing her own subjectivity. In other words, when speaking, she cannot *not* speak from a particular, biased, position; and if she claimed to utter the truth, then that would entail erasing her femininity, and consequently the body that she inhabits; or, to put it differently, herself.

Beauvoir's anecdote of the conflict between the bodily experience of being a woman, and (not) having access to the discourse, presupposes that feminine subjectivity is created in language – as a gendered discourse of masculine domination.

In reading the articulations of feminine subjectivity in the literary works at hand, I consider subjectivity to be a discursive formation in this sense. But, my main purpose is to show how articulations of feminine subjectivity can be traced in a masculine discourse in spite of its domination. The case of Sappho is illustrative; the quest for the voice of her lyric is not the same as searching for her biographical voice. Prins' approach to Sappho is useful in interpreting texts from a time so far removed from our own, so distant that their personal, biographical aspects are out of our

¹²⁵ See above.

reach: ‘Through multiple reconstructions and translations, versions and revisions, speculations and reinterpretations, Sappho proves to be an imitation for which there is no original’.¹²⁶ It is thus a textual voice that concerns us. However, this does not condemn the corporeal aspect of speech to irrelevance. Prins argues that Sappho’s survival in translations is based on her voice being, indeed, present:

What makes Sappho perpetually translatable? Her translatability, I would like to suggest, is the manifestation of a question about voice in Sappho’s fragments, as they simultaneously provoke and resist voicing. More than an accident of textual transmission, the fragmentation of Sapphic voice is implicit within the texts themselves.¹²⁷

With Sappho’s lyric *I*, the feminine voice of her poetry is transmitted through the ages, although the physical voice of her performances can no longer be heard.¹²⁸ Another example of a woman author who inscribes her voice into the literary tradition is Christine de Pizan (ca. 1364–1430). Her writings, not least the allegory *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405), describe her as reading and responding to the discourse that accuses her of inferiority due to her sex. In the mentioned text, Christine depicts herself, at her reading desk, wanting to read something pleasant after studying. As she reads the cleric Mathéolus, she finds an astonishing misogyny represented, which in turn, as Bonnie A. Birk writes:

set in motion a recollection of the many works she had encountered by highly revered and respected men that vilified women in the most determined and unflinching rhetoric. This in turn set loose an overwhelming torrent of troubling thoughts and emotions, causing her to doubt her own judgement regarding women even though her judgement was clearly grounded in her knowledge of herself as a

¹²⁶ Prins 1996, 37.

¹²⁷ Prins 1996, 38.

¹²⁸ For interesting approaches and readings of Sappho in this regard; see Greene (ed.) 1996b.

femme naturelle as well as in her observations of women of her acquaintance. She places herself in a position – as an elegantly elaborated framing device – of being unable to rise above the convincing and unrelenting appraisal of all these male ‘authorities’. Her portrait of despair is complete.¹²⁹

Christine could be described as highlighting the same problem that Beauvoir describes: how does the female body and voice find a place in a discourse that excludes women? Christine writes the experience of being a woman reader of the literary tradition in her culture. In *Le Chemin de longue étude* (1402), Christine describes her own experience of learning; her eyes seeing, her ears hearing, her body moving. In her dream, she describes herself finding the Sybil and the road of learning.¹³⁰ As she does in *Le Livre de la cité des dames*, here Christine also uses female figures from the literary tradition. By giving literary female figures new meaning and importance from a feminine perspective, the tradition becomes relatable for women in new ways. To quote Bärbel Zühlke: ‘Dans le *Chemin*, Christine trace son portrait intellectuel et littéraire, elle réfléchit donc à son statut singulier de femme écrivain – aspect central de son autoreprésentation’.¹³¹ When we read Christine de Pizan as well as Sappho, we trace feminine voices in a discourse dominated by men, and thus a literary feminine subjectivity. By tracing feminine subjectivity in ancient and medieval texts I do not intend to trace the biography of women’s voices, but rather to historicise the appearance of feminine articulations through time. The term ‘feminine subjectivity’ as it is employed in my study refers to the voice of the feminine inside the gender system, its discourse or tradition, not to biological women, or to an essentialist idea of a transhistorical and universal female identity. This means that the feminine voice

¹²⁹ Bonnie 2004, 125–126.

¹³⁰ *Le Chemin de longue étude*, 787–1138. As I refer to and quote this text, I always use Tarnowski’s edition (2000).

¹³¹ Zühlke 1994, 232.

is articulated within a dominating discourse, but also that its subjectivity can result from a specific appropriation of its tradition.¹³²

In addition, the focus is on twelfth-century romances and novels, i.e. works to which we cannot ascribe actual individual women as writers.¹³³ Anna Komnene is the exception, who writes herself into her work, and, not unlike Christine de Pizan, thus writes the feminine voice into the masculine tradition (in her case, of historiography). The voice of Anna, I argue, can be analysed in relation to the romances and novels that are the material of my study. The inclusion of her feminine voice in the Byzantine courtly literary scene should not be interpreted as emerging without context. For this reason, a consideration of the audiences, along with an expanded view of authorship during this time, is a key to better explore the communicative, occasional aspect of the romances and novels at the courts. Thus, in order to understand the articulations of feminine subjectivity without depending on a biographical view of authorship and history, I use a perspective on subjectivity that sees it as textual and discursive.

The conception of subjectivity in this study can, in the final analysis, be traced back to Émile Benveniste's linguistic theories. Benveniste argues that the speaking subject's construction inside language determines what its reality will be. In other words, the speaking subject cannot separate him- or herself from language, which governs our perceptions of the world. Benveniste describes the subject as a product of the dialogical nature of language: inside language, subjected to language, people constitute themselves as subjects, as they position themselves in the world and in relation to other speaking subjects.¹³⁴

In the same vein as Benveniste's description of subjectivity in language, Kristeva adds the significance of the syntactic predicate. The subjective *ego*, or *I*, discussed by Benveniste, is described by Kristeva as

¹³² I have taken this view of feminine subjectivity from Kay 1990, 102.

¹³³ Specifically not considering how *Hysmine and Hysminias* is composed by a male poet, and regarding *Partonopeu de Blois*, ascribing it to a female poet would be difficult considering the male narrator's voice.

¹³⁴ See Benveniste 1966, 52, and Benveniste 1976, 259–260.

positioned in the world through its combination with a predicate: ‘En contact avec le prédicat, le sujet sort de son indétermination; inversement, le prédicat en contact avec le sujet précise sa généralité’.¹³⁵ Hence, language loses its impersonal aspect, to instead become closely tied to its specific, socio-historical situation, on every spoken occasion. By speaking, the subject makes of him- or herself an actor in the world.

Furthermore, with her concept of intertextuality, Kristeva offers a perspective that permits an application of linguistic subjectivity to texts. Accordingly, a text becomes the carrier of a tradition of meaning, which shapes our understanding of it, in addition to the text becoming an innovator of meaning, as it is uttered and reactualised in a new context.¹³⁶

In analysing feminine subjectivity within literary works, and more specifically medieval romances and novels, I strive for, in Kristeva’s words: ‘une *opération*, un mouvement qui lie, mais plus encore qui *constitue* ce qu’on pourrait appeler les *arguments* de l’opération’.¹³⁷ Thus, the subjectivity of the text does not refer to an individual positioned outside it, but to a literary voice in dialogue with an intertextual field.

These intertextual aspects of the text are further supported by Tim Whitmarsh’s analysis of *pothos*, or desire, as a metanarrative force in the ancient Greek novel:

Pothos [...] always creates a space for narrative potentiality: it marks an absence to be remedied, a gap to be filled, a crisis to be resolved, a journey to be undertaken. [...] The relationship between *pothos* and its satisfaction is one of the most fundamental models for Greek narrative.¹³⁸

Desire thus operates in ways that are similar to Kristeva’s description of how the predicate works for the speaking subject. In other words, it functions as a metanarrative force for the plot, in the same way as, according

¹³⁵ Kristeva 1975, 250.

¹³⁶ Kristeva 1969, 52.

¹³⁷ Kristeva 1969, 53.

¹³⁸ Whitmarsh 2011, 142.

to Kristeva, the predicate acts to assure ‘une position transcendante du sujet de l’énonciation’.¹³⁹ Similarly to how the predicate situates the (syntactic) subject in a specific situation, or creates the relation between the subject and the world, so the text can be seen to be ‘plunged’ into language.¹⁴⁰

The linguistic view of subjectivity, along with the intertextual perspective on texts, creates possibilities to reread the *literary subjectivity* of each literary work, or the voice of the text: the movement – *pothos*, as it were – that shapes its meaning.

Literary Subjectivity

It is a matter of fact that vernacular twelfth-century poetry and romance pose methodological problems for the modern reader in search of subjectivity in this textual sense. Paul Zumthor states that ‘la poésie médiévale possède un caractère spécifique’, referring to poetic mobility among troubadours; namely, the inseparability between textual content and physical performance.¹⁴¹ This mobile aspect of medieval texts creates difficulties, Zumthor argues, since the medievalist has no access to the actual performances by which the texts reached their audiences.¹⁴² This also implies that the subjectivity of a medieval text cannot be traced back to an actual individual, but must rather be read as textual.

Zumthor discerns different types of literary or textual subjectivities, specifically within the Old French poetic context.¹⁴³ He makes a distinction in Old French between ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ speech (*discours*). In the performance, one finds the personal aspect of speech, as in a poet’s communication of affect. However, the impersonal speech narrates, referring to the past. All medieval narrative texts, Zumthor states,

¹³⁹ Kristeva 1975, 245.

¹⁴⁰ Kristeva 1969, 10.

¹⁴¹ Zumthor 1972, 31.

¹⁴² Zumthor 1972, 32.

¹⁴³ Zumthor 1972, 210.

are examples of impersonal speech, of which the subjects are merely nominal, never personal.¹⁴⁴

However, as we will see, an interpretation of the performative, personal *hic et nunc* characteristic, that Zumthor describes, can be discerned in the narratives analysed in this study. By the use of ancient rhetorical concepts, the narratives continuously digress from the listing of events, in order to create images in the audiences' minds. In the use of rhetorical techniques, we find moments in the narratives that can be said to connect the text to a physical audience; the poet's communication.

Influenced by Kristeva, Sarah Kay challenges Zumthor's view of the impossibility of tracing individuality in medieval texts.¹⁴⁵ Kay writes that the view of the medieval intertextual field as 'objective', as presented by Zumthor, fails to acknowledge the meaning-making that takes place in literature responding to a dominant tradition. Instead, Kay further develops Michel Zink's research on medieval literary subjectivity and his statement that 'le Moyen Âge est l'époque de la subjectivité'.¹⁴⁶ The birth of the romance language and literature equates to the birth of a literary consciousness, Zink argues. In translating historical legends, as well as composing poetry based on folkloric literary motifs, reflections on matters such as fictionality and the imaginary achieve an increased status in the poetic work. The *I* of the literary work becomes an individual voice.¹⁴⁷ Kay, for her part, argues that, in poets' use of literary tradition, one can discern elements of 'autobiography':

There are manifest differences between indifferently ('objectively') drawing on a common fund of *registres*, and citing a specific predecessor by name, quotation or allusion. Some troubadours achieve the status of *auctoritates*. Invoking them might gradually become part of the tradition; but initially at least, such invocations show

¹⁴⁴ Zumthor 1972, 210.

¹⁴⁵ Kay writes about her dependence on Kristeva's definition of intertextuality in Kay 1990, 2.

¹⁴⁶ Zink 1985, 10.

¹⁴⁷ Zink 1985, 42.

something of the specific knowledge and interests of those who cite them. They provide us with a fragment of 'autobiography'.¹⁴⁸

The methodological issue described by Zumthor regarding the impossibility of fully understanding the performative literature of the Middle Ages, is still not easily resolved. Nonetheless, this does not mean that modern readers cannot discover or delineate subjectivity articulated in the texts at hand, discerning individual voices within (as well as responding to) the tradition to which they belong. A text is created by discourse and simultaneously bound to a social and cultural world that, in combination with discourse (or tradition), makes meaning out of it. To quote Kristeva, we could say that, in order to better understand how poetic language is elaborated, 'il faut donc risquer de quitter les limites de l'observation linguistique et de prendre appui sur l'expérience du sujet parlant'; thus, language is being made simultaneously with subjectivity.¹⁴⁹ With Benveniste, Kristeva, Zink and Kay in mind, I explore twelfth-century narratives as subjective voices that co-shape literary tradition.

Rereading Feminine Subjectivity in Courtly Literature

According to the theoretical framework of linguistic subjectivity, developed into textual subjectivity by Kristeva with the concept of intertextuality, I consider subjectivity to be constructed within language and within the literary tradition's mosaic of texts. Furthermore, in contrast to Beauvoir's view of history as having excluded feminine voices, I strive to demonstrate in my readings that feminine subjectivity can be traced in literary history despite the fact that it is 'les mâles qui composent le codes'.¹⁵⁰ As medievalist scholarship has shown, feminine voices are discernibly represented in extant sources in various ways.

In her reading of twelfth-century Old French romance literature, E. Jane Burns finds a paradox regarding women's access to speaking that is

¹⁴⁸ Kay 1990, 6–7.

¹⁴⁹ Kristeva 1975, 246.

¹⁵⁰ Beauvoir (1949) 1976a, 136.

echoed in Beauvoir's description of the experience of the inaccessibility of language as a woman. In the twelfth-century translation of Ovid's tale of the sisters Philomela and Procne in the *Metamorphoses*, Burns identifies this issue as traceable in the narrative. When Procne's husband, Tereus, requests that (here) Philomena persuade her father that she may accompany Tereus to her sister, she responds: 'My speech, sir, in comparison to yours, what could it be worth?' (Sire, ma parole | Anvers la vostre que vaudroit?)¹⁵¹ In Philomena's line, Burns traces a discussion on feminine subjectivity:

We have here a particularly striking version of what contemporary feminist thinkers have termed the paradox of the female speaking subject: a heroine who, even as she speaks, cannot, it seems, escape primary identification as an object.¹⁵²

Burns appears to interpret this medieval translation of Ovid in line with the experience described by Beauvoir: a woman cannot speak except from a position that excludes her subjectivity. Issues discussed in our modern age were thus, accordingly, already pronounced during the twelfth century: 'To ask what her words could *be worth* implies deference to another's evaluation of them, marking herself as an object to be scrutinized by a more authoritative subject'.¹⁵³ In Philomena's question, we thus see the representation of experiencing a gendered condition, which dooms women to speak from an object position, a consciousness of being seen as the 'other'.

However, besides the representation of gender inequality in this scene, where 'Philomena here becomes, in Irigaray's terms, necessary ground for, the complementary support for, a subjectivity that excludes

¹⁵¹ *Philomena*, 276-277. The translation is quoted from Burns 1993, who quotes these verses in her discussion; Burns 1993, 1. For the quotations of and references to *Philomena* in this thesis, I always use Boer's edition in Le Livre de Poche's collection of Chrétien de Troyes' works (1994).

¹⁵² Burns 1993, 1.

¹⁵³ Burns 1993, 1.

her',¹⁵⁴ Burns asserts that, at the same time, the text represents resistance to this very inequality. Considering the courtly oral context in which the text was performed (despite us knowing crucially little, if anything, about it), the reiterated questions in medieval Philomena's reappearance, reworked from its ancient Latin source into vernacular poetry, encourages us to *reread* Philomena's question:

It is because we as readers know Philomena to be a female character that we can reread her question as an interrogation of the power dynamic in male/female relations. The very female body that would traditionally incite a standardized gender-determined interpretation of Philomena's feminine voice can also provoke us to hear in that voice a forceful alternative response.¹⁵⁵

In medievalist scholarship, the notion of an exclusive, masculine discourse ruling our past has been challenged, as Burns' study demonstrates. Burns shows how feminine subjectivity is perceptible in medieval sources. Rather than having a modern theory of phallogocentrism defining the discourse as exclusively masculine, theories from the feminist tradition enable us observe issues with which medieval women might also have struggled. In this sense, we should not really speak of a clear, progressive chronology in women's history, according to which we are now liberated and enlightened, in contrast to the dark ages. Instead, to historicise feminine subjectivity means that we are changing this chronological periodisation and progressive view of history, to instead appreciate that we come from a polyphonic past, a tradition of many voices, which we are continuing. By searching for liberation from the masculine discourse, we continue an old tradition, rather than breaking free from it. We reread.

Burns' approach to Old French romance, along with Kay's understanding of feminine subjectivity in troubadour poetry, are two significant inspirations for my readings. Kay focuses on the textual voice, rather than on the biological sex. When she encounters the masculine discourse of

¹⁵⁴ Burns 1993, 2.

¹⁵⁵ Burns 1993, 3.

twelfth-century poetry, she asks: how can a woman speak as a subject inside a discourse that is inherently exclusive? In her study, Kay finds responses to the discourse within it, by *using* it to one's own advantage.¹⁵⁶ Subjectivity can thus be detected in appropriations of the discourse.

In a way, Kay's view of feminine articulations within the gender discourse could seem to be related to Irigaray's notion of mimicry in the masculine discourse: 'Jouer de la mimesis, c'est donc, pour une femme, tenter de retrouver le lieu de son exploitation par le discours, sans s'y laisser simplement réduire'.¹⁵⁷ In her analysis of Irigaray's theory, Virpi Lehtinen explains that 'Irigaray uses the other's text for constructing her own identity as a woman who expresses herself in the discourse as a philosopher, i.e., with the goal of constructing her writings or her femininity in the discourse'.¹⁵⁸ This entails that women's access to speaking derives from a confirmation of belonging to an excluded position; if women are good at their mimicry, then they position themselves as speakers on the outside of the masculine, and thus unattainable, *logos*.¹⁵⁹ In other words, Kay's description of feminine subjectivity is in fact not analogous to Irigaray's theory of mimicry. Irigaray argues that the task for women is not to construct a feminine *logos*, but rather to bring the entire paradigm into question. Kay's analysis of feminine subjectivity within the masculine discourse does not, as I see it, depend on a utopian vocabulary from which this masculine paradigm has vanished. Rather, using her approach, one could read feminine subjectivity as already represented within extant language and literature; for instance, in troubadour poetry. In this way, a historical perspective can quite constructively provide us with an increased understanding of the discourse and tradition of our own times; by acknowledging the presence of feminine subjectivity within the discourse, women are not predestined to occupy a position on the outside, as Irigaray (and Beauvoir) would describe it. As I shall argue, the literary tradition demonstrates diversity as far as voices are concerned. I intend

¹⁵⁶ Kay 1990, 102 (referred to above).

¹⁵⁷ Irigaray 1977, 73–74.

¹⁵⁸ Lehtinen 2014, 43.

¹⁵⁹ Irigaray 1977, 74.

to examine the texts' subjectivity and the *pothos* that stirs the narratives and forms these voices.

Needless to say, the gender hierarchy is present in the material of this study, inherent in the discourse itself, but how is it represented? As we reread, the focus on narrative perspective and analysing audiences are two significant aspects of interpreting the texts, and even though I am indebted to Burns' and Kay's studies, I adopt the very concept of rereading from an earlier discussion in scholarship. As already pointed out, an illustrative example of increased interest in feminine subjectivity is the research related to Christine de Pizan. Devalorised by literary historians in the nineteenth century, today she is a star in medieval studies. Joan Kelly contributed considerably to this ongoing process of revaluing the tradition of feminine subjectivity in the literary tradition, in her study on feminist theory before the French revolution, published in 1982.¹⁶⁰ Kelly discussed the omnipresent masculine viewpoint in the field of history, and thus proposed a new methodology, supported by literary scholar Susan Schibanoff in her response in 1983, that I thus encapsulate in the word *rereading*.

Kelly's scholarly contribution challenges traditional ways of conceiving historical temporality.¹⁶¹ In her response to Kelly's article,

¹⁶⁰ Kelly 1982. The article was later published in a slightly revised version in Kelly's collection of essays; Kelly 1984b. In this thesis, I refer to Kelly's first version, published in 1982, to follow the chronology of Susan Schibanoff's response in 1983 (see below). The few changes made in the 1984 version are on a detailed, stylistic level, and do not change the content of the article's claims.

¹⁶¹ In her seminal article 'Did Women Have a Renaissance', Kelly argues that courtly love in the twelfth century was the result of an increase in actual power among aristocratic women, which was then discernible in lyric and romances where courtly love is represented; see Kelly (1977) 1984a, 22–30. Kelly's analysis of women's participation in aristocratic culture as voices of authority is reasonable, especially regarding women's patronage; Kelly (1977) 1984, 2–30. However, one could object to an idealised reading of courtly lyric and romance, seeing women's emancipation and reciprocity in any representation of feminine sexuality, without considering how the literary works in fact depict courtly love. For a nuanced survey of Kelly's arguments concerning courtly love in relation to other scholarship; see Cassagnes-Brouquet, Klapisch-Zuber, and Steinberg, 2010. In the present thesis, I will present

Schibanoff describes her approach as ‘multitemporal’, defying traditional historiographical periods. Instead Kelly ‘creates her own era, 1400–1789, which supersedes all the others’.¹⁶² She, Schibanoff continues, ‘dismisses these accepted schemes and devises one that more closely reflects female experience in the past’.¹⁶³ Thus, Kelly’s article is a critique of her own field, claiming that it does not acknowledge the tradition of feminist thought before the French revolution, which she argues has a much longer tradition – beginning with Christine de Pizan.¹⁶⁴ If feminist women appear at all in historical records, she argues, it is with an individualist focus that neglects the wider context.¹⁶⁵ Schibanoff describes the multitemporality of Kelly’s approach as a reconceptualisation of the past that ‘mingles our present with this past and this past with our present’.¹⁶⁶ In fact, Kelly argues that the historian studying women’s history before the French revolution has to perform a practice not unlike Christine de Pizan’s own reading:

To this day, every feminist who has followed Christine de Pisan has had to pass through a particular crisis of consciousness, which she described with as much self-awareness as Petrarch brought to his inner struggles with a dawning modern ethos. Unlike the male humanist, however, Christine could not draw on classical learning to guide her toward her new intellectual position. She had to oppose what seemed and still seems to be the overwhelming authority of the learned on women’s inferiority.¹⁶⁷

Kelly’s view of Christine de Pizan’s writing as a ‘first attempt at women’s studies’ manifests the multitemporality of the historian’s reading, linking

literary readings that simultaneously acknowledge women’s potential access to literary composition, and the masculine tradition and discourse that they must adjust to.

¹⁶² Schibanoff 1983, 320.

¹⁶³ Schibanoff 1983.

¹⁶⁴ Kelly 1982, 4–5.

¹⁶⁵ Kelly 1982, 5.

¹⁶⁶ Schibanoff, 1983, 320–321.

¹⁶⁷ Kelly 1982, 13.

Christine de Pizan to her own scholarly practice.¹⁶⁸ In rereading historical texts, Schibanoff notes the difficulty for feminists who, in her words, have ‘dual scholarly identities’:

Many of us were conventionally trained not to read ourselves and the present into the past we studied. [...] I learned, for example, that the *querelle des femmes* was merely a literary game; to find in it any evidence of serious feminist opposition to misogyny was to read into it my particular modern sensibility. Many of us, I think, believed that we were learning to see the past accurately and objectively and that, with sufficient practice, diligence, and, above all, rigor, we would ultimately attain the professional scholar’s chronistic vision.¹⁶⁹

Against this ‘chronistic vision’, Schibanoff (and others), in her (their) feminist critical practice, ‘adopted a methodology in which “reading into”, or rereading, is a central tenet’.¹⁷⁰ Today, Christine de Pizan is a widely studied author in the field of French literature, and her writings on women’s perspectives and issues are recognised in our modern era.

Christine de Pizan is famous for defending women, for example in the debate against Jean de Meun’s part of *Le Roman de la rose*. Furthermore, she writes herself into her work; a woman reader devastated and burdened by, but also appropriating and recreating, the masculine literary field. In the aforementioned *Livre de la cité des dames*, the first-person narrative voice, Christine, rereads and re-evaluates women throughout history for a contemporary public, but also for the women before, as well as after, her own time (*tant les passees dames, comme les presentes et celles a avenir*).¹⁷¹ As she rereads the literary tradition, Christine could be described as performing a different feminist practice than that perceived in the modern view of women’s emancipation as a progressive movement, culminating in our time.

¹⁶⁸ Kelly 1982, 20.

¹⁶⁹ Schibanoff 1983, 322.

¹⁷⁰ Schibanoff 1983, 322.

¹⁷¹ *Le Livre de la cité des dames*, XIX. I quote Richard’s edition ([1997] 2016).

Thus, the increased modern desire to highlight Christine de Pizan as the *first feminist* is understandable. However, a modern individualist perspective on feminist thought, projected onto an era before the French revolution, might run the risk of not seeing the longer tradition of articulations of feminine subjectivity. Such a criticism against Kelly's approach has been presented by Judith M. Bennett, who argued in 1997 that we should appreciate the continuity of women's history; while one can indeed acknowledge the '*changes in women's experiences*', this is not the same as seeing these as '*transformations in women's status*', Bennett stresses, and she continues:

Kelly's model of an inverted synchronization between women's history and traditional history provided a critical guide. Yet, although Kelly explicitly challenged some of the basic assumptions of traditional history, she did not fully reject its periodization. Kelly sought to change *evaluations* of great divides, not the idea of transformation per se.¹⁷²

In line with Bennett, I agree on the relevance of speaking about a continuity of feminine subjectivity in literary tradition. To be sure, I do not claim, in my readings of twelfth-century works, to trace feminism in any modern sense of the term. As will be noted, the narratives are far too complex and polyphonic to ascribe them an absolute (anachronistic) political stance, such as modern feminist views. However, I do think that a broader understanding of feminine subjectivity in the Middle Ages might help us to appreciate subsequent periods, when more obvious *feminist* opinions are discernible. Burns, Kay and Krueger demonstrate this *plus longue durée* of the history of feminine subjectivity in their previously mentioned research.

Furthermore, Burns, Kay, Krueger and Helen Solterer wrote an article in 1996, in the wake of Kelly and Schibanoff, discussing the combination of feminism and the discipline of Old French studies. Similarly to Kelly and Schibanoff, Burns et al. acknowledge a need to challenge the

¹⁷² Bennett 1997, 74–77.

discipline, which forces them to approach the issue of multitemporality. In their article, their identity as women readers in the field of medievalism is described as connected to the instability of medieval texts and their receptions, the so-called *mouvance* of Old French literature. Against this backdrop, they also criticise the quest for a universal, transhistorical, female identity:

When we investigate the medieval text, we find not the stable presence of fixed documents but a textual tradition characterized by variants and *mouvance*. The search for 'medieval women' turns out to be a tricky enterprise, plagued by the perils of essentializing 'woman' and of idealizing our foremothers as powerful or of portraying them as victims.¹⁷³

The anonymity of vernacular romance forces the critic to search for women's voices from a different angle, which generates a specific challenge for the medievalist, compared with scholars who work with more recent periods. This need, Burns et al. argue, places the scholar of Old French literature who is interested in women's issues in a peculiar position within the field:

We also face resistance within the institution of medieval studies, as traditionally constituted, where any avowedly contemporary theoretical or political position embraced by the critic is frequently rejected as 'anachronistic'. From this last perspective, the feminist medievalist is something of an oxymoron, a scholar at odds with her discipline.¹⁷⁴

Kelly, Schibanoff, Burns et al. show in their respective discussions that, as a consequence, their readings of feminine perspectives on the masculine discourse through history cause them to cross-examine their own fields.

¹⁷³ Burns et al. 1996, 227.

¹⁷⁴ Burns et al. 1996, 227.

In this study, I will reread *Partonopeu de Blois*, *Hysmine and Hysminias* and the *Alexiad* in order to understand these works in their twelfth-century contexts as well as in the literary tradition. Relating *Partonopeu de Blois* to the Graeco-Roman tradition as well as to the articulations of feminine subjectivity also requires that one takes the audience into consideration. Who were the women being addressed and who listened to these stories?

There are several ways to assess the contours of a courtly audience of women. In her study (1997) on women's participation in courtly literature, Ferrante studies correspondence to and from medieval women. In this material, she finds that:

women's authority, political and intellectual, is recognized by the men who work with them, that women collaborate and cooperate with men in politics, religion, and scholarship as colleagues, that their friendship and support is valued and trusted.¹⁷⁵

In her study, Ferrante shows how women were involved in intellectual life in the Western Middle Ages, including the composition of poetic works.

Ferrante has also studied medieval women and education, looking at both historical records of women from the period and literary examples.¹⁷⁶ One of the literary figures whom she discusses in this context is Melior, the female protagonist of *Partonopeu de Blois*. Ferrante argues that Melior is a representation of learned women, which appears to relate to an actual situation in which women's status as learned was increasing. There are examples of women from the twelfth century who received a notable education. It also seems as though these women were esteemed for their education. Examples of learned women who were known for their literary patronage are the aforementioned Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughters Alix of Blois, who was probably involved in the

¹⁷⁵ Ferrante 1997, 10.

¹⁷⁶ Ferrante 1984, 9–42.

composition of *Partonopeu de Blois*, and Marie de Champagne.¹⁷⁷ Both of these daughters seem to have known at least Latin.¹⁷⁸ In addition, the famous Héloïse (in the correspondence with Abélard) was described as an expert not only in Latin, but also in Hebrew and Greek, as seen above – and praised for it.¹⁷⁹ I agree with Ferrante that Melior is to be interpreted as the representation of a learned woman, worthy of praise for being an intellectual.

Furthermore, Melior's knowledge seems to reflect an actual appraisal of learned women in the twelfth-century Western European context: 'the educated woman [...] can command the respect and attention of the male establishment, and the educated heroine [...] can elicit the sympathy of the audience'. Ferrante argues that the twelfth-century educated woman is seen sympathetically, which is especially demonstrated in literature: 'In this period, at least', she concludes, 'we are meant to root for the brilliant heroine'.¹⁸⁰ In this study, I argue that Melior's character is a combination of two typical female characters from the Greek novel: the chaste protagonist and the antagonist seducer. By combining these two characters into one, the romance is able to create a new sort of female character: a protagonist female seducer, able to desire without losing her honour. The possibility of *Partonopeu de Blois* being based on the Graeco-Roman novel tradition carries consequences for how we read the literary situation and tradition of feminine subjectivity. Thus, the interpretation of the romance is based on an audience focus, as described above.

Returning to Ferrante's study of women's correspondence, one finds a collective identification among women regarding their sex, 'even as they perform the functions of men "virilely."' They seem to identify with other important women, to be alert to women's history and

¹⁷⁷ Regarding Alix' potential involvement in *Partonopeu de Blois*; see Eley 2011, 190–204.

¹⁷⁸ Ferrante 1984, 10–11.

¹⁷⁹ Ferrante 1984, 14. In her article, she also mentions Hildegard of Bingen as an example of a learned and praised woman.

¹⁸⁰ Ferrante 1984, 34–35.

problems'.¹⁸¹ Ferrante shows that, like Kelly and the scholars after her have done, medieval women appear to have perceived a continuity between themselves and women in the past: 'Even though the actions of particular women may be dropped from official memory within a few generations, their names are often preserved in texts written for women'.¹⁸²

In order to trace feminine subjectivity, we need to reread the past, as Kelly did in 1982, confronting the historical field within which she operated. Rereading the tradition of feminist thought in Christine de Pizan was an act of broadening our perceptions of history, which improved our understanding of articulations of feminine subjectivity in a literary context different from our own.

Medievalism is, furthermore, a field where studies on feminine subjectivity continue to reconfigure our perceptions of the past – from having seen it as an exclusively masculine tradition, to instead acknowledging its complex polyphony and mosaic of voices. In this study, I illustrate how feminine subjectivity can be traced in *Partonopeu de Blois*, *Hysmine and Hysminias* and the *Alexiad*, which encourages us to reexamine the literary tradition and to connect the Graeco-Roman novel tradition to the emergence of romances in Old French.

If we recognise the Graeco-Roman novel tradition as existing alongside the clerical tradition of the church fathers, which we do by acknowledging Apuleius' novel to have plausibly circulated, then we should indeed acknowledge the possibility that other novels, namely Greek and Byzantine ones, were also known at French courts, possibly in Latin versions or retold orally.¹⁸³ The recognition of Apuleius in *Partonopeu de Blois* urges us to reread twelfth-century romances and novels. As a result, we may hear new voices, through the Graeco-Roman novel tradition.

Considering the primary sources' diversity of ancient and medieval languages, the citations from them in the following literary analyses are

¹⁸¹ Ferrante 1997, 11.

¹⁸² Ferrante 1997, 11.

¹⁸³ Regarding Apuleius in the High Middle Ages; see Carver 2007, 61–107.

accompanied by translations into English in the main text. After each source's first citation, I refer in a footnote to the edition and translation that I have used (throughout, if not otherwise stated). Considering the lack of English translations of *Partonopeu de Blois*, those translations are mine. Citations from secondary literature in French are not translated into English but kept in their original, with the aim of not losing their original formulations and accuracy.

The analysis is outlined thematically from three angles: firstly, by focusing on the romance's erotic narrative in relation to erotic learning in the Greek novel tradition. This is accomplished in the section thematised as 'touch'. Secondly, I continue by examining articulations of feminine desire in relation to rhetorical models. This section is thematised as 'gaze', since the rhetoric of vision is discussed along with readings of looking vs. being observed. Thirdly, and lastly, I further discuss the articulations of a feminine voice in the narratives. This section is thematised as 'voice', since here I focus in more details on the feminine voice's function, both as female characters' voices within the fabula, and at a broader level regarding literary subjectivity. The reexamining of tradition discloses articulations of feminine subjectivity, as we will see.

TOUCH

Embroidering Desire on the Tissue of Tradition

This chapter discusses how representations of desire in the Greek novel tradition are preserved in *Partonopeu de Blois*. In the context of the chivalry underpinning the Old French romances, configurations of desire and love ‘centers attention on the male lover-hero’, as Kay puts it, ‘who alone can embody chivalry. “Courtly love” emphasizes a link between love, its social setting (the court), and its ways (courtliness) [...]’.¹⁸⁴ Accordingly, representations of desire are linked to social conduct, and more specifically to the ideals to which the knights at court aspired. Furthermore, Krueger writes that:

Chivalry imposed constraints on both men and women who would conform to courtly ideals. The ideal of the perfect knight dictates that the best knight wins, necessitates that many men be losers [...]. Ladies may wait as passive objects while knights fight to take possession of them [...] Romance misogyny sometimes scapegoats women as the arbiters of a system in which men compete for scarce sexual and material resources and private needs must be sacrificed for public obligations.¹⁸⁵

Regarding the way in which romances pay attention to the male lover-hero, as Kay puts it, and how ideals of chivalry indeed focus on the *chevalier* (as the word itself tells us), women are placed in a position of passivity, waiting to be ‘taken’ by the most valiant knight. Based on Beauvoir, we could therefore argue that the lady is trapped inside a masculine universe.¹⁸⁶ How is feminine desire articulated within frames of courtliness?

¹⁸⁴ Kay (2000) 2004, 84.

¹⁸⁵ Krueger (2000) 2004, 143–144.

¹⁸⁶ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 504.

In this chapter, I will construct an interpretation of *Partonopeu de Blois* that suggests courtly representations of feminine desire.

In her description of the modern woman's situation and characteristics, Beauvoir compares women to nature, mastered by civilisation (which functions as a symbol for the masculine). In this masculine universe, women have ambiguous feelings towards men: masculine domination forces women into immanent passivity; yet, in order to render their existence valuable in such a situation, women transform the trapped position inside which they find themselves into having a transcendent dimension: 'vassale de l'homme, elle se croit son idole; humiliée dans sa chair, elle exalte l'Amour'.¹⁸⁷ In *Le Deuxième sexe*, women are described as co-creators of the gender hierarchy into which they are born. They take on the role as the man's 'other'; however, since women indeed are, as Beauvoir writes, existing, transcendent beings, they take on this role actively.

Although Beauvoir's analysis of woman as other is pertinent, I read the situation of being 'the other' in a medieval literary universe quite differently. To be sure, as Kay and Krueger among others have pointed out, the courtly, literary and social world focuses on men and masculine ideals, but instead of using Beauvoir's analysis of woman's situation and assessing feminine subjectivity as negativity, helped by Kristeva's analyses, I acknowledge femininity to be plural and creative, and thus unstable and undetermined by a governing masculine order.¹⁸⁸ Thus, with the vocabulary available in erotic literary traditions, *Partonopeu de Blois* constructs what, inspired by Kristeva's formulation, one might define as an alphabet of feminine sensuality.¹⁸⁹

In order to highlight this aspect of the medieval configurations of feminine desire and love, and to assess the erotic narrative regarding feminine subjectivity, the erotic encounter between Partonopeu and Melior is analysed in relation to *Hysmine and Hysminias* and to the ancient Greek novel tradition.

¹⁸⁷ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 504.

¹⁸⁸ Kristeva 2002, 558.

¹⁸⁹ Kristeva 2002, 561.

As a frame, I take the scene that narrates the first meeting between Partonopeu and Melior in the Old French romance. Partonopeu has become lost in the Ardennes, finds an empty ship, and is transported to the enchanted city of Chief d'Oire. Here, he enters a palace, is served an abundant dinner by invisible hands, and then goes to a bedroom to sleep, which becomes the scene of the sexual encounter. This scene takes place in darkness. A stranger (Melior, presented further below in the narrative) enters. The two have intercourse, which could, arguably, be described as a sort of rape scenario.¹⁹⁰ After the intercourse has taken place, Melior introduces herself to Partonopeu, telling him that she has arranged the event. I will present a detailed reading of this scene, paralleled with Hysminias' erotic awakening in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, which occurs progressively through three erotic dreams. The scene from *Partonopeu de Blois* is compared with these dreams.

I also take into consideration the importance of the Latin tradition for the Old French romance, and especially the Cupid and Psyche story, regarding *Partonopeu de Blois*.¹⁹¹ The presence of this myth in the romance is obvious and appears to be consciously chosen in its composition. However, I argue that the singularity and 'uncourtly' character of the erotic narrative can be better understood in light of the Greek, rather than the Latin, tradition.

The Cupid and Psyche story is used as a background for my reading of the erotic scene in *Partonopeu de Blois*. Partonopeu is transported from his homeland to the enchanted city of Chief d'Oire. In *The Golden Ass*, the erotic scene has the following composition:

Finitis voluptatibus, vespera suadente concedit Psyche cubitum. Iamque provecta nocte clemens quidam sonus aures eius accedit. Tunc virginitati suae pro tanta solitudine metuens, et pavet et horrescit et quovis malo plus timet quod ignorat. Iamque aderat

¹⁹⁰ Kay has described the scene as 'a scene whose clumsy violence is quite disturbing'; Kay 2001, 280.

¹⁹¹ Brown 1964, 5–6.

ignobilis maritus, et torum inscenderat, et uxorem sibi Psychen fecerat, et ante lucis exortum propere discesserat.¹⁹²

When the pleasures were over, at the evening star's urging Psyche retired to bed. Then, when night was well advanced, a dulcet sound impinged upon her ears. Now being all alone she feared for her virginity. She trembles and shudders, and fears worse than anything the thing that she is ignorant of. Now her unknown husband had arrived, had mounted the bed, had made Psyche his wife, and had quickly departed before the rising of daylight.¹⁹³

The Cupid and Psyche narrative seems to be an undeniable intertext for *Partonopeu de Blois*, but the Old French romance amplifies this scene considerably. The Latin novel narrates the events. The narrative, however, leaves out information regarding the events taking place, and instead rather invites the audience to imagine the scene for themselves. In contrast, in *Partonopeu de Blois*, the narrative goes into detail about what takes place. In the romance, there appears to be considerable interest in erotic narrative, which seems different compared with the Cupid and Psyche tale in Apuleius' novel. If one instead compares *Partonopeu de Blois*' erotic narrative to Byzantine and ancient Greek sources, there are several salient parallels to be found.

With the comparison between *Partonopeu de Blois*' erotic narrative and those from the Greek novel tradition, the amplification of the erotic scene, as along with the explicit violence in *Partonopeu de Blois*, can be interpreted differently than the courtly love described above. Furthermore, Melior's resistance as well as her agency can be interpreted in terms of a fusion of two female literary figures from the Greek novel tradition: the chaste maiden protagonist and the experienced seducer. By combining these two figures into Melior's character, she can be conceived as both a desiring and a narrative agent, at the same time as she

¹⁹² *The Golden Ass*, V.4. Throughout the thesis, I quote J. Arthur Hanson's edition ([1989] 1996).

¹⁹³ Hanson's translation of Apuleius is quoted throughout the thesis; see Hanson (1989) 1996.

can claim the status of a chaste, ideal, maiden. In this way, I argue that *Partonopeu de Blois* can be read as a configuration of feminine subjectivity. Its use of different traditions blended together forms an alphabet of feminine sensuality, as it were.

Boy Becomes Man: An Erotic Education

I will start by comparing Partonopeu's initiation into love to Hysminias' similar initiation, in order to demonstrate similarities regarding the male characters' erotic experiences, which, in the next step, have consequences for the stories' representations of feminine subjectivity.

In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, the initial meeting between the lovers takes place at the novel's beginning, at a banquet. Hysminias is chosen to be the new herald from his home city Eurykomis to the city of Aulikomis. He is received at the house of Sosthenes. At the banquet, Sosthenes' daughter, Hysmine, serves Hysminias the wine:

Ἦκεν οὖν ἡ παρθένος καὶ παρατιθεμένη μοι τὸ ποτήριον ‘Χαίροις’ ὑπεψιθύρισεν· ἐγὼ δὲ ἀκούσας οὐδὲν εἶπον, ἀλλ’ ἔπιον μεθ’ ἡδονῆς ὅσης, ὅτι καὶ τὸ ἔκπωμα μάλα τερπνὸν καὶ τὸ πόμα γλυκὺ καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ διείδεξ καὶ μάλα ψυχρόν, ὧν οὔτι γένοιτ’ ἂν ἡδύτερον ἀνδρὶ διψῶντι καὶ καυματουμένῳ καὶ ζέοντι.¹⁹⁴

So the girl came up and, placing the cup beside me, whispered, ‘Welcome’. I heard her, though I made no reply but drank with great pleasure, because the cup was very delightful and the wine very sweet and the water clear and very cold: nothing can be more agreeable than this for a man who is thirsty and very hot and sweaty.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, I.8.3–4. Throughout this thesis, I always quote Miroslav Marcovich's edition; Marcovich 2001.

¹⁹⁵ Throughout the thesis, if not otherwise stated, I quote Jeffrey's translation from her collection of translations of the Komnenian novels; E. Jeffreys 2012.

They continue eating. Then, Hysmine comes back to serve Hysminias. She develops her flirtatious and erotic advances by touching him in various ways and whispering in his ear. She is the erotic initiator. Hysminias' reaction is rather passive. Being the narrator, he tells us what Hysmine does, but he does not mention that he himself makes any active response to her conduct, no advances in return:

Ἦκεν οὖν ἡ παρθένος καὶ ἐπ' ἐμὲ καὶ μάλα βραχεῖα φωνῇ “Ἐχεις” φησὶν “ἐξ ὁμωνύμου παρθένου τὴν κύλικα” καὶ τὸν πόδα ταύτης ἐπὶ τὸν ἐμὸν ἐπιτέθεικε καὶ προσεπέθλιβεν ἐφ' ὅσον ἐγὼ τοῦ πόματος ἔπινον· ἐγὼ δ' ἠρρυθρίων, νῆ τοὺς θεοὺς, καὶ τάχ' ἂν καὶ ἀπέσκωπα πρὸς αὐτήν, εἰ μὴ τύχη γενέσθαι τὸ πρᾶγμα νενόμικα. Πάλιν οὖν ἐτρεφόμεθα καὶ πάλιν ἐπίνομεν. Ἦκεν ἡ κόρη κιρνῶσά μοι καὶ προὔτεινετο τὸ ποτήριον, ἐγὼ δ' ἐξέτεινα τὴν χεῖρα λαβεῖν· καὶ τῆς μὲν κύλικος ἐλαβόμην, ἡ δ' οὐκ ἀπεσπᾶτο τῶν τῆς παρθένου χειρῶν· ἡ γάρ μοι παρθένος καὶ παρετίθετο τὸ ποτήριον καὶ παρακατεῖχεν αὐτό· καὶ τῷ μὲν σχήματι παρετίθετο, τῇ δ' ἀληθεία κατεῖχεν. Ἔρις οὖν ἐν χερσὶ, καὶ χεὶρ παρθένου κόρης νικᾷ χεῖρα κήρυκος ἀνδρὸς παρθένου.¹⁹⁶

So the maiden came and said to me, in a very quiet voice, ‘You are receiving the cup from a maiden with the same name’. And she placed her foot against mine, and kept it there for as long as I drank from the cup. I blushed, by the gods, and I might have made a joke of it, except I thought that this had happened accidentally. Then we ate once again and then we drank again. The girl came up, she mixed the wine for me and held out the cup. I held out my hand to take it and grasped the cup, but she did not let it out of her maidenly hands. For the maiden both offered me the cup and kept hold of it and though she was apparently offering it, in reality she was holding on to it. So there was a contest between our hands, and the hand of the virgin girl is victorious over the hand of the virgin herald.

This passage narrates how Hysmine catches Hysminias off guard. He does not seem prepared for the erotic advances that Hysmine is secretly making. Hysmine's control and agency, alongside Hysminias' surprised

¹⁹⁶ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, I.9.1–14.

reaction, are two features that will be repeated in the dreams that Hysminias later has but, as we shall see, in these dreams he responds differently. MacAlister describes the psychological element of Hysminias' progress from the primary initiation by Hysmine, towards dreaming and becoming enflamed with desire. In contrast to ancient novels, where desire is an instant effect of an external force, as Eros' weapons, Makrembolites rather creates an erotic narrative focusing on the internal process of desire:

We know that love in the typical ancient novel is instant, and is brought about through the intrusion of a nonhuman force (a god or chance). But in Makrembolites' discourse an oneiric appearance of Eros (3.1) only triggers in the reluctant Hysminias a sexual awareness of Hysmine. This awareness is then transformed into love by way of another dream, which occurs on the same night and which has a specifically erotic content (3.5–7). The psychological element that occurs as a result of the first dream, then, generates the second, and it is the physical element apparent in the second, rather than the alien speech intrusion of Eros – the nonhuman force – that provides the primary impulse for Hysminias' love.¹⁹⁷

In addition, Nilsson argues that in Makrembolites' novel, touch is 'the trigger of the love story'. It is important to note, as Nilsson remarks, that it is the female character's touch that 'awakens the desire and eventual love of the hero'.¹⁹⁸ As touch could thus be seen as replacing the ancient model of an external, divine force as a trigger of desire, we see how this new force of desire creates a space in which the focus on the couple's agency and psychological aspects appears to increase. As will be discussed below, this sort of erotic narrative, which enhances the role of touch, results in feminine erotic agency.

¹⁹⁷ MacAlister 1996, 135–137.

¹⁹⁸ Nilsson 2017, 249.

Before Hysminias' erotic dreams are narrated, he and his friend Kratisthenes observe a painting in a garden, in which Eros is depicted.¹⁹⁹ Hysminias is afraid of the sight of Eros, seated on 'a lofty throne, that is brilliant and truly imperial' (δίφρον ὀρῶμεν ὑψηλὸν καὶ λαμπρὸν καὶ ὄντως βασιλικόν).²⁰⁰ His slaves surround him. Kratisthenes explains to Hysminias that the man is Eros, armed with a sword against men and fire against women, making humans and animals his slaves.²⁰¹ Hysminias reacts by saying: 'May I never know him!' (Μηδὲ γινώσκειτό μοι)²⁰² He keeps this hostile attitude towards Eros until the three dreams of concern subsequently change it.²⁰³ Below, I will offer a close reading of these dreams in relation to Partonopeu's erotic awakening in the Old French romance.

Subjugating to Eros: Partonopeu's Fright and Hysminias' First Dream

In the first dream, Hysminias recalls the armed and imperial Eros whom he saw in the painting mentioned in the quotation above. This dream is described as terrifying. In it, he sees a large crowd, each person holding a torch in one hand, expressing servitude by placing the other on their breasts. After this sight, Hysminias sees Eros seated on a golden throne, and his voice sounds like thunder when he says: 'Bring to me the upstart, the one who is free, who does not fear my dart, [...] who is embarrassed by my nudity, [...] who spurned my beloved Hysmine and whom the gods love for his chastity' (Πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὸν δυνάστην, τὸν ἐλεύθερον, τὸν μὴ φρίσσοντά μου τὸ βέλος, [...] τὸν αἰσχυνόμενόν μου τὴν γύμνωσιν, [...] τὸν τὴν ἐμὴν φίλην Ὑσμίνην αἰσχύναντα, ὃν ὡς σῶφρονα φιλοῦσι θεοί).²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ For an analysis of the painting as well as its relation to the first dream, see Nilsson 2001, 103–107.

²⁰⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, II.7.1.

²⁰¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, II.11.

²⁰² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, II.11.3.

²⁰³ Nilsson 2001, 105.

²⁰⁴ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.1.3.

This dream, in which Eros' tyranny over his enslaved subjects is described, not only correlates with Partonopeu's fear of Melior at the beginning of the sexual scene in *Partonopeu de Blois*. It is also comparable at a broader level to the entire narrative of the Old French romance. Melior is the emperor's daughter, but the emperor himself plays no direct part in the romance. He is present only indirectly, in her speech about him. After Partonopeu has broken the rule that Melior has declared regarding their relationship (i.e. he has seen her without her permission as in the Cupid and Psyche story), she explains her noble lineage. She is the emperor's daughter, impressively educated and considered to be her parents' single heir. Regardless of Partonopeu's possibly idealised chivalry or prowess, Melior is politically more powerful than her lover. Her role appears similar to the *domna* in troubadour poetry, masculine in terms of status and with 'masculine powers such as making war, appearing in court and granting territories', to quote Kay's description of the *domna*.²⁰⁵ Melior's role needs a more in-depth discussion, to which I return below; however, she indeed imposes authority on her lover. In the Byzantine space where Partonopeu now finds himself, Melior is the ruler.²⁰⁶

In the twelfth-century Byzantine context, Eros is reactualised as a common figure in literature and art. He is also connected to Emperor Manuel; 'literary interest in Eros and literary celebration of the emperor became fused' in poets' minds, writes Magdalino.²⁰⁷ In her analysis of Hysminias' reaction to the painting of Eros in the garden, Nilsson writes that 'he interprets the painting according to its apparently Byzantine imperial context: the despot on his throne'.²⁰⁸ Greek novel tradition is thus fused together with the twelfth-century Byzantine court. Magdalino further argues that 'the concept of Eros the King was all but fully formulated in

²⁰⁵ Kay 1990, 92.

²⁰⁶ Robert Hanning interprets their asymmetrical relationship as that between a poet and his audience; Hanning 1981, 18. The matter of Melior's relation to storytelling is discussed below.

²⁰⁷ He is here specifically pointing at Manganeios Prodromos; see Magdalino 1992, 200.

²⁰⁸ Nilsson 2001, 104.

Byzantine court rhetoric of the 1150s'.²⁰⁹ He continues by highlighting how Emperor Manuel was compared to the god of love: 'The imperial court at this time was a milieu where the emperor, Manuel Komnenos, was openly referred to as the βασιλεὺς τῶν ἐρώτων and compared to the ancient Greek god of love'.²¹⁰ In the Byzantine context, Eros is connected to the emperor.

However, in *Partonopeu de Blois*, Melior's father is absent from the story except through Melior's words. Partonopeu is present at the Byzantine palace precisely because the emperor is not there: Melior has brought Partonopeu to her so that they can be married, and he can be crowned emperor. She explains that he must follow her command.²¹¹ Melior explains that the emperor was determined to give her a solid education; that there would be no other heir but her. Since Melior appears to represent a version of Cupid, this tale could thus be interpreted as woven into an existing political view of Eros. In Byzantium, Eros was connected to the imperial figures of the Byzantine court. Melior, in the role of Cupid (or Eros), is not only the god of love, but also the Byzantine empress. In *Partonopeu de Blois*, the merging of mythological connotations with the imaginary, which can be traced in Byzantine sources, appears to represent at once a combination of contemporary politics and culture in Constantinople, and the literary heritage from the ancient Greek novel, as we shall see. Considering that the romance was intended to be read at French courts, Melior's character seems, at any rate, to play with an existing, vague image of the Byzantine imperial court. Let us continue examining how the sexual scenes of the Byzantine and Old French texts play out.

Hysminias' first dream is a figuration of fear of Eros, or desire. The scene of the passage takes place in the middle of the night. Hysminias sees Eros' slaves carrying torches in their hands. In *Partonopeu de Blois*,

²⁰⁹ Magdalino 1992, 202.

²¹⁰ Magdalino 1992, 202.

²¹¹ Tote Besance est mes empires, | Vos en serés et rois et sires | Se mon conseil volés tenir, | Qui legiers vos ert a souffrir, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1337–1340. As previously mentioned, throughout the thesis when *Partonopeu de Blois* is cited, I quote Collet and Joris' edition (2005). The translations are my own. Moreover, this passage is further discussed below.

a similar scene takes place, as though it is a reversed mirror to that of *Hysmine and Hysminias*. In the Old French passage, Partonopeu has been led into a bedroom by candelabras: ‘But as soon as he has drawn [the quilt] to his ears the lights go out. The bedroom turns very dark. The child does not feel safe at all’ (Mais quant l’a trait vers ses orelles, | Cierges estingnent et candelles; | La cambre devient molt obscure. | Li enfes point ne s’aseüre).²¹² In the darkness, Partonopeu is so afraid that he cannot sleep: ‘He cannot fall asleep; instead his fear keeps him awake’ (N’a nul talent de somellier; | Peors l’atorne al vellier).²¹³ The scene is set in such a way that it reminds us of Hysminias’ first dream. Both scenes contain candles, nocturnal darkness, fear, and sleep or insomnia – both narratives go on to describe the presence of that which induces fear. Hysminias fears ‘Eros, the emperor, that terrifying figure’, and Partonopeu fears ‘some demon’ who might attack him.²¹⁴ Both Hysminias and Partonopeu face a potential threat from someone mightier than themselves. Hysminias’ fear plays out in a dream, but Partonopeu’s experience takes place in an imaginary palace in Chief d’Oire, built especially for him.²¹⁵ The magical setting of *Partonopeu de Blois* blurs the boundaries between dream and reality, which further relates it to the dream scene in the Byzantine novel.²¹⁶

After these similar scenes, there follows, in both stories, the introduction of a woman in the two protagonists’ minds. Hysminias has already met Hysmine, but Partonopeu has not yet been introduced to Melior, and thus the lady who comes to his mind is anonymous.

²¹²*Partonopeu de Blois*, 1113–1116.

²¹³*Partonopeu de Blois*, 1117–1118.

²¹⁴Que vif maufé li corent sore, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1120.

²¹⁵Li casteaus est ci por vos fés, | Li bors et tos li beaus atrés ; | Por ço fu fais en cest bel liu | Qu’en eüssiés deduit et giu, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1731–1734. Regarding the vagueness of Chief d’Oire in the narrative; see Černáková 2019, 56. Regarding Chief d’Oire’s connotations to Byzantium along with other places, real or legendary; see, besides Černáková 2019, also Bermejo 2001, 232–238 and Kay 2001, 279.

²¹⁶Kay interprets the fantasy aspect of the erotic scene from a psychoanalytic perspective in Kay 2001, 279–284.

In both novels, the passages begin with more fear. In *Partonopeu de Blois*, this fear is not caused by Eros' thunder-like voice, in contrast to the case of Hysminias in the Byzantine novel. Yet, Partonopeu's fear is also channelled by what he hears. As Partonopeu hears someone approaching his bed with small steps, the narrative describes how he believes this to be a demon, and that he thus wishes he had never been born.²¹⁷ The narrator explains, however, that it is not a demon, but a woman.²¹⁸ In this way, the narrator manifests himself as having more information than Partonopeu about what is happening; he knows that the present stranger is a woman. In contrast to Partonopeu, the narrator does not represent a state of fear, but rather talks about the events in erotic terms. I will return to the narrator's role in relation to the Greek novel tradition below, connecting him to 'the male friend' character in the Greek novel tradition.

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, Melior is also described as being unaware of what is taking place. At the same time as Melior is the seducer (being a version of Cupid), she is also described as ignorant in terms of love. Where Apuleius does not go into detail regarding how the event plays out, the narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois* describes it as though Melior and Partonopeu are experiencing the same fear and lack of knowledge.²¹⁹ In both stories' nocturnal scenes, the protagonists are afraid of a potential threat. In fear, they both lie still, as if defeated by a menacing force of some kind:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Ἐγὼ δ' εἰλκόμην ἐλεεινῶς, ὅλος
ἐντρομος, ὅλος ἄφωνος, ὅλος
νεκρὸς καὶ κατὰ γῆν κείμενος.²²⁰

Partonopeu de Blois

En pais se sont geü grant pose ; | Il
le crient tant que parler n'ose.²²¹

²¹⁷ A une part se traist del lit, | Defors soi en laisse petit. | Il crient que ce ne soit maufés | Et dist que male eure fu nés, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1125–1128.

²¹⁸ Mais ce est une damoisele, | Quels qu'ele soit, u laide u bele, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1129–1130.

²¹⁹ Mais el ne set mot que i soit, | Car el ne l'ot ne ne l'i voit | N'encore ne l'a pas sentu, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1133–1135.

²²⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.1.4.

²²¹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1137–1138.

I was dragged along pitiably, quite trembling, quite dumb, quite dead, and lay on the ground.

Peacefully they lie there, neither of them makes a big move. Partonopeu is so afraid that he does not dare to speak.

After this part of Hysminias' dream and the initial part of Partonopeu's seduction, the female characters, who were previously introduced in each respective narrative, now begin to speak. In *Partonopeu de Blois*, Melior feels Partonopeu's foot and screams. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysminias hears a voice speaking to Eros. Although the passages begin differently, the female characters' acts of speaking share similar narrative functions. Their utterances have a soothing effect on the male characters, who are afterwards reassured of being secured from evil. Another shared feature in the narratives is that both female characters claim the male ones to be slaves, or subjects to authoritative rule:

Hysmine and Hysminias

‘Υσμινίου’, φεῖσαι, ‘βασιλεῦ, δι’ ἐμέ· ἐγώ σοι τοῦτον δουλογραφήσω’. Καὶ πρὸς τὴν παρθένον ὁ βασιλεὺς· ‘Διὰ σὲ καὶ ὠργίσθην, διὰ σὲ καὶ διαλλάσσομαι’.²²²

Partonopeu de Blois

‘Comment!’ fait ele, ‘qui es tu? | Qui t’a en mon lit enbatu? | Iço que est, virgene Marie? | Qui est ici? Sui jo traïe? | Et tu qui iés, va, fole riens? | Cis roïames est trestos miens. | Comment ossas sains mon congié | En ma cité metre ton pié, | En la cité ne el castel, | Sains mon congié, sains mon apel, | Et em mon lit ensorquetout? | Certes, j’en sui marie mout’.²²³

‘Spare Hysminias, spare him for my sake, emperor; I will enroll him in your service’. And the emperor said to the maiden, ‘It is for

‘What is this?’, she says, ‘who are you, who took a place in my bed? Virgin Mary, what is all this? Who is this? Am I betrayed? And

²²² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.1.4–5.

²²³ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1143–1154.

your sake that I was angry, so for your sake I receive him back in favour’.

you, who are here, now explain yourself to me. How dare you take one step without my permission into my city, into my castle, without my permission, without me calling you — and most importantly into my bed? To be sure, I am very upset by this’.

In the Byzantine narrative, Hysmine tells Eros that she will subjugate Hysminias into slavery, which according to E. Jeffreys is ‘ostensibly analogous with French and Provençal concepts of servitude in the Court of Love’.²²⁴ Women’s speech appears as a statement of power; arguably, the female characters could be interpreted as representations of the courtly *domna*. E. Jeffreys connects the Komnenian novel to Western courtly lyrics, in which the desiring courtly man is supposed to subject himself to his lady.²²⁵ In this sense, in Hysmine’s as well as in Melior’s characters, we can see an appropriation of a feminine role in courtly culture. Courtly ideals demand that the man subject himself to his desired lady. By speaking, Hysmine subjugates Hysminias to Eros. As the courtly *domnas* frighten and astound men in troubadour lyrics, Hysminias and Partonopeu are faced in these passages with women who impose authority over them as well. The female characters, in both passages, manifest authority over the male characters.

The speeches in the two quoted passages differ markedly in tone. In the request that Hysminias shall be spared, uttered by Hysmine, the female character is described as calm, whereas Melior, in the passage from *Partonopeu de Blois*, is portrayed as confused and upset. This contrast could perhaps be explained by comparing the female characters’ respective control, or lack thereof. In fact, Melior’s tone already implies that her character is the representation of something beyond the authority of the stereotypical *domna*. The authority that she claims for herself has

²²⁴ E. Jeffreys 2012, n.67.

²²⁵ See also Cupane 1974.

already been disrespected by Partonopeu, which could be said to manifest a powerlessness in the symbolic feminine position of the ideal of courtly love: the desired lady has power over her desiring man, but only seemingly. The discrepancy regarding message and tone in Melior's speech, quoted above, can be read as a manifestation of this powerlessness. Based on Beauvoir, the passage can be read as an exposure of the entrapment that women are caught up in, inside the masculine universe: 'vassale de l'homme, elle se croit son idole', as it were – except that Melior seems to represent a lack of such a conviction.

In Makrembolites' novel, the passage relates how Hysmine is in dialogue with Eros, the terrifying emperor in Hysminias' nightmare. In his response, Eros says that he felt anger for Hysmine's sake. Accordingly, Hysmine caused Eros to demonstrate his authority over Hysminias, and now she causes him to stop. Hysmine is thus described as controlling the situation, and seems to hold sway over the almighty Eros. As he is about to be subjected to slavery, the formerly chaste Hysminias is now saved. He is not really under Eros' command; indirectly he is under Hysmine's governance, at least in his own dream.

In contrast, Melior is described as lacking control. Her speech is filled with questions and concerns, as a response to the experience of having her integrity disrespected. Considering Melior's connections to Cupid, as well as the suggested connection to Eros in the imaginary of Byzantine culture, Partonopeu's touch could be perceived as an act of defiance against the god of love himself. Partonopeu has disrespected Melior's authority and entered her bed without permission. He should have sought her authorisation, and could thus be described as being under her command (or as being her slave), something that he himself says, a couple of verses below.²²⁶

Even though the female characters' speeches differ in tone, the consequences in both passages seem to correspond with each other. The two

²²⁶ Faire poés vostre plaisir | De moi detraire u detrencier; | Del tot sui en vostre dangier.
| Tot ligement vos doins mon cors | A laissier ci u geter fors, | Et vos doins bonement
congié | De moi ocire sains pechié | U de moi faire oster de ci | Se n'en volés avoir
merci, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1228–1236.

boys have been introduced to Eros' power. Frightened, they subject themselves to it. In both passages, the two female characters assure the male characters of their safety:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Ἡ δ' εὐθὺς λαβομένη μου τῆς
χειρὸς ἐξάνεστησε, θαρρεῖν
ἐπιτρέψασα.²²⁷

Partonopeu de Blois

Molt li est vis que bel parole; | A
paine lait que ne l'acole²²⁸

She immediately took my hand
and made me stand up, telling me
to be confident.

Her fine words assure him of it
[that she is not demonic], he
makes an effort to keep from embracing her.

Eros leaves and Hysminias' first dream is over. The compared passages in *Partonopeu de Blois* and *Hysmine and Hysminias* show similar progressions in the male characters' respective first erotic experience; from fear to comfort.

Paideia and Masculinity: Partonopeu's Erotic Explorations and Hysminias' Second Dream

In Hysminias' second dream, his erotic knowledge has advanced. With this progression, his view of Hysmine changes. It is noteworthy that, as the male character becomes further initiated into the erotic experience, the female character transforms into more of an object that Hysminias aspires to possess.

Hysminias' friend Kratisthenes falls back to sleep, and so does Hysminias. First, he dozes off into a dream, in which he finds an occasion to respond to the previous day's banquet. In his dream, Hysminias finds room for agency; henceforth, he challenges Hysmine's advances. He thinks about how he will respond to Hysmine's initiatives the next time they meet, not only reciprocally, but even more fiercely:

²²⁷ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.1.5.

²²⁸ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1161–1162.

Τὴν ἡμέραν ἐπεθύμουν ἰδεῖν· ὠνειροπόλουν τὴν τράπεζαν καὶ τὴν Ὑσμίνην κερνῶσαν, “Ἄν θλίψῃ” λέγων “τὸν δάκτυλον, ἀντιθλιβήσεται γενναιότερον. Ἀλλ’ ἔθλιψε χθές. Ναὶ θλιβέτω καὶ πάλιν. Ἄν θλίψῃ, θλιβήσεται· εἰ δ’ οὐ θλίψει, θλιβήσεται. Ἄν τὸν πόδα ταύτης ἐπιθήσῃ μου τῷ ποδί, τοῖν ποδοῖν ἐγὼ προσεπιθήσω τὸν ἕτερον· ἂν ‘Χαίροις’ εἴπῃ, ‘Ἑκατοντά<κισ> χαῖρ’ ἀκούσει·[’]”²²⁹

I longed to see the day; I went into a dream about the banquet and Hysmine mixing the wine, saying, ‘If she squeezes my finger, she will be squeezed more firmly in return. But she did squeeze it yesterday! Very well, let her squeeze it yet again; if she does, she will be squeezed; but if she doesn’t, she will still be squeezed. If she puts her foot on mine, I’ll add my other foot to the two already there. If she says, “Welcome”, she will hear, “A hundred times welcome”[’].

In his dream, Hysminias seems to elaborate upon the events that occurred during the day. He has had his first erotic dream, discussed it with Kratis-thenes, been made aware of Eros’ tyranny, and now he decides to challenge Hysmine regarding the role of seducer. It appears that Hysminias sees Hysmine’s approaches as challenges. She was in control, a desiring subject who seduces a desired object. Being initiated into Eros’ mysteries, Hysminias is described as having decided to fight for the position that until now has been held by Hysmine. In his dream, we read Hysminias’ decision to take control of the erotic relationship. This is part of his education from childish innocence to manhood, of his pursuit of *paideia*.

In her study on how the ancient Greek novel describes the passage from childhood to adolescence, Sophie Lalanne describes *paideia* as a masculine virtue. It is the child’s educative journey towards adolescence, which is a constitutive factor in cultivating an existent idea of the perfect man. In the Greek novel, Lalanne finds this education to manifest the complex process of the individual in his adaptation to a social and cultural

²²⁹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.4.2–3.

context. She argues that Greek novels are sources composed by men (as almost all ancient sources are), which means that they are inclined to describe the making of a man in society, which is essentially founded on his power.²³⁰ Lalanne reads Greek education in relation to the social context of masculine dominance, which in turn genders erotic experience. Accordingly, one finds an asymmetry between the sexes in the ancient Greek context, which is reflected in the novels. The masculine perspective that is described could thus be seen as destabilised, as we further read the twelfth-century narratives under scrutiny. Considering the importance of touch in the novel, being in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, as Nilsson defined it, a trigger for the erotic plot, the erotic experience in this narrative is not solely surrounding the male character. In MacAlister's analysis, Makrembolites' story has transformed the erotic discourse compared with ancient novels; in this twelfth-century narrative, desire is awoken internally, instead of being the sudden effect of an external, divine force. As Hysminias discovers Eros and begins the process of maturing into a man, the narrative tells of a resistance to viewing this erotic process from the masculine perspective that Lalanne describes in her analysis of the ancient novel, by means of including Hysmine's part in the process. It is through Hysmine's touch at the banquet that Hysminias' sexual awareness is aroused. In other words, the (authorial) audience is told about *her* sexual awareness, her desire, before Hysminias' desire is awoken.

Returning to *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysminias' new knowledge of desire results in a power struggle with his beloved: 'If she drinks from the cup before me, I'll drink the whole girl down myself. If she holds the goblet back, I'll grab hold of her hand as well as the goblet' (ἀν προεκροφῇ μου τοῦ ποτηρίου, ὅλην ἐκροφήσω τὴν κόρην αὐτός· ἂν ἐπέχῃ τὴν κύλικα, καὶ τὴν χεῖρα τῆς κόρης τῷ ποτηρίῳ συνεφελεύσομαι).²³¹ With Hysminias relating his new motivation to Kratisthenes' previous response to his dream, we see that something has changed in terms of reciprocity. 'You are in love' (Ἐρᾶς), Kratisthenes

²³⁰ Lalanne 2006, 183.

²³¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.4.3–4.

says to Hysminias, and continues by praising his luck in loving someone who loves him back.²³² In Hysminias' dream, we see that the matter of mutuality between the lovers has become a matter of battle. Hysminias has been instructed in love, transformed from child to adolescent, and has been educated into pursuing a masculine identity.

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, up until now the male character has gone through the experiences of fear, submission and relief, not unlike Hysminias' experiences before his second dream in the Byzantine novel. After this, the Old French narrative focuses on the moment after Partonopeu has given a speech of submission to Melior, which could be viewed as parallel to the moment when Hysminias is described as becoming a slave in Hysmine's speech to Eros.²³³ After his speech, Partonopeu sighs deeply, which Melior hears.²³⁴ Thereafter, we learn that she is instantly filled with sympathy for him.²³⁵ Partonopeu is (continuously) referred to as a child (*enfant*), which could be interpreted as his lack of *paideia*.

The text then describes Melior as feeling sorry for Partonopeu, regretting that she has been cruel: 'She almost asks him to forgive her for having mistakenly treated him badly. She sobs, her tears fall. She weeps and sighs and feels regret' (Por poi ne li crie merci | De ço qu'a tort l'avoit laidi. | A caudes larmies, tenrement, | Plore et sospire et s'en repent).²³⁶ As in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Melior's remorse could be interpreted as meaning that Eros regrets his brutal speech. Partonopeu has subjected himself to Melior, and her position as his tyrant does not seem to correspond with the feelings that she is described as having. If, before, her

²³² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.3.3. This specific passage as well as the overall matter is discussed under the section 'The Male Friend'.

²³³ – Dame, fait il, n'en irai pas. | N'en puis aler, que trop sui las; | C'en est la fins, n'en puis partir. | Faire poés vostre plaisir | De moi detraire u detrencier; | Del tot sui en vostre dangier. | Tot ligement vos doins mon cors | A laissier ci u geter fors, | Et vos doins bonement congié | De moi ocire sains pechié | U de moi faire oster de ci | Se n'en volés avoir merci, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1225–1236 (see above).

²³⁴ A cief de piece si sospire, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1240.

²³⁵ Quant la dame ot le lonc sospir, | Li cuers il commence a fremir. | De l'enfant a molt grant pitié, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1243–1245.

²³⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1248–1251.

character evoked connotations of the courtly *domna*, powerful in relation to the knight who desires her, the narration of her inner thoughts and perceptions now disrupts this stereotypical image. Based on Mieke Bal, we could say that the text thus presents a feminine view of the presented event, that the woman is the focaliser. To present a certain, selected perspective within the narrative is unavoidable; the ‘subjective nature of storytelling is inevitable [...]. Perception [...] is a psychosomatic process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body [...]’.²³⁷ If Partonopeu’s previous reactions could be compared to the desiring character’s need to submit to Eros in the Greek novel tradition, then *Partonopeu de Blois*, in its suggested elaboration of this tradition, humanises not only Eros, but also a current courtly feminine stereotype. This stereotype is thus the *perceiving body* – the *domna* is humanised, turned into a woman.

Partonopeu’s conduct can be understood through Duby’s perspective on courtly love as an instructive matter for young men in aristocratic culture. In his dialogue with Melior, Partonopeu learns behaviours of restraint and submission.²³⁸ Yet, this conduct is not performed for long, and Melior will consequently lose her powerful status between them in the erotic scene. Thus, similarly to how Hysmine’s agency can be read as a response to the erotic narrative of masculine *paideia*, following Lalanne’s discussion on the ancient Greek novel, so we can see that Melior’s perspective and agency also seem to offer a counter-perspective in conflict with courtly, erotic expectations.

Because of Melior’s empathetic reaction, the link between her and the god of love, who stirs the desire of others, is severed. So too is her connection with the image of a passive receiver of desires: Partonopeu’s submissive speech implies an underlying idea that the courtly lady must reject the lover’s propositions.²³⁹ Instead, through her empathy, Melior is turned into a character with a complexity of its own, unconditioned by the male character’s perception.

²³⁷ Bal (1985) 2009, 145.

²³⁸ See n.233.

²³⁹ The lady in courtly lyric is, to quote Moller, ‘never a marriagable girl but a woman already married to a man of high social status’; see Moller 1960, 42.

Next, we shall see that not only are Hysminias' thoughts described in progressively more aggressive terms as the erotic progression advances, but Partonopeu's behaviour also becomes more and more aggressive. Partonopeu is discreet at first, described as lying still, fearing that he might make a bad move, considering that Melior is refraining from giving him any indication that his advances are welcome.²⁴⁰ However, it seems as though Partonopeu's caution has its limits. The passage then describes how he decides to touch Melior, regardless of her signals. Instead, the narrative presents him as acting rather carelessly in this respect. Correspondingly, in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysminias has also reached a point in the narrative where he not only meets Hysmine's advances with more aggressive ones, but he also proclaims that he will no longer be mocked for his virginity, nor will he fear Eros' wrath:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Οὐκέτι τὸν θυμὸν ὑφέξω τοῦ
Ἑρωτος, οὐκέτι
κατονειδισθήσομαι τὸν παρθένον,
οὐκέτι τὸν σώφρονα
κατειρωνευθήσομαι καὶ τᾷλλ'
ὅποσα νῆ τὸν Ἑρωτα πέπονθα.
Ἄν τὰ πρόσφορα τῇ νυκτὶ ζητήσῃ,
συγκοιμηθήσομαι τῇ παρθένῳ,
καὶ νήδυμον τὸν ὕπνον
ἀνακηρύξω ποιητικῶς.²⁴¹

Partonopeu de Blois

Vers li se traist, et mist se main |
Sor son costé, soef et plain. | Tant
l'a trouvé plain et craset, | Por poi
que trestos n'en remet. | Tant l'a
soef et cras trouvé | Que tot en a le
sens torblé. | Quant la dame a se
main sentue, | Od repentaille le
remue. | Tot soavet en estraignant
| L'a reboutee sor l'enfant. | Vers
lui se torne, et dist : 'Laissiés! |
Grans folie est que vos caciés'. |
Li enfes auques s'en vergonde, |
Ne desist mot por rien del
monde²⁴²

I won't put up with Eros's wrath He moves towards her, and puts
any more, I won't be reproached his hand on her waist, soft and

²⁴⁰ Li enfes gist grant piece en pais | Et crient que nel tiegne a mavlais, | Quant ele s'est en pais tenue, | Se il vers li ne se remue, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1263–1266.

²⁴¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.4.7.

²⁴² *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1267–1280.

any more for my virginity, I won't be made fun of any more for my chastity, and all the other things, by Eros, that I have put up with. If she is looking for what is appropriate for the night, I will go and sleep with the maiden and I will proclaim in poetic manner that sleep is sweet.

smooth. He finds it so smooth that he cannot lift his hand from it, it is simply too sweet and tender, and causes him to lose all his senses. As the lady feels his hand, she feels regret and pushes it away. Softly, she lifts his hand off herself, and turns towards the child and says: 'Stop that! Great madness hides inside you'. The child feels so ashamed of this that he cannot say a word.

In comparing these passages, we see that the male characters' attitudes differ from each other. Hysminias, on the one hand, expresses arrogance towards Eros, claiming firmly that his chastity and virginity shall no longer make a fool out of him. Rather, the narrative presents him as thinking about how he will be able to sleep with Hysmine. Partonopeu, on the other hand, is described as acting according to his own desires, as experiencing pleasure from touching, but then as being rejected and feeling ashamed. At this stage he is, so-to-speak, still an *enfes*.²⁴³

This passage from *Hysmine and Hysminias* takes place in-between waking and sleeping; as a mix between the dream's imaginary fantasy and reflections on real situations to come. With his achieved erotic education, Hysminias' masculine identity is constructed within a patriarchal culture. Partonopeu has not yet reached this point in his transformation from boy to man. In the passages discussed below, we will see in the

²⁴³ One must remember that Hysminias' arrogance is expressed in his dream, whereas Partonopeu is in Melior's palace, in a vulnerable position. She has already told him that this is her palace and her city, thus explaining her superior position in relation to him, and his attitude should probably be interpreted accordingly. That being said, the fact that he is still a child in the process of becoming a man should be considered the main reason for his shame, as it fits an overall erotic progressive pattern. Partonopeu has indeed been introduced to Eros and is his slave, one could say, just as Hysminias is. Therefore, his shame is conquered by the desire that he feels from touching Melior, and he thus continues, regardless of her will. But this matter is further discussed in the analysis of Hysminias' third dream.

progression of Partonopeu's conduct, how passive shame is turned into erotic agency. With this progression, the narrative attains a more violent character, which could be interpreted as a progression similar to that in the Byzantine novel. In other words, the following part of the narrative shows how Partonopeu grows up – as Hysminias has done through his erotic awakening – and that he subsequently learns to *defeat* his beloved.

Progressively, as the male characters in both stories evolve into desiring men, their perceptions of their desired maidens transform. In the narrated progressions from boyhood to manhood, both female characters seem to change shape in the male characters' eyes. As the male characters begin to identify themselves as desiring subjects, so do the female characters appear to be perceived by them as objects to conquer. It seems, then, as though both narratives depict a similar sort of gender construction; not only regarding the change from boyhood to manhood, but also in the female characters' progression towards being objectified by the male characters.

It should be stressed that, at this point, the objectification of the female characters is interpreted from within a traditional narrative pattern: the male character desires a female character. However, in both cases, this sort of interpretation of the female characters' role in this traditionally asymmetrical structure must be nuanced, which has been mentioned already. Both Melior's and Hysmine's agency can rather be interpreted as operations of response to this traditional erotic motif of gender asymmetry, which we will see as we focus on them more specifically.

Fighting the Maiden: Partonopeu's Violence and Hysminias' Third Dream

In the following passage of *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysminias falls asleep, and has another dream about the banquet that had previously taken place, at which Hysmine initiated erotic contact. At the banquet in his dream, Hysmine approaches him with the cup, just as it happened in reality. However, this time, Hysminias gazes at her with desire:

πρὸς ἐμὲ δ' ἦκεν ἡ κόρη κιρνῶσα, καὶ ὅλην αὐτὴν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς μου κατέπινον, ὅλην ἐξερρόφουν, ὅλην πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν ἐπεβίβαζον. Ἡ δέ μοι 'Λάβε' φησὶ 'τὸ ποτήριον'. Ἐγὼ δὲ πάλιν ἀτενῶς ἐώρων αὐτήν· ἐκτείνω δ' ὅμως τὴν χεῖρα λαβεῖν καὶ τῆς παρθένου θλίβω τὸν δάκτυλον καὶ τὸν πόδα τῷ ποδί μου προσεπιθλίβω, 'Χαίροις' ὑποπιθυρίσας τῇ κόρῃ λεπτὸν καὶ οἶον ἐκείνη προεπιθυρίζεν· ἡ δ' οὐκ ἀντεῖπεν οὐδ' ἀντέδρασεν, ἀλλ' ὥς ἐξ αἰδοῦς ἠρυθραίνετο. Τροφαὶ ποικίλαι συνήθως περὶ τὴν τράπεζαν· ἐγὼ δ' ὥς ἀληθῶς ἐτίμων τὸν ὄνειρον, καὶ ὅλος κατ' ὄνειρον ἐτρεφόμην· τροφὴ δέ μοι καὶ πόσις καὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ καὶ ψυχῆς Ὑσμίνη παρθένος, πρὸς ἣν καὶ μόνην ἀτενέστερον ἔβλεπον.²⁴⁴

the girl came towards me, mixing the wine, and I drank her down completely with my eyes and I quaffed the girl entirely, and I took her entirely into my soul. And she said to me, 'Take the cup'. And I gazed at her intently again, and stretch out my hand even so to take it, and I squeeze the maiden's finger and press her foot with mine, whispering quietly to the girl 'Welcome', just as she had whispered previously; she made no reply, she did not react but blushed as if from modesty. The customary variety of food was spread around the table, and I paid true honour to my dream and was thoroughly fed in my dream; the maiden Hysmine, to whom alone I turned my gaze so intently, was food and drink for my eyes and soul.

This passage describes Hysminias as contemplating the previous night, when he experienced Hysmine to be in control of the situation. In the passage in which Hysmine serves Hysminias wine in reality, there is no mention of Hysminias' gaze.²⁴⁵ Hysmine's actions are described without any mention of his observations of them. This time, however, Hysmine's actions are seen through a masculine gaze. The passage describes how Hysminias drinks her in with his eyes and gazes at her intently, an act that is followed by physical advances. Now, Hysminias utters the words that were previously uttered by Hysmine: this time, *he* tells *her* 'welcome'. In

²⁴⁴ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.5.2–4.

²⁴⁵ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, I.9, see above.

her reaction, we see an expression of modesty: Hysmine articulates no words, but instead her face turns red.

This could be put in relation to Tatius' ancient novel *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. During the initial meeting between the main characters, Kleitophon sees Leukippe at a banquet and describes how he cannot keep from looking at her, and that he does not care to eat since she is his 'entire meal', a passage to which Makrembolites clearly makes reference in the twelfth-century novel.²⁴⁶ In her analysis of *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Morales highlights that the Greek tradition's female characters seem to represent an apparent power over the male characters, due to their beauty's strong effect on them. This power, however, Morales continues, is not real. Even if it has an effect on the male characters, it leaves the female characters without any actual power. Similarly to how other female characters represent beauty in the ancient tradition, Leukippe is not empowered by the way in which men are struck by her beauty, or as Morales puts it: 'Power is not just the ability to have an effect on someone, it is the capacity to control that ability, to use it if and when a person wants to, and for its effect to be a desired effect. Leucippe is not given this capacity'.²⁴⁷

After being introduced to Eros, Hysminias seems to have become more similar to Kleitophon in Tatius' novel, than he was previously. Kleitophon is sexually experienced, initiated into the pursuit of methods to fulfil his desires. And in Makrembolites' novel, Hysminias has at this point uttered his decision to face Hysmine's advances with more aggressive ones of his own. Rather than Hysmine's actions having an impact upon him, Hysminias' control seems to increase as the narrative emphasises the impact of his gaze on Hysmine.

With the narrative focalised through Hysminias' perception, the power that Hysmine previously held before is now lost. She responds to Hysminias' actions with silence and modesty, as though the agency that

²⁴⁶ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, I.5.3. Throughout this thesis, I always refer to and quote Vilborg's edition (1955). Regarding the allusion in *Hysmine and Hysminias*; see Nilsson 2001, 228.

²⁴⁷ Morales 2004, 162.

she had before is unavailable now that she is faced with his new agency. Morales describes a similar situation in Leukippe's case. The power of her beauty is beyond her will or control: 'Sometimes the narrative makes the men active subjects in the viewing process, at other times they surrender agency to their eyes and to external forces'.²⁴⁸ Either way, the narrative reflects a masculine perception. The female characters are either objectified, given a passive role in the narrative, or they are held accountable for their beauty's effect on men, as Morales points out: 'Leucippe is denied control over her potent beauty and her powerful eyes, yet she is held responsible for their actions'.²⁴⁹ In Hysminias' progression towards erotic knowledge, the narrative describes the new experience of gazing. Hysminias directs his gaze at his beloved. The gaze gives him agency and control of the situation, as well as of her.

Through this masculine focalisation, we see how a gender hierarchy gradually establishes itself, along with the male character's progression towards becoming a sexual, adult man. As the scene at the banquet is now told through Hysminias' eyes, in his dream, we see it as a part of his universe – the masculine universe – where Hysmine is given a new role. In his masculine perception, Hysmine is relegated to a subservient position, which, however, does not correspond with her role and position in the previous scene, which took place in daytime's reality.

As the dream continues, the banquet comes to an end and people retreat to bed. Hysminias then sees Hysmine by his bed, and he makes new advances. In Hysminias' dream, Hysmine is reluctant to accept these advances, due to her virginity:

Καὶ δὴ τὴν Ὑσμίνην περὶ τὴν κλίνην ὁρῶ τὴν ἐμήν, ἣν μηδὲν αἰδεσθεὶς ὅλαις ἐφέλκομαι ταῖς χερσί, καὶ τῇ κλίνῃ παρακαθίζω· Ἔρω γὰρ ἀναιδείας πατήρ. Ἡ δ' αἰδεῖται μὲν ὡς παρθένος καὶ τὴν μὴ πειθομένην τὰ πρῶτα καθυποκρίνεται, νικᾶται δ' ὁμως ὡς παρθένος ἀνδρός, ὅτι καὶ πρὸ τῆς ἐμῆς ταύτης χειρὸς ἐξ Ἑρωτος ἥττηται.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Morales 2004, 164.

²⁴⁹ Morales 2004, 164–165.

²⁵⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.5.7.

But I see Hysmine by my bed and without the least shame I draw her by the hand and sit her beside me on the bed; for Eros is the father of shamelessness. But the girl, being a virgin, is abashed, and at first pretends to be reluctant but finally is overcome, as happens to a virgin when with a man, for she has been defeated by Eros even before the touch of my hand.

According to Hysminias' narration, Hysmine's virginity causes her to pretend that she is not persuaded by his advances, but that afterwards, she is overpowered. Hysminias' dream appears as a counter-factual story; Hysmine reacts unwillingly towards erotic advances, as if she does not admit to being defeated by Eros. Yet, as we saw previously in the narrative, Hysmine made the initial erotic advances that caused Hysminias to dream about her and Eros in the first place. Previously, Hysminias was described as lacking power in relation to Hysmine, whom, in his first dream, he found to be in collaboration with Eros. Now, Hysminias narrates a different story. The male character is described as seeing himself as a man (ἄνδρως) who defeats a maiden, or girl (παρθένης). Hysminias now seems familiar with erotic affairs. In the text's generalisation of their identities into 'man' and 'girl', we see a reflection of the gender situation more generally: the man acts, and the woman is defeated. The scene could be interpreted as mirroring Beauvoir's description of how the general gendered situation is reflected in a heterosexual relationship:

C'est la différence de leur situation qui se reflète dans la conception que l'homme et la femme se font de l'amour. L'individu qui est sujet, qui est soi-même, s'il a le goût généreux et la transcendance, s'efforce d'élargir sa prise sur le monde: il est ambitieux, il agit. Mais un être inessentiel ne peut découvrir l'absolu au cœur de sa subjectivité; un être voué à l'immanence ne saurait se réaliser dans des actes. [...] il n'y a pas pour elle d'autre issue que de se perdre corps et âme en celui qu'on lui désigne comme l'absolu, comme l'essentiel.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 540.

Hysminias is described as grabbing Hysmine by the hand, and drawing her towards him. He is a subject, in need of transcendence. Hysmine is reactive, defeated, passive. However, as the narrative is told from the male character's point of view, inside his erotic dream, the asymmetrical situation that is put on display must be interpreted as the male character's subjective experience. Hysmine is an illusion in this scene, created in the mind of Hysminias. Hence, although the narrative can be read as a reflection of Beauvoir's analysis of the heterosexual asymmetry in her modern world, it is merely a reflection of the world according to a masculine perception of it. As we have already seen, the masculine perspective in the erotic narrative is faced with a counter-perspective and feminine desire. In this sense, the text can be said to illustrate the asymmetrical gender hierarchy that Beauvoir describes, but rather than reproducing it, this hierarchy is destabilised.

The dream continues with a description of Hysmine's appearance.²⁵² After the physical description, an advancement of the action follows, ending with Hysminias reaching climax. The final passage of the sexual scene in *Partonopeu de Blois* will be read in relation to this passage of *Hysmine and Hysminias*.

In both stories, the female characters put up intense resistance. Both Hysmine and Melior try to protect their bodies from invasion. Both Hysminias and Partonopeu defy the female characters' resistance; instead, they continue their aggressive advances. While Hysminias does not succeed in penetrating Hysmine, Partonopeu does manage to penetrate Melior. However, considering that Hysminias ejaculates, his erotic experience is comparable to the one in *Partonopeu de Blois*. After the sexual act is finished, there is a similar description in both narratives of the heart of the desiring character as beating fast and hard. A remarkable addition in *Partonopeu de Blois* is that a representation of the female character's sexual experience is included in the narrative.

²⁵² This description is discussed below in relation to the description of Partonopeu's beauty.

In the first part of the scene, Hysminias and Partonopeu act similarly. They put their hands on the female characters' bodies:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Ἄπτομαι τῆς χειρός, ἢ δ' ἐπιχειρεῖ
συνάγειν ταύτην καὶ
περικαλύπτειν εἰς τὸ χιτῶνιον·
ἀλλ' ὅμως κὰν τοῦτ' ὀνικῶ.²⁵³

Partonopeu de Blois

S'estent lés li tant con est lons. |
Coardement ra se main mise | Vers
le bele qui le justise. | La france l'a
soufert en pais, | Et il s'en traist un
poi plus pres, | Et el li dist: 'Lais-
siés, ostés!', | Et il l'estrainst par
les costés²⁵⁴

I touch her hand and, although she
tries to withdraw it and conceal it
in her tunic, nevertheless I prevail.

Afraid, he once more puts his
hand on the beautiful one, who
lets him. The noble one suffers it
silently, and he draws himself a
little closer to her, to which she re-
sponds: 'Stop that! Away from
me!' And he takes hold of her
waist.

In this first passage, neither Hysminias nor Partonopeu make very aggressive advances. Both passages begin with a focus on the hand, which is then followed by the woman's resistance, followed in turn by defiance against that resistance.

Afterwards, the advances in both scenes present a more intense, physical character. Hysminias kisses and nibbles Hysmine's hand. She in turn pulls away. He then makes more erotic advances, taking hold of her neck and kissing her mouth. Hysmine then seems to act ambiguously. She withdraws her lips while simultaneously biting and kissing him. Hysminias moves on to kiss Hysmine's eyes: being the source of love, this indicates another intensification of his advances.

As for *Partonopeu de Blois*, the passage is different not only in being shorter, but also regarding the fact that Melior's resistance in large

²⁵³ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.7.1.

²⁵⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1282–1288.

part consists of her speaking. She closes her thighs, to which Partonopeu responds by embracing her. Once again, a physical move is followed by another, intensified, move. Melior protests verbally, but Partonopeu draws her body towards his. She protests again, and he presses his entire body against hers, at which she again protests.

Hysmine and Hysminias

Ἐφέλκομαι ταύτην περὶ τὸ χεῖλος,
καταφιλῶ καὶ καταδάκνω πυκνά·
ἢ δ' ἀντεφέλκεται καὶ ὅλη
συστέλλεται. Περιπτύσσομαι καὶ
τὸν τράχηλον καὶ τὰ χεῖλη τοῖς
χείλεσιν ἐπιτίθημι καὶ φιλημάτων
πληρῶ καὶ καταστάζω τὸν ἔρωτα·
ἢ δ' ὑποπλαττομένη συνάγειν
αὐτὰ δάκνει μου τὸ χεῖλος
ἔρωτικῶς καὶ ὑποκλέπτει τὸ
φίλημα. Τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς
κατεφίλησα καὶ ὅλον εἰς τὴν
ψυχὴν ἀνιμησάμην τὸν ἔρωτα·
ὀφθαλμὸς γὰρ ἔρωτος πηγή.²⁵⁵

I draw it up to my lips, I kiss it, I nibble it incessantly; she pulls away and curls up on herself. I clasp her neck and set my lips on hers and fill her with kisses and exude passion. She pretends to withdraw her lips but bites my lip passionately and steals a kiss. I kissed her eyes and suck all passion into my soul, for the eye is the source of love.

Partonopeu de Blois

Et ele ferm ses gambes lace, | Et il
estroit a soi l'enbrace. | 'Mar le
faites, dist ele, sire', | Et il vers soi
le trait et tire. | 'Ne faites, sire',
fait la bele, | Et il vers li tot sa-
chantele. | 'Laissiés, sire, fait ele,
ester!'²⁵⁶

She keeps her thighs well closed, and he throws himself around her. 'You act badly!', she says, but he keeps on pulling her towards him. 'Stop it!', the beautiful one says, and he presses his entire body against hers. 'Stop it, let it be!', she says.

²⁵⁵ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.7.1–3.

²⁵⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1289–1295.

Both passages describe – however differently in terms of perception and narrator – erotic situations where physical advances occur progressively; one act is followed by an intensified act, and so on. The female characters protest – although Hysmine’s behaviour is narrated as equivocal; we must, however, remember that the scene takes place in Hysminias’ dream, and so her behaviour should be interpreted as his fantasy.

Although the following passage of *Hysmine and Hysminias* contains more descriptions than the one from *Partonopeu de Blois*, they still seem to share structures in terms of the erotic scenes’ respective progressions:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Γίνομαι καὶ περὶ τὸ στέρνον τῆς κόρης· ἡ δ’ ἀντέχεται μάλα γενναίως καὶ ὅλη συστέλλεται καὶ ὅλῳ σώματι περιτειγίζει τὸν μαστὸν ὡς πόλις ἀκρόπολιν, καὶ χερσὶ καὶ τραχήλῳ καὶ πώγωνι καὶ γαστρὶ τοὺς μαστοὺς καταφράττει καὶ περιφράττει· καὶ κάτωθεν μὲν ἀνέχει τὰ γόνατα, ὡς ἐξ ἀκροπόλεως δὲ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἀκροβολίζει τὸ δάκρυον, μονονοῦ λέγουσα· “Ἡ φιλῶν μαλαχθῇ μου τοῖς δάκρυσιν, ἢ μὴ φιλῶν ὀκνήσει τὸν πόλεμον”. Ἐγὼ δὲ μᾶλλον τὴν ἥτταν αἰδούμενος ἀντέχομαι βιαίτερον καὶ μόλις νικῶ, καὶ νικῶν ἡττῶμαι καὶ ὅλος ἀμβλύνομαι. Ἄμα γὰρ ἡ χεὶρ περὶ τὸν τῆς κόρης μαστόν, καὶ χαννότης ὅλη περὶ τὴν ἐμὴν καρδίαν ἐπέρρευσεν.²⁵⁷

Partonopeu de Blois

il entent as genols sevrer. | ‘Or est anuis, fait ele, a certes’. | Il li a les cuisses overttes, | Et quant les soies i a mises, | Les flors del pucelage a prises. | Flors i dona et flors i prist, | Car ainc mais tel deduit ne fist, | Nel n’ot sofert ne il n’ot fait | Onques encor rien d’itel plait.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.7.3–5.

²⁵⁸ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1296–1304.

Then I find myself at the girl's chest; she puts up a stout resistance, curls up completely and defends her breast with her entire body, as a city defends a citadel, and fortifies and barricades her breasts with her hands and neck and fists and belly; and further down she raises her knees as she shoots off a tear from the citadel of her head, all but saying, 'Either he loves me and will be softened by my tears, or he doesn't love me and will shrink from battle'. I am rather ashamed to be defeated and so I persist more violently and at length I am almost victorious but find defeat in my victory and am utterly undone. For the moment my hand got to the girl's breast lassitude invaded my heart.

He tries to open her thighs. 'Now is a bad time, trust me!', she says. He opened her thighs. And as he there put his own, he took her virginity's flowers. His flowers he gave her, and her flowers he took. Never had he felt either such joy, or such suffering, nor would anything please him ever again this much.

Both Hysmine and Melior protect their bodies from being attacked. Hysmine's body is associated with the fortress of a city under invasion, which resonates with Melior's first reaction to Partonopeu's presence in her bed.²⁵⁹ She bemoans her fate and says that he may end his advances – either from love or the lack thereof. This utterance forms Hysmine's first verbal resistance in this scene. Hysminias' response is shame, which has been Partonopeu's reaction to Melior's rejections several times. However, as in the case of Partonopeu, this does not cause Hysminias to stop. Instead, like Partonopeu, Hysminias intensifies his advances. Ashamed, he is narrated as trying more eagerly to defeat Hysmine. Compared to Partonopeu's unresponsiveness to Melior's protests, Hysminias appears arrogant towards Hysmine's. Perhaps this is best seen in the

²⁵⁹ 'πόλις ἀκρόπολιν' compared to: Comment ossas sains mon congié | En ma cité metre ton pié, | En la cité ne el castel, | Sains mon congié, sains mon apel, | Et em mon lit ensorquetout?, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1149–1153 (referred to above).

emphatic expression of his active agency in going against her will: ‘but I’ (Ἐγὼ δὲ).

In the last passage, Partonopeu’s satisfaction is described. The final verses of the passage from the previous quotation are repeated, in order to make the subsequent discussion clearer:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Ἦλγουν, ἡθύμουν, καινόν τινα
τρόμον ἔτρεμον, ἡμβλυνόμην τὴν
ὄψιν, ἐμαλθακιζόμην τὴν ψυχὴν,
τὴν ἰσχὺν ἔχαννούμην,
ἐνωθρευόμην τὸ σῶμα, ἐπείχετό
μοι τὸ ἄσθμα, πυκνὸν
κατεπάλλετό μοι τὸ περικάρδιον,
καὶ τις ὁδύνη γλυκάζουσα
κατεπέδραμέ μου τὰ μέλη καὶ οἶον
ὑπεγαργάλισε, καὶ ὅλον με
κατέσχευ ἄρρητος ἔρωσ
ἀνεκλάλητος, ἄφραστος· καὶ τι
πέπονθα, νῆ τὸν Ἑρωτα, οἶον
οὐδέποτε πέπονθα.²⁶⁰

I was in pain, I was in anguish, a
strange trembling came over me,
my sight was dimmed, my soul
softened, my strength weakened,
my body grew sluggish, my breath
choked, my heart beat faster and a
sweet pain poured over my limbs
with a kind of tickling sensation
and an ineffable, unspeakable, in-
expressible passion took posses-
sion of me. And I experienced, by
Eros, what I had never experi-
enced before.

Partonopeu de Blois

Les flors del pucelage a prises. |
Flors i dona et flors i prist, | Car
ainc mais tel deduit ne fist, | Nel
n’ot sofert ne il n’ot fait | Onques
encor rien d’itel plait. | Trestot le
soefre en pais la lasse ; | S’ele rien
dist, c’est a vois basse. | Li cuers
li muet molt et volete.²⁶¹

His flowers he gave her, and her
flowers he took. Never had he felt
either such joy, or such suffering,
nor anything of such pleasure,
ever. As for her, she keeps her ex-
perience silent. If she says any-
thing, it is in a quiet whisper. In-
side, she feels her heart beating
hard and vividly.

²⁶⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.7.6–7.

²⁶¹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1300–1307.

The passages reveal two quite similar descriptions of an erotic experience. For both male characters, the sexual experience appears to be something new. Hysminias is described as having experienced something that he never had before, as is Partonopeu. Sexual satisfaction is expressed similarly in the two stories, i.e. via a vocabulary of suffering; they are all described as suffering: Hysminias, Partonopeu – and Melior.

Like Hysminias, Melior does not speak of her sensation. Instead, the text presents her heart as beating passionately within. The description of her reaction seems to carry an ambiguous significance. Considering that the analysed scene can be described in terms of rape, one could interpret her racing heart, suffering and silence as expressions of an upset state. In this sense, the scene could be viewed as Partonopeu engaging in conduct to be condemned. However, her reaction could also indicate a reciprocity present in the narrative. Considering the descriptions of the male characters' respective feelings of satisfaction in the two narratives, Melior's pounding heart could also be interpreted as a representation of sexual satisfaction. The scene in *Partonopeu de Blois* is no dream. The female character is thus not the creation of the male character's imagination; she is really present in the scene. In the Old French romance, the narrative makes room for both characters to be described as experiencing the sexual event, from two different points of view. And as we have seen, generally, the sexual passage shifts in terms of focalisation: at one moment we see the situation from Partonopeu's perspective, and the next from Melior's.

If the dream in *Hysmine and Hysminias* can be read in accordance with the idea of women in medieval literature being given object roles in relation to men, Hysmine could be interpreted as an instrument for the male narrator and protagonist's progression, and the woman can be read as a symbol in a masculine narrative.²⁶² If so, the erotic scene in

²⁶² Ferrante describes Melior's proper love in the narrative but, fundamentally, her character appears, in Ferrante's interpretation, to function as an instrument through which male characters can experience love: Partonopeu as Psyche discovers love in

Partonopeu de Blois can be read in terms of Kristeva's description of how, in the development from courtly lyric into narratives, the symbolic figure turns into a living body, responding to what happens with a potentially counter-perspective.²⁶³ The symbol speaks, so-to-speak.

Melior's perspective is present in *Partonopeu de Blois* in a way that complicates the interpretation of the story. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, the narrative also reaches beyond Hysminias' dream. Hysmine exists beyond Hysminias' nocturnal fantasies, having agency of her own. We will return later to the articulations of these feminine voices.

Partonopeu's name surely evokes connotations of the Greek word for maiden: *parthenos*. However, just as Hysminias exclaims that he is no longer chaste, as he awakens from his erotic dream, so Partonopeu also completes his childhood in this passage. He is no longer *enfants* after having been introduced to Eros, or the Byzantine empress. Compared with the erotic passage from Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, the Greek novel tradition adds another, novel light to this initiation.

The narratives appear to follow a traditional pattern: a man desires a woman, who wants to remain chaste. One might say that we see the 'narrative koine', from which *Partonopeu de Blois* draws its erotic motif: the Greek novel tradition. Yet, the pattern leads to an asymmetrical relationship, in which the man is the desiring subject and the woman is the desired object, not unlike Beauvoir's analysis of the situation of men and women in her own time, which she sees as created through history.

In the following chapters, I would like to deepen the discussion regarding this traditional pattern, demonstrating them as being, in both narratives, under negotiation, nuanced, and even – I venture – questioned. Both narratives can be interpreted as portraying feminine agency and desire, despite the fact that there seems to be no room for either of these in the traditional gender asymmetry.

Before focusing more specifically on the female characters, first we will look more closely at the role of the male friend in the Greek novel

and through Cupid, and the narrator criticises his lover, 'through Melior'; see Ferrante 1975, 86–87.

²⁶³ Kristeva 1983, 358–359.

tradition, in relation to the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois*. By looking at the roles of the narrator and his male friend in the narratives, we might find help to understand the common narrative structures of the stories, as well as the complexity of the narrator of the Old French romance.

The Male Friend

The narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois* illustrates how the romance fuses different genres together. In her analysis, Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner writes about how the narrator shifts between representing the typical courtly lyric persona and the rhetorically skilled romance narrator.²⁶⁴ The narrator, according to Bruckner, combines ‘the subjective engagement of lyric and the objective stance of romance’.²⁶⁵ Lori Walters also argues that, in *Partonopeu de Blois*, the ‘basically lyric construct of a man’s unrequited love for a woman produces a major force fuelling the process of poetic continuation’.²⁶⁶ Walters writes that this romance, along with the later *Le Bel Inconnu*, ‘represent an intermediate stage in the evolution of the first-person narrative’ in the context of Old French romance, between Chrétien de Troyes and *Le Roman de la rose*.²⁶⁷ Thus, it is relevant to examine the role of the narrator, considering that its fusion of the lyric and romance genres makes for new ways of telling stories.

The narrator compares his own affection for a desired, but rejecting, woman to the story that he is narrating.²⁶⁸ The first-person experience of

²⁶⁴ Bruckner 1993b, 111.

²⁶⁵ Bruckner 1993b, 111.

²⁶⁶ Walters 1992, 229.

²⁶⁷ Walters 1992, 230.

²⁶⁸ Moreover, as Simons and Eley write, Partonopeu’s friend Gaudin also compares his unlucky love situation with that of Partonopeu at the end; Simons and Eley 1998, 193. However, this comparison is not entirely equal to that of the narrator, since Gaudin does not seem to desire Melior or focus on their relationship, but rather appears to lament the end of their companionship and his lack of lady to marry in general. In this sense, Partonopeu and Gaudin’s friendship rather resembles the sort of male friendship that one finds in the epic genre, such as Roland and Olivier’s

unrequited love is an accelerator for the intradiegetic plot to advance. In the following section, I would like to add the role of another literary figure whose function can be compared to *Partonopeu de Blois*' narrator, namely the friend of the male protagonist of the Greek novel tradition, who tells the protagonist about love and sometimes about his own experiences.

In the passage depicting the erotic initiation, discussed above, the role of the *Partonopeu de Blois* narrator could be put in relation to Hysminias' friend, Kratisthenes, in Makrembolites' novel. Kratisthenes is Hysminias' helper as well as advisor in his erotic progression.²⁶⁹ He meets Hysminias' ignorance regarding desire with ease and amusement, or rather, as Nilsson puts it, 'with a patronising attitude'.²⁷⁰ In relation to the friend with whom the protagonist can conduct a dialogue (a typical character from the Greek novel tradition), the narrator in the Old French romance seems to take the same narrative function. In both *Hysmine and Hysminias* and *Partonopeu de Blois*, the presence of a more mature voice, who laughs at the ignorant boy's fears, can be interpreted as reflecting an audience that is familiar with the nature of the story they are hearing, being a story of the initiation into love, or adulthood. It can reflect the authorial audience, thus constituting the illusion of wink between the mature friend and the imagined receiver. In this sense, the friend in the narrative gives the impression of being the audience's friend. For an actual audience to appreciate the friend's full function, they would need to be familiar with the narrative pattern in which the friend, or mature voice more generally, is usually found – perhaps thus the Greek novel.

So, Kratisthenes is Hysminias' friend and erotic pedagogue. Hysminias wakes Kratisthenes up after his nightmare (the first dream), and

friendship in *La Chanson de Roland*, f. ex. The narrator's function appears, I argue, more in line with the male friend of the Greek novel tradition. For a study on friendship in courtly literature deriving from Roland and Olivier's friendship; see Kane 2018; for a study on Roland and Olivier's friendship in the Old French chanson compared to the German *Rolandslied*; see Buschinger 1986.

²⁶⁹ Nilsson 2001, 256.

²⁷⁰ Nilsson 2001, 257.

the latter reacts with fear at the sight of the devastated Hysminias. ‘I am ruined, Kratisthenes’, Hysminias tells him. ‘Hysmine destroys me, Hysmine saves me. Eros has emptied his entire quiver into my soul, he has burnt up my entire heart. [...] I am no longer chaste’ (Ἐγὼ δ’ ‘Ὠλώλιν’ εἶπον ‘Κρατίσθηνες· Ὑσμίνη μ’ ἀπόλλυσιν, Ὑσμίνη με σώζει· ὅλην φάρετραν Ἔρως ἐξεκένωσέ μου κατὰ ψυχῆς, ὅλην μου τὴν καρδίαν ἐνέπηρσεν. [...] οὐκέτι παρθένος[’]).²⁷¹ Hysminias goes on to explain how his life has changed now that he is Eros’ slave. Rather rhetorically, Kratisthenes asks how this has happened: ‘How is it that, from being entirely chaste and a herald of Zeus and entirely virtuous, everything you now breathe out is Eros, having been initiated spontaneously and yourself become an instructor?’ (Ὁ δὲ ‘Πῶς οὕτω’ φησὶν ‘ἐξ ὅλου παρθένου καὶ κήρυκος Διὸς καὶ ὅλου σώφρονος ὅλον ἀναπνεῖς μοι τὸν Ἔρωτα, μύστης αὐτόματος γεγονὼς καὶ ὅλος διδάσκαλος;’)²⁷² Kratisthenes’ question implies that Hysminias must have been initiated into Eros’ mysteries by his own making.

In *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, the male protagonist Kleitophon’s friend, Kleinias, also talks about love as a matter of self-instruction. In the passage where Kleitophon is described as having an awakening interest in Leukippe, Kleinias responds that his situation seems promising due to them both being young.²⁷³ Kleitophon asks his friend how to proceed: ‘But what do I say? What do I do? How can I reach my beloved? I flounder in ignorance of *method*’ (τί λέγω; τί ποιῶ; πῶς ἂν τύχοιμι τῆς ἐρωμένης; οὐκ οἶδα γὰρ ἐγὼ τὰς ὁδοὺς).²⁷⁴ Kleitophon expresses a desire to know what path to follow, and Kleinias tells him that he can only learn this on his own: “Don’t look to learn this from anyone else,” says Kleinias: “This god is a self-taught scholar” (‘Μηδέν’, εἶπεν ὁ Κλεινίας, ‘πρὸς

²⁷¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.2.3–4.

²⁷² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.3.1.

²⁷³ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, I.9.

²⁷⁴ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, I.9.7. Throughout this thesis I always quote John J. Winkler’s translation in Reardon’s collection of the ancient Greek novels in English translations ([1989] 2008).

ταῦτα ζήτει παρ' ἄλλου μαθεῖν· αὐτοδίδακτος γάρ ἐστιν ὁ θεὸς σοφιστής').²⁷⁵

In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Kratisthenes and Hysminias have conversations of the same nature. Hysminias expresses doubt regarding what is happening to him, and Kratisthenes assures him that he will know when he needs to.²⁷⁶ As Morales argues, in the ancient novel, Kleinias expresses 'the impetus of sexual stimulation and the release of climax' to reach 'a "point of no return"'.²⁷⁷ In this passage, Kleinias compares sexual stimulation to pregnancy and childbirth, 'to depict the birth of desire'. As Morales notes, Tatius makes an allusion to Plato's description of Socrates as midwife, 'delivering wisdom from men's souls'. Kleinias 'reclaims [Platonic] imagery and philosophy, only to describe, with a comic juxtaposition of images and registers, erotic ejaculation'.²⁷⁸ As Nilsson further shows, in taking its inspiration from *Leukippe and Kleitophon* (and other ancient novels), *Hysmine and Hysminias* uses Platonic references to associate philosophy with (discussions of) desire, something that Komnenian novels do generally.²⁷⁹ We will come back to Platonic representations of desire below.

With this in mind, let us now return to *Hysmine and Hysminias*, and Hysminias' fear after his first dream. After Hysminias has told Kratisthenes about his newly experienced devastation, he repeats the events of the dream, to which Kratisthenes responds that what he has experienced is desire: "What you have experienced", he said, "is nothing out of the ordinary. You are in love; you are not alone in this but share the experience with many mortals" (Ὁ δ' 'Οὐδὲν καινὸν' φησὶ 'πέπονθας. Ἐρᾶς· οὐ μόνος, ἀλλὰ σὺν πολλοῖς βροτῶν·[']).²⁸⁰ He further says that Hysminias is especially lucky, since Hysmine loves him in return: 'And you are

²⁷⁵ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, I.10.1. As Nilsson writes, Kleinias does proceed after this with methodological advice anyway; Nilsson 2001, 257.

²⁷⁶ Nilsson 2001, 257.

²⁷⁷ Morales 2004, 155.

²⁷⁸ Morales 2004, 155.

²⁷⁹ Nilsson 2001, 183–184.

²⁸⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.3.3.

fortunate in matters of love, for your beloved is so beautiful and so completely responsive, and you have Eros at your service' (καὶ τὰ πρὸς ἔρωτας εὐτυχεῖς, ἐρωμένην ἔχων οὕτω καλὴν καὶ ὅλην ἐρῶσαν καὶ ὑπηρέτην τὸν Ἔρωτα).²⁸¹

As he hears the events of Hysminias' dream, Kratisthenes is said to stop being worried about his friend. From Kratisthenes' relaxed attitude, the audience can be assured that Hysminias is not in danger, but rather that the narrative is relating a traditional erotic plot.²⁸² Hysminias is learning about love and desire. Kratisthenes seems to understand that Hysminias has been introduced to Eros, and the audience has understood it with him.

As Nilsson argues, there is an important difference between Hysminias and Kleitophon in this regard: 'while Kleitophon's *aporia* is concerned with what to do in order to make the girl fall in love, Hysminias is just utterly at loss about what to do at all'.²⁸³ Kleitophon asks about what method to use, whereas Hysminias is described as experiencing an existential crisis: having given up everything that he was, he has now become Eros' slave.

As Morales writes in her analysis of *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Kleitophon has had sexual relationships with prostitutes before falling in love with Leukippe.²⁸⁴ This, she continues, creates an inequality between them. She is responding to David Konstan, who writes that the peculiarity of the Greek novel is:

that the protagonists are invariably a young boy and a young girl, both of free status and eligible for marriage, and each equally enamored of the other. This pattern of symmetrical or reciprocal love, in which the attraction is both mutual and between social equals,

²⁸¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.3.3–4.

²⁸² Regarding the audience and the apparent 'wink' from the 'friend' to them; see above.

²⁸³ Nilsson 2001, 257.

²⁸⁴ Morales 2004, 152–153.

has a profound effect on the entire structure of the novel and gives it its *raison d'être* or informing principle.²⁸⁵

Morales instead argues that the fact that Kleitophon is experienced establishes 'a crucial asymmetry between Clitophon, the sexually experienced man, and Leucippe, the sexually inexperienced *parthenos*'.²⁸⁶ In contrast to this noted asymmetry however, in the twelfth-century novel, Hysminias has never had an erotic experience, and has another reason for his *aporia* than Kleitophon, whose search for Kleinias' advice is more goal-oriented than Hysminias' search for Kratisthenes' advice. Hysminias is depicted as expressing his need for guidance due to his overall despair.

This difference causes the friends' respective reactions to be different as well. In the quoted passage from *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Kratisthenes calms Hysminias by telling him that he is fortunate to feel desire; he desires someone so beautiful, who desires him back.²⁸⁷ In *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Kleinias responds to Kleitophon that he can be reassured, considering that he and Leukippe are both young, which gives him an advantage with the maiden, and he continues: 'let her feel sure that she is loved, and soon enough she will imitate your love with her own' (ἐρᾶσθαι πιστευσάτω, καὶ ταχέως σε μιμήσεται).²⁸⁸

It seems as though the points of departure thus differ from each other in the two narratives. Kleitophon is described as desiring Leukippe, and he is thus advised to manipulate her into desiring him in return. Hysminias is described as desiring Hysmine, who already desires him back, of which the (authorial) audience is made aware, after their initial meeting where Hysmine serves Hysminias at dinner in a seductive manner. I will come back to Hysmine's desire but, from his reaction to his dream, we could interpret Hysminias' fear as being caused by a mere lack of erotic knowledge.

²⁸⁵ Konstan 1994, 7.

²⁸⁶ Morales 2004, 153.

²⁸⁷ Hysmine's desire was made evident in the initial meetings between the lovers, during which she initiates erotic contact between the two.

²⁸⁸ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, I.9.6–7.

As already mentioned, the friend's role as coach regarding questions of desire has a parallel in the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois*. Walters argues that the narrator in fact advances the plot by comparing his own erotic situation with Partonopeu's.²⁸⁹ Bruckner also highlights 'the narrator's own virtuoso performance in rhetorical play', as an experimentation with different genres and styles.²⁹⁰

The narrator's attitude towards Partonopeu as he is introduced to the 'Byzantine' palace, and his first erotic encounter, is similar to Kratisthenes' relaxed reaction to Hysminias' dream. Partonopeu also has to be initiated into matters of desire on his own, similarly to how Kleinias in *Leukippe and Kleitophon* refers to Eros as a self-taught scholar. Partonopeu's lack of knowledge of desire makes him comparable to the male characters in Greek and Byzantine novels. Their inexperience is part of an erotic motif; spontaneously, one needs to learn what desire is, as Kleinias tells Kleitophon in *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. *Partonopeu de Blois* can accordingly be described as a story about Greek erotic education, or rep-novels' resentations of *paideia*. It is a courtly narrative about the end of knight Partonopeu's being *parthenos*: Greek novel tradition encounters Old French romance in this *éducation sentimentale*.

By touching the intruder in the darkened bedroom, Partonopeu is said to understand that the stranger is a woman; as he hears her scream, his fears transform into lust. In addition, the narrator affirms this turn from fear to desire. He makes a speech that praises Melior as well as women who desire in general: 'May God bless all women, and make them love without being uncourtly. And may all have one who is loyal and does not love any other man' (Deus [totes dames] beneïe | Et face amer sans vilonie, | Et a cascun une en acort | Qu'a nul autre home ne s'amort).²⁹¹ Not unlike Kratisthenes' response to Hysminias' dream, the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois* declares how lucky a man who desires someone is,

²⁸⁹ Walters 1992, 230.

²⁹⁰ Bruckner 1993a, 37.

²⁹¹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1255–1258. Regarding the word 'vilonie' in relation to courtliness, Kathryn Gravdal's study on the *vilain* in relation to the *courtois* in medieval literature shows how the literature of the time played with these sorts of social categories; see Gravdal 1989, 5.

if the desired one returns his feelings. Even though the narrator in *Partonopeu de Blois* speaks from a masculine perspective, wishing for ‘each man to have one who has no other man’, he recognises reciprocity, the female counterpart’s own desire – as does Kratisthenes. In *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, it seems that asymmetry between the lovers is taken for granted, just as it is described in the code of courtly love and its evolution into allegory, as Kristeva describes it.²⁹² For instance, Kleinias responds to Kleitophon’s plea for advice by assuring him how easy it is to make a young maiden imitate the feelings that one expresses to her (rather than addressing the importance of her own feelings corresponding).²⁹³ However, as we have seen, the analysed twelfth-century narratives rather subvert this order of love and desire. Both Kratisthenes in *Hysmine and Hysminias* and the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois* seem to praise the erotic situation in which a woman desires on equal terms.

However, in the Byzantine novel, Hysminias is the narrator, whereas the narrator of the Old French romance is an extradiegetic poet, who compares his desire to the desire of his intradiegetic protagonist. Kratisthenes functions as a support to Hysminias’ erotic progression, but he does not compare his own situation with that of Hysminias. In order to place *Partonopeu de Blois* more broadly within the Greek novel tradition, I will digress a little bit, by adding Prodhomos’ twelfth-century novel *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* into the discussion. Thus, we may more clearly see the Old French romance narrator’s similarity to the stories of unsuccessful love told by male friends from the Greek novel tradition.

Storytelling between characters is a common feature in the novel tradition. At the beginning of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, Kratandros, a fellow captive along with the two lovers and main characters, asks Dosikles to tell him his unlucky fate. Dosikles asks that Kratandros begins; and the new friend thus tells him about how he lost the woman whom he loved, Chrysochroe, due to a failed attempt to abduct her so that they could

²⁹² As lyric turns into longer narrative, love becomes represented along with its social consequences; see Kristeva 1983, 362–363.

²⁹³ ἐρᾶσθαι πιστευσάτω, καὶ ταχέως σε μιμήσεται, *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, I.9.7.

marry. When they were caught in their attempt to escape by Chrysochroe's servants, she was killed, and he was accused of the killing. Having managed to escape death after the trial against him, Kratandros fled and was captured by pirates at sea.²⁹⁴ The fate of Kratandros can be read as a contrast to that of Dosikles, who, unlike Kratandros, succeeds in abducting his beloved and later marrying her. And, as Kratandros asks for the story of Dosikles' fate, the audience is given the background to the *in medias res* opening of the novel as a whole. In this sense, the function of Kratandros corresponds to the function of the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois*. Two contrasting love stories take place simultaneously: one is happy and one unhappy. The comparison between these fates is used as a device to advance the intradiegetic plot in both stories respectively.

Later in the story, still captives, Rhodanthe and Dosikles are separated from each other. Dosikles then bemoans his situation. Kratandros thus compares his unhappy situation with that of Dosikles, in an attempt to cheer him up:

Ταὐτὸν κάγω πέπονθα ταύταις ταῖς πάθαις· | κόρης ἐάλων εὐγενοῦς
καὶ παρθένου | (ἔχεις ἐγνωκῶς ἐξ ἐμοῦ Χρυσοχρόνην)· | τέθνηκεν
ἢ παῖς συνθρυβεῖσα τὴν κάραν· | ἔκλαυσα τὴν θανοῦσαν ὡς ἔχρην
κλάειν, | ἀπεξενώθην συγγενοῦς συναυλίας, | φίλων, φίλης γῆς,
μητροπατρώου γένους· | οὐ μὴν θανάτῳ τὴν κόρην ἡμειψάμην. |
[...] | Μεμπτὸς μὲν οὖν σὺ τοῦ μικροψύχου θρασους, | καὶ δῶμεν
ὡς τέθνηκεν ἢ σὴ παρθένος· | ἐγὼ δ' ἄρα πρόμαντίς εἰμί σοι, ξένε, |
τοῦ ζῆν Ροδάνθην καὶ βιοῦν, καλῶς μὲν οὐ | (πῶς γὰρ
ἀποξευχθεῖσα τοῦ Δοσικλέος;), | ζῆν δ' οὖν ὁμῶς ἔνδακρυν, ὡς
οἶμαι, βίον.²⁹⁵

I suffered the same affliction in similar circumstances, | when I was
captivated by a well-born maiden | (you have already heard from
me about Chrysochroe); | the girl died when her head was crushed;
| I wept for the dead girl as I should, | I absented myself from gath-
erings of my kin, | from my friends, from my dear land, from my

²⁹⁴ See *Rhodante and Dosikles*, I.168–178, I.195–205, and I.409–424. When I refer to and quote *Rhodante and Dosikles*, I always use Conca's edition (1994).

²⁹⁵ *Rhodante and Dosikles*, VI.446–453, VI.465–470.

ancestral clan; | but I would not have responded to the girl with death. | [...] | You are to be chided for your petty spirit, | even if we grant that your maiden is dead; | but I, stranger, am a prophet for you, | that Rhodanthe survives and lives, not happily | (how can she, when separated from Dosikles?), | And so she lives, I conjecture, a tearful life.²⁹⁶

In his speech, Kratandros compares his unhappy fate with that of his friend; not only does he cheer Dosikles up with hopeful prophecies, but he also lets the audience know that Rhodanthe most certainly lives.

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, the narrator compares Partonopeu's access to Melior's voice and body. After having explained that Partonopeu enjoys Melior's stories at night, he continues:

Douce et soef a le parole, | C'est une riens qui molt m'afole; | Ço ai de m'amie et nient plus, | Par tant m'i tieng et pens et mus, | Et Dameldex, qui ne menti, | Me doinst qu'el m'aint si con j'aim li | Et qu'a moi pere se francise, | Car ce n'ert ja que autre eslise. | Partonopeu a son delit, | Li parlers de lui molt m'ocit | Car il a tos biens de s'amie; | Jo n'en ai riens qui ne m'ocie. | Il ne le voic, mais a loisir | Le sent et en fait son plaisir. | Je voi la moie et n'en faç rien; | Je n'en ai le mal et il le bien.²⁹⁷

Her speech is soft and sweet. This is one thing that drives me crazy – I receive that from my lover, and only that! Her voice holds me captive; she is in my thoughts. But, I wish that God who does not lie would grant me that she loved me as I indeed love her; and that she would show herself to me, for, there is no one else whom I would ever choose. Partonopeu has his pleasures. Talking about him really kills me. He does not see her, but he can touch her and draw pleasure from her. As for me, I watch my lover and it does not change anything. I am miserable and he is lucky.

Kratandros is not the narrator of the novel, but his function is similar to that of the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois*: the protagonists' love

²⁹⁶ For the translations of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, I always quote E. Jeffreys 2012.

²⁹⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1865–18880. Regarding Melior's storytelling; see below.

situation is compared with that of a commenting voice, whose personal story is less happy than that of the main characters.

Perhaps the technique of the narrator in *Partonopeu de Blois* could imply a common narrative motif in Byzantine and Old French twelfth-century literature: a voice that compares or explains the desire of the main character, and thus helps to advance the plot. Perhaps we can speak of a transfer of story matter, from Byzantium to Western vernacular romance. In this regard, the intermediate stage of first-person narrative development in French literature, as Walters describes it, can be explained by defining the *Partonopeu de Blois* narrator as something of a ‘pseudo-intradiegetic’ character: a fusion between the intradiegetic friend and the extradiegetic narrator. The narrator’s way of explaining to his audience Partonopeu’s progression in the erotic scene as something not to be feared, but rather to be seen as forming part of an erotic motif, by the way in which the fabula is told in relation to the narrator’s personal life, arguably places this Old French romance within the erotic Greek novel tradition.

The Female Seducer

In the erotic scene discussed, Melior could be interpreted as not only playing the role of the traditionally chaste heroine of ancient and medieval novels or the Western courtly lady, who is desired by the desiring man, who is unable to reach her. Although she is both a chaste virgin and the romance’s heroine, Melior is at the same time a seducer. This aspect of her character ‘precludes her playing the part of the young woman who has to learn about love’, as Eley argues; although she may be a virgin when she meets Partonopeu, she has the necessary knowledge of erotic matters.²⁹⁸ In the following section, my aim is to show how Melior’s role

²⁹⁸ Eley 2011, 38. Regarding Melior’s narrative function as an erotic instructor; see Eley 34–35.

in the seductive scene is a dual one: she plays two stereotypical women at the same time.²⁹⁹ More precisely, I will discuss Melior's combination of two female characters from the Greek novel tradition. By adding the Greek novel to the interpretation of Melior's character, her detachment from the typical courtly lady can be explained.

In her study on *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Morales describes Melite as the novel's antagonist. The antagonist is secondary to the plot, she argues: 'This is not Melite's novel, we do not expect the narrative climax to be the celebration of *her* marriage'.³⁰⁰ The sexually experienced woman is a cliché, common in the novel genre. Not only does Melior's name resemble Melite's, but her characteristics are similar as well. Melior is no widow, she is unmarried. Yet, since her father is gone, she is left on her own. Her characteristics can be compared with Melite's, considering, as Morales highlights, that 'Melite is wealthy, powerful, from the city, married and though young, relatively experienced'.³⁰¹

Melior is neither married nor sexually experienced, which could be explained by the fact that she is indeed not the story's antagonist. Melior is not the sidekick to the protagonists, she is a protagonist herself. Unlike in the ancient novel, in the Old French romance it is Melior's marriage that becomes the narrative climax.

Another female seducer from the ancient Greek novel tradition is Lykainion from Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*. Lykainion is a married woman who offers herself to the protagonist Daphnis, so that he can have his first sexual experience with her instead of with the woman he loves, Chloe. Lykainion leads Daphnis far away from Chloe, and tells him the following:

²⁹⁹ Adding to this, a similar analysis can be made regarding the duality of Hysmine's character, considering her to be an erotic initiator at the same time as she is firm in her chastity. However, given that she in fact remains chaste in the narrative, she nevertheless fits the category consisting of female, chaste protagonists of the Greek novel tradition.

³⁰⁰ Morales 2004, 220.

³⁰¹ Morales 2004, 220; *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, V.11.5–6.

‘ἐρᾶς’ εἶπε ‘Δάφνι, Χλόης, καὶ τοῦτο ἔμαθον ἐγὼ νύκτωρ παρὰ τῶν Νυμφῶν δι’ ὀνείρατος, αἶ μοι καὶ τὰ χθιζὰ σου διηγήσαντο δάκρυα καὶ ἐκέλευσάν σε σῶσαι διδασκαμένην τὰ ἔρωτος ἔργα. Τὰ δὲ ἐστὶν οὐ φίλημα καὶ περιβολὴ καὶ οἷα δρῶσι κριοὶ καὶ τράγοι. ἄλλα ταῦτα πηδήματα καὶ τῶν ἐκεῖ γλυκύτερα· πρόσσεστι γὰρ αὐτοῖς χρόνος μακροτέρας ἡδονῆς. εἰ δὴ σοι φίλον ἀπηλλάχθαι κακῶν καὶ ἐν πείρᾳ γενέσθαι ζητουμένων τερπνῶν, ἴθι, παραδίδου μοι σαντὸν μαθητὴν, ἐγὼ δὲ χαριζομένη ταῖς Νύμφαις ἐκεῖναις διδάξω’.³⁰²

Daphnis, you’re in love with Chloe: I found this out from the Nymphs last night in a dream. They told me how you wept yesterday and told me to rescue you by teaching you how to make love. This isn’t just kissing and embracing and doing what the rams and he-goats do. It is a kind of leaping that is sweeter than theirs, for it takes longer and gives a longer pleasure. If you want to get rid of your troubles and try out the pleasures you are searching for, come and give yourself to me as a pupil, and I will give you a lesson, as a favor to those Nymphs.³⁰³

Daphnis is happy to hear Lykainion’s offer. He threw himself at her feet ‘and begged her to teach him, as soon as possible, the skill that would make him able to do what he wanted to Chloe’ (πρὸ τῶν ποδῶν καταπεσὼν τὴν Λυκαίνιον ἰκέτευεν ὅτι τάχιστα διδάξαι τὴν τέχνην, δι’ ἧς ὁ βούλεται δράσει Χλόην), and offers to pay Lykainion with fresh cheese for her trouble.³⁰⁴ Lykainion therefore ‘found Daphnis even more of a goatherd (and more generous too) than she expected’ (εὐροῦσα δὲ ἡ Λυκαίνιον αἰπολικὴν ἀφθονίαν οἷαν οὐ προσεδόκησεν, ἤρχετο παιδεύειν τὸν Δάφνιν τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον), and she begins to instruct him.³⁰⁵ If we compare the following passage with the discussed erotic passage in *Par-tonopeu de Blois*, we can see the progressive similarities in the Old French narrative and the description of Daphnis’ erotic experience:

³⁰² *Daphnis and Chloe*, III.17.1–18.1. Throughout this thesis, I always quote Michael D. Reeve’s edition ([1982] 1986).

³⁰³ Throughout this thesis, I always quote Christopher Gill’s translation in Reardon (1989) 2008.

³⁰⁴ *Daphnis and Chloe*, III.18.1–3.

³⁰⁵ *Daphnis and Chloe*, III.18.3.

ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν καθίσαι πλησίον αὐτῆς ὥς ἔχει καὶ φιλήματα φιλεῖν οἷα εἴωθε καὶ ὅσα καὶ φιλοῦντα ἅμα περιβάλλειν καὶ κατακλίνεσθαι χαμαί. ὥς δὲ ἐκαθέσθη καὶ ἐφίλησε καὶ κατεκλίθη, μαθοῦσα ἐνεργεῖν δυνάμενον καὶ σφριγῶντα ἀπὸ μὲν τῆς ἐπὶ πλευρὰν κατακλίσεως ἀνίστησιν, αὐτὴν δὲ ὑποστορέσασα ἐντέχνως ἐς τὴν τέως ζητουμένην ὁδὸν ἦγε, τὸ δὲ ἐντεῦθεν οὐδὲν περιειργάζετο ξένον· αὐτὴ γὰρ ἡ φύσις λοιπὸν ἐπαίδευε τὸ πρακτέον.³⁰⁶

She [Lykainion] ordered him to sit beside her, just as he was, to kiss her, in his usual way, and as often as usual, and, as he kissed her, to embrace her at the same time and lie down on the ground. When he had sat down, kissed and lain down, and she discovered that he was capable of action and was swollen with desire, she lifted him up from where he was lying on his side, slipped her body underneath, and guided him skillfully on the road he had been searching for until now. After that, she did nothing exotic; from then on, nature herself taught him what had to be done.

As we saw in the passage from *Partonopeu de Blois*, the sexual scene advances gradually, along with progressively greater aggression. As Partonopeu reaches the point where he no longer listens to Melior's objections against his conduct, in *Daphnis and Chloe*, the narrative also reaches a point where the woman's instruction has no further impact; the man acts spontaneously. He is a self-taught scholar, to use the description that Kleinias gives of Eros, in Tatius' novel. Even though the two ancient novels differ – Melite is not explicitly a teacher, like Lykainion – one can still, as Morales points out, expect that 'the reader who comes to *Leucippe and Clitophon* with knowledge of *Daphnis and Chloe* might anticipate Melite to be not only a sexual predator, but a pedagogue and a figure of authority'.³⁰⁷ The sexually initiated woman can thus be read as a known type for the reader of ancient novels, which explains the similarities between Melite and Lykainion.

³⁰⁶ *Daphnis and Chloe*, III.18.3–4.

³⁰⁷ Morales 2004, 221.

There are two significant reasons for acknowledging the potential connection between this sort of female seducer in the ancient Greek novel and Melior in *Partonopeu de Blois*. The first is that it can be useful in interpreting the presence of sexual violence in the scene. The second is that it implies that the narrated events can be explained while taking into consideration Melior's desire and agency.

Regarding the violence, *Daphnis and Chloe* has been interpreted as ascribing the maiden's pain as an essential component of the man's desire. Since she is married, Lykainion has already experienced all the pain that Chloe has not, and she was thus not hurt by their intercourse. Afterwards, Daphnis wants to immediately teach Chloe what he has learned, so Lykainion tells him the following:

ἔτι καὶ ταῦτά σε δεῖ μαθεῖν, Δάφνι. ἐγὼ γυνὴ τυγχάνουσα πέπονθα νῦν οὐδέν (πάλαι γάρ με ταῦτα ἀνὴρ ἄλλος ἐπαίδευσε, μισθὸν τὴν παρθενίαν λαβών), Χλόη δὲ συμπαλαίουςά σοι ταύτην τὴν πόλιν καὶ οἰμῶξει καὶ κλαύσεται κὰν αἵματι κείσεται πολλῶ. ἀλλὰ σὺ τὸ αἷμα μὴ φοβηθῇς, ἀλλ' ἥνίκα ἂν πείσης αὐτήν σοι παρασχεῖν, ἄγαγε αὐτήν εἰς τοῦτο τὸ χωρίον, ἵνα κὰν βοήσῃ μηδεὶς ἀκούσῃ κὰν δακρύσῃ μηδεὶς ἴδῃ κὰν αἵμαχθῇ λούσῃται τῇ πηγῇ· καὶ μέμνησο ὅτι σε ἄνδρα ἐγὼ πρὸ Χλόης πεποίηκα.³⁰⁸

You've still got this to learn, Daphnis. Because I happen to be an experienced woman, I didn't suffer any harm just now (long ago another man gave me this lesson and took my virginity as his reward). But if Chloe has this sort of wrestling match with you, she will cry out and weep and will lie there, bleeding heavily. But don't be afraid of the blood; when you talk her into giving herself to you, lead her to this spot so that if she cries out, no one can hear her, and if she weeps, no one can see her, and if she bleeds, she can wash in the spring. And remember – I made you a man before Chloe did.

In *Daphnis and Chloe*, the initiating sexual experience is thus described as painful for the woman; to learn about desire is to learn about inevitable suffering. With this perspective in mind, the twelfth-century stories'

³⁰⁸ *Daphnis and Chloe*, III.19.

gender roles in the respective scenes might be explained in terms of a narrative structure based on a masculine perspective. Simon Goldhill argues that there is a ‘pervasive imagery linking violence and penetration *throughout* Greek culture, and the pervasive imagery associating the wedding-night with violent seizure and even death’.³⁰⁹ Daphnis learns that violence is a part of sexual conduct, which presupposes expectations of resistance from his female counterpart. This imagery, Goldhill argues, can be traced not only in all other novels, but also in various different sources: ‘across different registers of Greek the assumption of the pain of defloration, its association with male violence, the presence of blood, and the fear of the woman, is a commonplace, and validated as such’.³¹⁰

The ideal female character is chaste. However, as Goldhill also argues, just as this common link between sex and violence is represented in *Daphnis and Chloe*, it is also presented in a humorous fashion, and should not be interpreted as normative. The cruel descriptions of Lykainion’s lesson draw ‘on an extensive and multiform tradition’, as we have seen, for which reason Goldhill interprets the passage to function as an ‘ironic exaggeration rather than a fresh and questioning perception of male sexuality’.³¹¹ Lykainion’s lesson can thus be interpreted as a pastiche of erotic representations in Greek culture. The novel can be said to represent, in Goldhill’s words, a ‘manipulation of *and within* the terms of patriarchal narrative’.³¹²

If we return to the twelfth-century narratives, we see that, while Hysmine in *Hysmine and Hysminias* remains chaste, Melior in *Partonopeu de Blois* does not: she has her virginity taken through Partonopeu’s use of force. Differently from Melite’s role in *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, or Lykainion’s role in *Daphnis and Chloe*, Melior is not an antagonist of the story, but a protagonist. She is at once the desired lady who is expected to be chaste, and the older instructor. *Partonopeu de Blois* can be said to fuse together these two literary roles from the Greek novel

³⁰⁹ Goldhill 1995, 35.

³¹⁰ Goldhill 1995, 39.

³¹¹ Goldhill 1995, 39.

³¹² Goldhill 1995, 39.

tradition, in order to create a combination of a desiring agent and chaste protagonist, embodied in only one female character.

In addition, in their nocturnal space of sexual meetings, Melior could be said to represent chastity, albeit having lost her virginity. In the medieval context, sexuality is seen as discernible not only in acts, but also in mind and in vision, as a heritage from the late ancient Christian thinkers. For example, Andreas Capellanus defines love as ‘an inborn suffering which results from the sight of, and uncontrolled thinking about, the beauty of the other sex’ (*Amor est passio quaedam innata procedens ex visione et immoderata cogitatione formae alterius sexus*).³¹³ Vision forms part of sexual desire and experience, and thus the woman who is desired by a man can, as a result of his mere gaze, have her chastity questioned.³¹⁴

By portraying a woman’s seduction in the darkness, *Partonopeu de Blois* can be interpreted as playing with different definitions of chastity in medieval culture; if the female character seduces the male character in the dark, she may avoid exposure to masculine desire, which threatens her chastity. At the same time, Melior can be read as similar to the chaste maidens in ancient Greek and Byzantine novels, who may awaken the male character’s desire, but nonetheless reject his advances. Being the romance heroine, the ideal of chastity is represented in Melior’s character, in the scene of their (unchaste) intercourse. This can be seen in relation to the Greek novel. Morales describes the ancient novels as containing ‘an interest in what virginity and chastity are. [...] The ancient novels invite an active interrogation of virginity and chastity as much [...] as a

³¹³ *De Amore*, I.1.1. Throughout this thesis, I always quote P. G. Walsh’s edition, as well as his translation into English; see Walsh (1985) 2002.

³¹⁴ Howard Bloch discusses how the church fathers would deem ‘the view of woman as the source of evil’ on the one hand, while also defining the woman as ‘the symbol of the union of the soul with Christ’, which shows how the mere sight of a woman was seen as charged with great risk, or potential; see Bloch 1991, 68. Eley also notes how Partonopeu, through the Psyche allusion, cannot experience the suffering that originates at the sight of the beloved, that Capellanus writes about in *De Amore*; see Eley 2011, 38.

celebration of them'.³¹⁵ I will come back to the question of darkness and Melior's version of Cupid, but first I will turn to some observations regarding her and Melite's respective agency.

As mentioned above, we can observe similar characteristics when comparing Melior to Melite. They are both from a city, powerful, wealthy, and a little older than the male character whom they approach.³¹⁶ Eley writes that of all the French and Latin sources from which *Partnopeu de Blois* would have drawn inspiration: 'Nowhere in the network of texts with which he [the poet] engages is there a model of a love-affair between a very young man and an older woman', and she continues further below by stating that, compared with other sources: 'Melior [...] is quite explicitly characterised as being older than Partonopeus'.³¹⁷ Melior thus stands out in the French courtly context – but not if we consider the Greek novel.

In her analysis of *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Morales finds that Melite is described (as is Leukippe) in terms of rhetorical elements, but the difference is that, when the narrative presents a masculine gaze upon her, 'Melite is shown looking back'.³¹⁸ As she sees Kleitophon, Melite

³¹⁵ Regarding this described interest, Morales further notes that the novels take pleasure in the fantasy of potential rape; Morales 2008, 53–54. Moreover, Lynda Garland describes the twelfth-century Byzantine novels to 'display simultaneously a regard for chastity and decorum and an enjoyment of erotic innuendo and description [...]'; Garland 1990, 64. Furthermore, regarding rape as a theme in narratives, Gravdal discusses the poetic play with sexual violence in the Old French romances. In her reading of Chrétien de Troyes, Gravdal finds that a 'striking tension underlies his use and presentation of sexual violence'; Gravdal 1991, 67. As the knight learns to protect women in the Arthurian romance, Gravdal argues that the text 'aestheticizes rape as a formulaic challenge'; Gravdal 1991, 67. We could thus note that both the ancient and Byzantine novels as well as Old French romances bring topics such as sexuality, chastity, and rape to light from different angles, which might tell us something regarding the literary circles' interest in discussing conditions of these matters. The female character's alternatives appear to be chastity or rape; she is forced to passivity. This passivity can arguably, however, be interpreted as challenged through Melior's character, as I argue in this thesis.

³¹⁶ Eley writes that Partonopeu's young age is unusual for twelfth-century French romance generally; Eley 2011, 19 and 22.

³¹⁷ Eley 2011, 32–33.

³¹⁸ Morales 2004, 222.

desires him instantly; as a reversed mirror to Kleitophon's first view of Leukippe, Melite 'eats' him with her eyes:

τὸ μὲν οὖν δεῖπνον ἦν πολυτελές· ἡ δὲ ἐφαπτομένη τῶν παρακειμένων, ὥς δοκεῖν ἐσθίειν, οὐκ ἠδύνατο τυχεῖν ὀλοκλήρου τροφῆς, πάντα δὲ ἐβλεπέ με. [...] ἡ δε, 'Ποῖον γὰρ ὄψον', ἔφη, 'μοι πολυτελὲς ἢ ποῖος οἶος τιμιώτερος τῆς σῆς ὄψεως';³¹⁹

The meal itself was lavish, but she barely touched the food in front of her and only seemed to eat. She could not take in real food but was wholly focused on me. [...] And she [said], 'What rare venison, what vintage rarer still, could satisfy me like the vision of you?'

Kleitophon describes how Melite desires him and gazes upon him: 'His explanation of Melite's behavior reinforces the active nature of her desire', Morales writes.³²⁰ Kleitophon is described as objectified by Melite. Compared with how Kleitophon initially desired Leukippe, this scenario could be interpreted as a reversal of the situation. As Morales argues, the presence of Melite in the text complicates the entire novel and subverts the gender roles portrayed within it:

Through the figure of Melite the text constructs a female viewing subject, a factor which complicates readings of Achilles which focus exclusively upon the male gaze and its objectification of the female characters. There is a place in this narrative for a 'voyeuristic moment' controlled by a woman. However, it is significant that the narrative perspective is not upon the object of Melite's gaze; we still have no glimpse of Clitophon's physical appearance. The focus is upon Melite's looking, not on what she looked at.³²¹

In terms of gaze and desire, Melite can be described as similar to Kleitophon. Yet, in the novel, her role is to be antagonist rather than protagonist, whereas in *Partonopeu de Blois* one may argue that the seductress cliché

³¹⁹ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, V.13.3–5.

³²⁰ Morales 2004, 222.

³²¹ Morales 2004, 223–224.

is fused together with the chaste maiden, and thus becomes the female protagonist. Through the role of the female seducer, combined with the role of Cupid in the tale of Cupid and Psyche, Melior becomes the embodiment of a feminine desiring subject, which in turn complicates the narrative as a whole. This, however, does not mean that there is no female antagonist seducer, comparable to the ancient novel, in the Old French romance. In the section below, I suggest that this role is taken by Partonopeu's mother, Lucrece.

Lucrece: Mother, Seducer and Antagonist

One can speak of an antagonistic female seducer in *Partonopeu de Blois*, but in an indirect fashion. Partonopeu's mother Lucrece, sister to the king, is described as suspicious of the mysterious Melior, whom she hears about when Partonopeu visits his home after a year abroad. She is described as wanting her son to instead marry the king's niece, and therefore starts arranging their marriage. However, Partonopeu goes back to Chief d'Oire for another year. When he comes back, Lucrece and the king together arrange a love potion to unite Partonopeu with the king's niece, so that he will stop seeing Melior. The potion is strong, and Partonopeu is swept up by desire for the king's niece.³²² At first, he forgets Melior at the sight of the new woman in front of him, and the two become a couple.³²³ Later, however, his new beloved one mentions Melior.³²⁴ Thus, Partonopeu immediately remembers her again; the ruse of the potion fades and he returns to his senses.³²⁵ He leaves the girl and runs off, cursing the trickery of his mother, the king and the girl.³²⁶ Partonopeu thus

³²² *Partonopeu de Blois*, 3919–4004.

³²³ La damoisele a esgardee | Et Melior tot olbliee. *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4005–4006.

³²⁴ Par grant sens vos avons conquis. | Jetés estes de le baillie | La bele fee, vostre amie, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4048–4050.

³²⁵ Quant cil ot s'amie nomer, | Un poi se prist a porpenser, | Et en l'angoisse del porpens | Li est bien revenus ses sens, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4051–4054.

³²⁶ Le roi, se mere, et lor mestrie | Maudist et se novele amie, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4061–4062.

leaves his home, and returns to Melior, who still dwells in the imaginary Byzantine space. His mother again acts as an obstacle to Partonopeu and Melior's relationship later, when, together with the bishop of Paris, she convinces him to lighten up the bedroom.³²⁷

Regardless of the mother's intentions, her role in the narrative can be interpreted as that of an opponent, struggling against the desire of the protagonists. Her narrative function is, thus, to be an antagonist to the protagonist couple.³²⁸ With the arrangement of the seductive potion, mixed in order to trick Partonopeu into taking another lover than the narrative's female protagonist, *Partonopeu de Blois* could be said to place the antagonist role of the female seducer elsewhere than in the sexually experienced, somewhat older woman. The antagonist female seducer in this story is Partonopeu's mother, with the help of the king's niece. The narrative structure taken from the Greek novel tradition can thus be rearranged, so that female seduction is not doomed to take on an antagonist role.

By using different aspects of the Graeco-Roman erotic tradition and of twelfth-century Byzantine literature, we see the possibility of reading *Partonopeu de Blois* as a narrative of feminine desire. Makrembolites' erotic narrative differs from ancient configurations of desire by turning sexual awakening into an internal process triggered by the other's touch, in contrast to the traditional approach of an external force imposing a sudden attack on the subject; thus, the narrative not only presents the female character as having agency and power to influence the male character in new ways, but also opens up new possibilities of representing feminine desire. Hysmine is the erotic initiator in Makrembolites' novel, who arouses Hysminias' sexual awakening with her seductive actions. If we read the erotic narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to this erotic, Byzantine narrative, then Melior's seductive actions and the representations of her desire could be understood as forming part of the literary development of the novel and romance genres, which articulates feminine subjectivity based on variations of ancient narrative sources. The

³²⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4344–4416.

³²⁸ McBride 2018, 11.

romance can thus be understood as the story of a female character in need of transcendence, who reaches out for that which she yearns for. Thus, the narrative can be read as constructed out of an alphabet of feminine sensuality, written into the language of the Greek erotic tradition.

Chapter 3

GAZE

Inscribing Feminine Desire into Masculine Rhetoric

This chapter aims to understand how the tradition of erotic narrative connects with ideals of rhetoric originating in the first centuries CE; how rhetorical techniques of *ekphrasis* and *enargeia* apply to the erotic literary discourse. This backdrop will help us to understand the possible effect on the audience of listening to Anna Komnene's long description of crusader Bohemond, in which she paints a picture of his beautiful appearance. The argument is that the twelfth century is a time during which a feminine perspective enters into the Graeco-Roman rhetorical tradition, with Anna's work and the novel *Hysmine and Hysminias*, as well as *Partonopeu de Blois*. The chapter also adds a description of masculine beauty from *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*. In this way, my aim is to demonstrate how the *Alexiad* could be read in relation to the novel and romance genres, and with what insights such a reading could contribute. I think that if we read these intertexts as relating to each other, we can gain an increased understanding of the romance and novel of the twelfth century, and do new interpretations of how feminine subjectivity is articulated in the narratives.

In texts of rhetoricians from the first centuries CE, a distinction is discernible between, as Ruth Webb writes, 'a plain statement of facts ("narration") and a narration with *enargeia*', a distinction between '*diēgēsis* and *ekphrasis*'.³²⁹ *Enargeia*'s effect is to create an intended imagery in the mind of the listener, to arouse emotions, and to persuade.³³⁰ According to Quintilian's description, *enargeia* can be explained as the connection between oration and sight:

³²⁹ Webb 2016, 88.

³³⁰ Webb 2016, 88.

He [Quintilian] shows how important the ability to ‘place before the eyes’ was for the orator who wished to make his audience feel involved in the events of the case. More than that, he explains how the orator should achieve *enargeia* through the use of mental images (*phantasiai*). The way in which he describes this harnessing of the power of the imagination provides the missing link between language and sight and explains a great deal about how *enargeia* was thought to work.³³¹

The aim of the rhetorician aspiring to *enargeia* is to make the audience feel close to the narrated events and, thus, in evoking emotional engagement in the listener, the rhetorician can persuade him or her.

Enargeia is connected to *ekphrasis*. Both these rhetorical devices stand in contrast to a purely informative narration. Rather than adding up events in a story, *ekphrasis* evokes a visual image of an event or object in the mind of the audience. It thus aims to engage the audience with what is being told, but the rhetorician’s ability to engage with it is equally important:

This openness of history, its availability as matter for manipulation, also underlines the irreverent re-imaginings of the classical tradition [...]. One particular manifestation of this attitude towards the past is the habit of reading for the sensation of being plunged into the scene or transported back into the moment [...]. This habit of responding imaginatively to the written or spoken word forms a vital part of the background to the teaching and use of *ekphrasis* in rhetorical contexts [...].³³²

The ability to make an audience respond emotionally to a beautiful scene or object, thus attests to rhetorical skill. In this sense, articulation in itself can affirm status and power.³³³ In his reading of Lucian, Goldhill finds

³³¹ Webb 2016, 88.

³³² Webb 2016, 19.

³³³ See Goldhill 2001, 161.

‘something of a materialist model for the effect of beauty on a person, and [...] the contrast between proper looking, proper speech, and mere seeing’.³³⁴ *Seeing* is thus not *looking*, and the level of cultivation, or the capacity of *looking*, is articulated through educated speech.

To Look is to Desire

In the novel, looking at a beautiful other relates to rhetorical *ekphrasis* and *enargeia*. As Goldhill notes in his reading of *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Kleitophon cannot stop imagining Leukippe in his mind after having seen her: ‘because of desire “Impressions of Leucippe face me all the time”’: πάντοτε Λευκίππην φαντάζομαι. Now φαντάζομαι and the noun φαντασία, normally translated “impression”, are central terms in Stoic (and other materialist) theories of vision [...]’.³³⁵ In Kleitophon’s description of the effect that looking at Leukippe has on him, he can be described as an ‘expert viewer’ in Hellenistic society: ‘sophisticated, educated, cultivated’.³³⁶ Articulation and gaze thus go hand in hand, linked together as two essential components in the making of a cultivated man during the period of the Second Sophistic.

The ideal of rhetorical mastery in antiquity is a masculine one. In the competitive hierarchy between rhetoricians, winners and losers are defined in gendered terms: the worse the speaker, the more effeminate.³³⁷ Kleitophon – being the narrator of the story – explicitly uses the word *phantasia* in mentioning his internal imagery of Leukippe, which shows that he knows how to *appreciate* beauty, creating the scene as though Leukippe was indeed in his presence: ‘*Phantasia* is the central term for the impact the external world makes on the viewing subject and produces

³³⁴ Goldhill 2001, 161.

³³⁵ Goldhill 2001, 168.

³³⁶ Goldhill 2001, 168.

³³⁷ See Gleason 1995. Gleason describes for example how ‘the rhetorical skill was considered a definitive test of masculine excellence’; Gleason 1995, 160.

articulate reaction'.³³⁸ In his utterance, Kleitophon 'evokes a theoretical perspective on the eye's work'.³³⁹

Considering the importance of the rhetorician (and the audience) being able to visualize that which is described in words, the darkness in the tale of Cupid and Psyche, as it is composed in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, could be said to stand out.³⁴⁰ In this story, Cupid enters the dark bedroom and makes Psyche his wife. The audience of the story, as well as the character Cupid, are aware that Psyche is beautiful. Psyche's beauty is, after all, the reason why she finds herself in the castle in the first place. However, the darkness hinders Psyche from looking at Cupid; in other words, she is prevented from appreciating his beauty. She is hindered therefore from desiring him back; consequently, she is obstructed from the discourse of desire, from obtaining her own erotic education, or pursuing *paideia*. More generally, this erotic scene is not narrated as reciprocal; Psyche appears to lack both agency and influence regarding the turn of events as they first meet. Her lost virginity is rather described in terms of a violation.³⁴¹

Yet, the narration continues by stating that these frequent visits paid by Cupid to Psyche are pleasurable to her, as she grows accustomed to them.³⁴² Perhaps one could thus see in this relationship the difference between cultivated appreciation and mere indulgence, in comparison to Goldhill's description of how, in Lucian, there is a difference between the eye of the educated man and that of the poor man: the educated man actively *looks*, the poor man passively *sees*. As Cupid has the ability to look

³³⁸ Goldhill 2001, 168.

³³⁹ Goldhill 2001, 169.

³⁴⁰ To be sure, darkness is a well-known theme in erotic narratives in the Greek context, but in consideration of sight's importance, the theme opens up the possibility to narrate desire in different ways from the conventional rhetoric of vision.

³⁴¹ 'At once voices-in-waiting in the bedchamber cared for the new bride whose virginity was ended' (Statim voces cubiculo praestolatae novam nuptam interfectae virginitatis currant), *The Golden Ass*, V.4.

³⁴² 'This happened thus for a long time, and, as nature provides, her own condition through constant habituation won her over to its pleasure' (Haec diutino tempore sic agebantur. Atque, ut est natura redditum, novitas per assiduam consuetudinem delectationem ei commendarat), *The Golden Ass*, V.4.

at Psyche, he is able to desire her. Psyche, for her part, enjoys the encounters with her strange lover, to which she has grown accustomed, but she is not described as *desiring* him. It is only after she has brought light into the bedroom that she becomes aroused. After having *looked* at him, Psyche experiences desire.

When Psyche violates the prohibition of seeing Cupid, she is separated from him and must strive to have him returned to her life. During this time, Cupid is passive, remaining secluded. One could say that when Cupid is active, Psyche is passive, and vice versa. Reciprocity in the novel is present in the sense that both characters seem to desire one another, but not simultaneously. Reciprocity is thus represented as turn-taking; one desires the other, and then the other way around. One is subject and the other is object. As represented in the narrative of Cupid and Psyche, reciprocity is constructed as the constant interchange between these roles. In this sense, *pothos*, as Whitmarsh analyses it in the Greek novel, can be interpreted as stirring the Latin novel's plot. Accordingly, the plot is motivated by 'multiple modes of desire'.³⁴³

Furthermore, *pothos* can be considered as relating to *enargeia*, in the sense that it creates a narrative desire in the audience's imagination. According to Whitmarsh, *pothos* creates 'a space for narrative potentiality', which *energeia* can also be said to do in the minds of the audience.³⁴⁴ The Cupid and Psyche story, as it is narrated in Apuleius' novel, is composed in the manner that Whitmarsh describes in his study of the ancient Greek novel: in the narrative, *pothos* works as 'a metanarrative force, a cipher for the romantic plot'.³⁴⁵ It is the desire, or the yearning for what is absent, that stirs the narrative onwards towards satisfaction, and desire is aroused by the sight of the other.

Apuleius' disputed Platonism could further explain this narrative construction. In his seminal article on Plato's definition of love, Gregory Vlastos argues that, according to Plato, the individual in love is

³⁴³ Whitmarsh 2011, 139.

³⁴⁴ Whitmarsh 2011, 142.

³⁴⁵ Whitmarsh 2011, 142.

egocentric.³⁴⁶ Eros is evoked by beautiful persons as well as by impersonal objects or projects; one loves ‘holy-images’; unrecognising them as desiring subjects themselves, Vlastos argues, or as persons worth desiring *for their own sake*.³⁴⁷ The importance of Platonism in *The Golden Ass* is well-known.³⁴⁸ Moreover, the use of light in the Cupid and Psyche story, in order to look at (and desire) an object, can also be connected to the ocularcentrism of ancient Greek tradition. Ocularcentrism has always shaped Greek literature, Morales argues.³⁴⁹ Accordingly, vision plays a significant role in ancient Greece. In *Leukippe and Kleitophon* and in *The Golden Ass*, sight is of crucial significance. In Morales’ analysis, as the act of looking is turned into narration, it tends to result in a masculine gaze fixed on an objectified woman. Looking is gendered.³⁵⁰

In the Cupid and Psyche tale, we could describe the act of looking in similar terms. Looking means having control over the gaze. The one who looks objectifies the other. Cupid sees Psyche, but she is not allowed to see him. Their relationship depends on him objectifying her, and her not objectifying him. When Psyche lights up the room she in turn objectifies Cupid, and is filled with desire:

Tunc Psyche, et corporis et animi alioquin infirma, fati tamen saevitia sumministrante viribus roboratur, et prolata lucerna et arrepta novacula sexum audacia mutatur. Sed cum primum luminis

³⁴⁶ In his article, Vlastos emphasises how Plato’s theory of love becomes tricky when concerning the love of persons: ‘What we are to love in persons is the “image” of the Idea in them’; Vlastos (1969) 1981, 31. Regarding Vlastos’ analysis of Plato’s egocentric love; see Dypedokk Johnsen 2016, 16.

³⁴⁷ Vlastos (1969) 1981, 32. F. C. White argues on the contrary, that one finds the view of loving people for their own sake in Plato’s theory; White 1990, 397.

³⁴⁸ Harrison describes the Cupid and Psyche-tale in *The Golden Ass* as echoing Plato’s dialogues, stating that the tale appears as modelled on the *Symposium* and Diotima’s lesson to Socrates: ‘Here is an inserted tale in which a woman gives an account of love and the soul, Cupid (*Cupido/Amor*) and Psyche (*ψυχή*, soul), a Platonic model for the narrative frame’; Harrison 2000, 225. Moreover, Carl C. Schlam writes that one can interpret in Apuleius’ narrative recollections of Platonic ‘myth’, referring to Plato’s descriptions of love in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*; Schlam 1992, 95.

³⁴⁹ Morales 2004, 8–9.

³⁵⁰ Morales 2004, 24.

oblatione tori secreta claruerunt, videt omnium ferarum mitissimam dulcissimamque bestiam, ipsum illum Cupidinem formosum deum formose cubantem. Cuius aspectu lucernae quoque lumen hilaratum increbruit et acuminis sacrilegi novaculam paenitebat. At vero Psyche tanto aspectu deterrita et impos animi, marcido pallore defecta tremensque desedit in imos poplites et ferrum quaerit abscondere, sed in suo pectore. Quod profecto fecisset, nisi ferrum timore tanti flagitii manibus temerariis delapsum evolasset. Iamque lassa, salute defecta, dum saepius divini vultus intuetur pulchritudinem, recreatur animi.³⁵¹

Then Psyche, though naturally weak in both body and spirit, was fed with strength by the cruelty of Fate. She brought out the lamp, seized the razor, and in her boldness changed her sex. But as soon as the bed's mysteries were illumined as the lamp was brought near, she beheld that wild creature who is the gentlest and sweetest beast of all, Cupid himself, the beautiful god beautifully sleeping. At the sight of him even the light of the lamp quickened in joy, and the razor repented its sacrilegious sharpness. But Psyche was terrified at this marvellous sight and put out of her mind; overcome with the pallor of exhaustion she sank faint and trembling to her knees. She tried to hide the weapon – in her own heart. And she would certainly have done so, had not the blade slipped out and flown away from her reckless hands in its horror of so atrocious a deed. She was now weary and overcome by the sense of being safe, but as she gazed repeatedly at the beauty of that divine countenance her spirit began to revive.

As Psyche takes action to look at her mysterious lover, she is described as acting against her sex. Her act is thus bold not merely in consideration of the contract between her and Cupid, but more broadly considering that she acts beyond gendered expectations. The text then explains what Psyche indeed sees, after which it lets us know how Psyche responds to the same sight that the audience is supposed to visualise inside his or her mind. Psyche's act of looking awakens her spirit, yet her reaction implies an inability to handle the beauty she sees. Her corporeal reaction

³⁵¹ *The Golden Ass*, V.22.

illustrates an uneducated reaction to the sight of beauty. Psyche indeed sees and, thus, desires, but she seems unable to *appreciate* what she sees in a manner fitting to a cultivated man. Her acts go against her sex, the text tells us. Yet, Psyche remains a woman who does not perform the behaviour of educated desire that was idealised during the time of the Second Sophistic, the period during which Apuleius' novel was composed.

As Cupid now transforms from a desiring subject into a desired object, he leaves Psyche. In terms of Vlastos' argument regarding Platonic love, we could say that their love is egocentric. To look signifies a power struggle over the status of subject in relation to the other. This in itself implies an unwillingness to be objectified. Therefore, considering sight as a gendered issue, as it is practised in rhetoric during the first centuries CE, we see the presence of a gender hierarchy, favourable to men and unfavourable to women.

Yet, as Whitmarsh underlines in his study on the ancient Greek novel, in any one narrative – however normative – more than one perspective can often be discerned. Multiple modes of desire motivate the plot.³⁵² In Apuleius' novel, Psyche sees and desires the man in her bedroom. Her journey towards having him restored to her presence can be read as though she is fantasising; as though she is picturing the beloved object in her mind, and yearning for what she has lost. As the novel's audience is encouraged to engage emotionally with what they are hearing from a skilful performer, they may share the yearning along with the narrative agent. They see the potentiality of satisfaction along with her: the reunion with Cupid. In Apuleius' novel, many perspectives take turns in being dominant – multiple modes of desire coexist. With the Psyche character, one finds the articulation of a feminine desire that functions as a metanarrative force. However, the story is indeed normative in terms of a masculine ideal, establishing a hierarchy in regard to the characters' cultivation of their respective gender identity. Psyche sees and desires, yet she lacks control over her gaze in a sophisticated sense. Unlike

³⁵² Morales also discusses the ancient novel as phenomenological rather than teleological or normative; see Morales 2008, 43.

Kleitophon in Tatius' novel, who explains his *phantasia* explicitly, and can thus be interpreted as representing a desire belonging to educated theories of vision, in Apuleius' novel, Psyche loses her self-control.

Appropriating Femininity

As already noted, in *Partonopeu de Blois*, the conventional gender roles of the Graeco-Roman tradition more generally are elaborated, and the gender roles of the Cupid and Psyche story in Apuleius' novel specifically, are reversed. Melior takes the role of Cupid, and Partonopeu that of Psyche. The romance's gender shift transforms Melior into the narrative agent, through being a desiring subject, if we allow ourselves to read the Old French romance with the help of Whitmarsh's reading of *pothos* in the ancient novel. Accordingly, Melior's desire is the main cipher for the romantic plot. Analogously with Cupid, Melior brings her beloved to her magical palace. She seduces him, by arranging the encounter between them to take place. Partonopeu, similarly to Psyche, is not allowed to see his lover. Nevertheless, when he visits his homeland, Partonopeu's mother (the king's sister) and the bishop of Paris convince him to break Melior's rule and light up the bedroom.³⁵³ This adds a political layer to the adaptation of the myth; the mother and the bishop could be viewed as symbols of the French monarchy and church, who both mistakenly consider Melior, the Byzantine empress, to be of demonic nature. They are, however, proven to be wrong. As a punishment, Melior does what Cupid does to his disobedient beloved: she ends the relationship. In accordance with the Psyche allusion, Partonopeu then searches for his beloved, desiring to revive their relationship. In the end, they marry, and Partonopeu is accepted as the new ruler of the narrated imaginary Byzantine space,

³⁵³ In Apuleius' tale, Psyche is encouraged to light up the room by her jealous sisters. Furthermore, the lack of Psyche's razor in the twelfth-century romance has been explained in terms of it not suiting a courtly text. According to Carver, 'one could excuse the absence of a "razor" in the poem by an appeal to chivalric values – the notion of Partonopeu drawing a blade on a sleeping woman might have seemed incongruous'; Carver 2007, 98.

in comparison to the way in which Psyche is married into the divine world in the ancient myth.³⁵⁴

Without studying textual details, it is quite clear that, by the use of myth and gender-role reversals, *Partonopeu de Blois* becomes a narrative that encompasses feminine agency and power, both erotic and political.³⁵⁵ The reworking of the Cupid and Psyche story, in this elaborated fashion, should be considered in terms of how a text, by means of its creation, is assimilated into a space, both physical (a courtly space) and intertextual (a voice inside a literary tradition). By imitating, or reactualising, tradition, meaning is produced with and in the making of the literary product.

By elaborating the Byzantine erotic narrative, such as the one in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, and the Cupid and Psyche story (probably transmitted to the poet through *The Golden Ass*), *Partonopeu de Blois* becomes a story of reciprocity between the main characters. Partonopeu is a desiring subject comparable to Hysminias in the Byzantine novel, and Melior is a desiring subject comparable to Cupid in Apuleius' novel. As suggested, Melior becomes a desiring subject by the fusion of two literary figures into the same character: the chaste maiden and the female instructive seducer, both of whom are present in the Greek novel tradition. Due to ideals of chastity, which were vital during both ancient and medieval times, the female protagonist is required to resist the desiring, male, protagonist's erotic advances. Arguably, this explains the violence in the erotic scene in the Old French romance. However, Melior's arrangements enabling their intercourse to take place and her suggested erotic instructions complicate the text and invite us to reinterpret both the female character's apparently chaste behaviour and the romance's perspectives on ideals of chastity and women's prescribed passivity, which are transmitted through literary tradition.

Partonopeu's and Hysminias' respective acts of desire turn their female counterparts into their opponents: they advance their erotic actions by pushing against the female characters' resistance. In both narratives,

³⁵⁴ Deveraux interprets the romance as describing 'the beneficial effects of Western domination' in the relations between the East and West; see Deveraux 2012, 76.

³⁵⁵ See also Bruckner 1993b, 123.

the maidens need to be defeated before the male characters can achieve sexual satisfaction. In this sense, one may argue that the act of defeating the maidens constitutes an integral part of both stories' male characters' sexual satisfaction.

The erotic passage in *Partonopeu de Blois* could perhaps best be described in terms of a paradox. As the sexual activity ends, Melior's described heartbeats could be read either as analogous to Hysminias' and Partonopeu's reactions, as sexual satisfaction, or they could be read as the expression of an oppositional, disapproving reaction. The scene can be explained with reference to the Greek novel tradition, which explains not only Melior's approval of Partonopeu's violent behaviour, but also her guidance of it as well. At the same time, the narrated scene displays sexual violence from the feminine perspective. As Partonopeu touches Melior, his sensation of desire is described, but so is her internal unwilling reaction. Let us look at the verses again:

Vers li se traist, et mist se main | Sor son costé, soef et plain. | Tant l'a trové plain et craset, | Por poi que trestos n'en remet. | Tant l'a soef et cras trové | Que tot en a le sens torblé. | Quant la dame a se main sentue, | Od repentaille le remue. | Tot soavet en estraignant | L'a reboutee sor l'enfant. | Vers lui se torne, et dist : 'Laissiés! | Grans folie est que vos caciés'.³⁵⁶

He moves towards her, puts his hand on her waist, soft and smooth. He finds it so smooth that he cannot lift his hand from it – it is simply too sweet and tender, and causes him to lose all his senses. As the lady feels his hand, she feels regret and pushes it back. Softly she lifts his hand from her, and she turns towards the child and says: 'Stop that! Great madness hides inside you'.

As suggested, the erotic narrative of *Partonopeu de Blois* can fruitfully be interpreted as connected to the Greek novel tradition. Without such a consideration, I believe that the dual character of Melior's conduct leaves the receiver of the work with questions. It is through these intertextual

³⁵⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1267–1278.

connections that the scene becomes an erotic situation of reciprocity. The Graeco-Roman literary tradition offers some erotic narrative models, but, as we have seen, the medieval narratives under scrutiny create variations on these models, in their reception of the ancient novel, responding to the same tradition that, one may argue, determines their respective compositions. In this way, tradition is transformed at the same time as it is prolonged.

Kristeva suggests that, as the courtly love code evolves from poetic to narrative form, love loses its abstract aspect and instead becomes more violent and possessive.³⁵⁷ Accordingly, the desired object is given increased narrative space, which might explain how, in the quoted passage, the female character is given a perspective of her own. The form of a narrative, as opposed to lyric, makes it possible for multiple modes of desire to coexist; as Whitmarsh puts it regarding the ancient Greek novel: several perspectives and wills can be articulated inside one story. In contrast to how women can be interpreted as symbols in courtly literature, narratives make it possible to give the female character agency and intention.³⁵⁸ This possibility, gained with the narrative romance form, can be argued to add a new sort of ‘realism’ to the story, considering how the multiple perspectives may present reactions and feelings that seem to undercut feelings of objectification; with the narrative, women’s role as symbol is thus destabilised, by imbuing the symbol with embodied subjectivity in the narrative.

In the quoted passage, the desired lady’s reaction to the man’s erotic advances is articulated, not as a part of a social game or expected conduct, but as an inner thought: she feels regret, *od repentaille*, and then acts according to her contemplation. The feminine object, which we can trace back to the ancient literary tradition, is here animated by flesh and blood. *Partonopeu de Blois*’ approach to narrating Melior’s view of the event

³⁵⁷ Kristeva 1983, 358–359.

³⁵⁸ Regarding women as symbols in courtly literature, Ferrante writes about the instrumental aspect of love, for the man: ‘Lyric and romance poets are concerned with the effect of love on the man [...]. Love can provide a man with a new and nobler identity and inspire him to great deeds [...]’; Ferrante 1975, 65.

turns the female character into the focaliser. The perception is dependent on Melior in this scene; hers is the perceiving body, to use Bal's formulation.³⁵⁹ The lady is now presented as a human being rather than an object of masculine desire, affected by the acts done to her.

Thus, the narrated heartbeats, following the act's conclusion, can be read as the expression of a distressed reaction to the previous violence. Perhaps the way of nuancing the traditional violent narrative of the literary tradition, through the psychological aspect of Melior's reactions to it, could explain something of how the romance's (actual) audience might have received it. 'The degree to which one is familiar with what one sees also influences perception', to quote Bal.³⁶⁰ The alternation between perspectives in the erotic scene could be interpreted as the representation of an experience that is shared by women during the time of the romance's composition, which might mean that this common experience could have been recognised in the female character's articulated *repentaille*, by a potential (actual) audience of women.

That being said, Melior's final heartbeats could, or rather should, be read as an indication of her experience of having been appreciated. Moreover, as a version of Cupid, she arranged for the event to take place and tells Partonopeu that everything that happened was according to her arrangements and plan.³⁶¹

The romance seems to introduce several perspectives at once, communicating with an audience where matters of sexuality could have been viewed differently, depending on the gender of the listener in the audience. Partonopeu can be said to represent a man who desires a woman in a courtly context, and Melior can in turn be described as representing a woman living in a culture of masculine violence, as well as a desiring subject within a tradition dominated by men. Yet, with Rabinowitz' theory of audiences in mind, we could see that by presenting both the masculine and feminine perspective, the authorial audience is required to

³⁵⁹ Bal (1985) 2009, 145.

³⁶⁰ Bal (1985) 2009, 145.

³⁶¹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1308–1414.

understand both the male and female character, in order to understand the narrative.³⁶²

As Beauvoir explains the asymmetric relationship between a man and a woman in heterosexual relationships, love is described as always implying a specific dualism between a subject and an object.³⁶³ As a subject, the woman finds herself frustrated due to her prescribed immanence. From her object position in the world, she offers herself to what she desires rather than aspiring to obtain it herself. The woman therefore doubles herself into a masculine subject and a feminine object.³⁶⁴ Accordingly, the woman desires man's desire (of her). Irigaray argues that women, determined by a discourse dominated by men, find themselves becoming inverted mirrorings of the subject, a negation.³⁶⁵ Women, accordingly, take a mimetic position.³⁶⁶ Arguably, Melior's ambiguous character can be better understood in the light of these modern theories of femininity, in the sense that she appears to *perform* femininity, appropriating the feminine role within the gender discourse. She seems to represent an object of desire for Partonopeu in his initiation into love, which corresponds to the erotic Greek novel tradition as well as the courtly code: she is the chaste maiden protagonist, who awakens the male protagonist's desire and then rejects his advances. She also represents a subject who arranges intercourse with her desired object, which in turn corresponds to the Cupid and Psyche myth, translated into the Latin tradition, and to the female seducer of the Greek novel tradition. The imitation that Irigaray describes can thus be interpreted in the case of Melior's agency in the scene. She appears as the subject's reversed mirror image, however, in fact this is nothing but an act; her performance is a method to achieve her own aims.

Melior thus appears to represent a subject position that normally excludes women, at the same time as remaining the representation of an

³⁶² Rabinowitz 1977, 126–134.

³⁶³ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 519.

³⁶⁴ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 520.

³⁶⁵ Irigaray 1977, 76.

³⁶⁶ Lehtinen 2014, 92.

object of desire, according to prescribed gender norms. She may also be interpreted as actively arranging her own passivity, in relation to her beloved. As already suggested, the female character can be interpreted as a fusion between the chaste female protagonist of the Greek novel tradition, and the more experienced, female seducer from the same tradition. It seems as though Melior acts in accordance with these two roles, which in combination make her both the protagonist of the story and its desiring agent. In this sense, the romance can be described as producing a femininity that exists in the literary tradition, but in the conscious use of its stereotypes, it formulates a new perspective on how one should perceive the tradition itself. By imitating circulating motifs and narrative structures, *Partonopeu de Blois* can be said to expose a gender hierarchy that, from a feminine perspective, is seen in an unfavourable light.³⁶⁷ In other words, Melior can be read as taking two positions at the same time: a masculine and a feminine position of subject and object.

Yet, although Melior is essentially the desiring agent in the story, this does not prevent Partonopeu from also being presented as a desiring character. As we have seen, in the bedroom scene, Partonopeu's desire is also described, as is his erotic agency. Masculine desire, in Beauvoir's view, coincides with his transcendence. A man does not see himself as an object. For him, being means activity and subjectivity, reaching beyond oneself.³⁶⁸ From this perspective, Partonopeu is arguably interpretable as a subject who is unaware of himself as being objectified. Accordingly, from Partonopeu's perspective, he is the subject in the duality of love as it is described by Beauvoir. Nevertheless, considering his role and function in the overall narrative, it is Melior who has the subject position. By acting according to her desire, Melior reaches beyond herself, and advances the story. In the Old French romance narrative, we thus see multiple modes of desire stirring the romantic plot. Yet, there appears to exist a hierarchy in terms of the modes' importance in the narrative

³⁶⁷ This can be seen in Gérard Genette's description of 'pastiche', according to which a literary work can imitate a traditional style and thus expose this tradition from another angle, by mere reactualisation; see Genette 1982, 107.

³⁶⁸ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 521.

progression. Thus, in its operation within different intertexts and contexts, this medieval narrative seems to demonstrate the equality between subjects that Beauvoir described as desirable, but which she could not see in a world where the fixed positions between object and subject determine men's domination over women. The articulation of Melior's subjectivity in the romance can be interpreted as a matter of gender subversion: Partonopeu is a desiring masculine subject in the text, but Melior is not an object of immanence. As they are both desiring subjects, the gender hierarchy embedded in the style imitated by the romance is destabilised.

According to Beauvoir, women's purpose is to capture men's gaze; their beauty indicates the passivity of immanence.³⁶⁹ By imposing darkness, both Cupid and Melior refuse their respective beloved ones the ability to objectify them. Neither Partonopeu nor the audience has any knowledge of Melior's beauty. Melior's subject position is based on both her agency and her ability to prevent objectification.

Compared with the use of the *domna* in Western medieval representations of women's power, Melior does not manifest a detachment from femininity. In fact, she appears to appropriate the role of a passive courtly woman. The reciprocal relationship between Melior and Partonopeu could perhaps be described in terms of sexual difference. As a contrast, the *domna* is considered comparable to men in terms of power only because she lacks femininity. She transcends her femininity, so-to-speak. Melior, I believe, should not be interpreted as lacking femininity. Her role as a courtly lady is not really threatened. Thus, her arrangement of the sexual encounter can be interpreted as being composed within the discourse of erotic conduct: Partonopeu must be the initiator of their intercourse. Her initiation is concealed during the time when they have intercourse, both from the male character and from the audience of the romance. The courtly lady is not ideally a desiring agent, in the sense that she ought not to respond to the lover's praise or requests. Ideally, the courtly lady is passive.

³⁶⁹ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 521.

Hysmine in *Hysmine and Hysminias* has agency, as does Melior. Melior can be said to be an agent in the narrative due to how she embodies Cupid from Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. *Hysmine and Hysminias* also makes gender inversions compared to its main ancient influence *Leukippe and Kleitophon*. In Nilsson's comparison of the two novels, she finds that Kleitophon and Hysminias 'find themselves in different situations in the openings of the novels: Kleitophon falls in love at first sight and slowly convinces Leukippe to fall in love with him, whereas Hysminias has to be convinced by Hysmine, Kratisthenes, and even Eros himself'.³⁷⁰ Hysmine seems to take the role of the desiring subject in relation to Hysminias. As Nilsson points out: 'The traditional roles seem to have been reversed, the heroine Hysmine acts like the hero Kleitophon'.³⁷¹

By being the erotic initiator, Hysmine is the narrative agent who advances the plot. This seems astonishing in relation to the social context of gender hierarchy during the Middle Ages. Hysmine takes the subject position in relation to Hysminias, and he plays the role of object in terms of sexual conduct; he is harassed by two women, 'whereas Hysmine is never threatened by another man'.³⁷² In this regard, Hysminias can be read as being oppressed. Yet, in many ways, Hysmine is also forced to suppress her sexual agency. To quote Adam Goldwyn, any 'attempt to express her sexuality is met with strong rebuke'.³⁷³ Even so, she does express her desires to her lover, something that makes her 'unique among all the heroines of the Byzantine novel'.³⁷⁴ Hysmine seems to be the very opposite of *Leukippe and Kleitophon*'s female character Leukippe. *Hysmine and Hysminias*' use of ancient tradition enables the elaboration of gender roles and feminine agency. Hysmine is in some ways an adaptation of the male character in *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, which creates a subversive gender shift in the narrative. Yet, all the while adopting a

³⁷⁰ Nilsson 2001, 250.

³⁷¹ Nilsson 2001, 250.

³⁷² Nilsson 2001, 250.

³⁷³ Goldwyn 2018, 119.

³⁷⁴ Goldwyn 2018, 119.

seemingly ‘masculine’ agency, Hysmine needs to adjust to a situation where this agency is not accepted, concealing it from her parents.

In studying the Komnenian novels’ adaptation of the ancient Greek ones, Corinne Jouanno finds *Hysmine and Hysminias* to be playing with the dominant ideology in ways that expose an existing discrepancy between norms and practice: ‘The gap between ideology and practice was indeed very striking at Byzantium’.³⁷⁵ She argues that Makrembolites’ work can be read ‘as an allusion to, and even a protest against, this gap between Byzantine norms and actual way of living’.³⁷⁶ In Hysmine’s initiation of her relationship with Hysminias, one can see that her behaviour does not correlate with social expectations. Her father has commanded her to serve the wine, which she does. However, even as she does what he demands, there is another scene taking place simultaneously, of which her parents have no knowledge. Silently, as has been noted, Hysmine communicates her erotic desire to Hysminias by using tactility, playing with his hands.³⁷⁷ Jouanno describes this way of narrating two activities at once in terms of the novel’s recognition of social codes, as well as reluctance to obey them: ‘The novelist often seems to deride the conventional, stereotyped character of the social code, to which one usually paid mere lip-service’.³⁷⁸ Ideological expectations appear to affect how Hysmine acts in the narrative. She obeys her father’s command but, nevertheless, her will appears to also affect how her agency works; making erotic advances towards the object of her desires.

As already suggested, the gender subversion in the narrative of *Par-tonopeu de Blois*, represented in the female character Melior, can be seen as a result of elaborating upon the literary tradition. As a version of Cupid,

³⁷⁵ Jouanno, 2006, p. 162.

³⁷⁶ Jouanno, 2006, p. 162.

³⁷⁷ ‘For the maiden both offered me the cup and kept hold of it and though she was apparently offering it, in reality she was holding on to it. So there was a contest between our hands, and the hand of the virgin girl is victorious over the hand of the virgin herald’ (ἡ γάρ μοι παρθένος καὶ παρετίθετο τὸ ποτήριον καὶ παρακατεῖχεν αὐτό· καὶ τῷ μὲν σχήματι παρετίθετο, τῇ δ’ ἀληθείᾳ κατεῖχεν. Ἔρις οὖν ἐν χερσὶ, καὶ χεὶρ παρθένου κόρης νικᾷ χεῖρα κήρυκος ἀνδρὸς παρθένου), *Hysmine and Hysminias*, I.9.2–3. (see above)

³⁷⁸ Jouanno 2006, 162.

Melior holds a subject position in the narrative. She is both a desiring and a narrative agent. Her agency can be described as constructed through appropriations of feminine conventions. Her desire is represented in feminine rather than masculine terms. She never quite transcends her femininity; she does not reject the femininity into which she was born, but rather uses it instrumentally in order to gain control.

The same could be said of Hysmine. Although she is an active character, a desiring subject, she acts from within a gender discourse where passivity is prescribed for women. In the Komnenian novels, Jouanno argues, there is not ‘a single case of a masculine woman’.³⁷⁹ The Komnenian novels are, accordingly, composed within a conservative context, enhancing the traditional roles between men and women. Goldwyn writes that: ‘as the romances were written by men and often narrated by the men within the story, the true interiority of the women experiencing these advances remains unknowable’.³⁸⁰ It is indeed, as we have seen, Hysminias’ path towards knowledge about Eros that is the most clearly narrated erotic motif in the novel. It is his refusal to heed Hysmine’s resistance against him, his conquest over her, that makes him a man – it is a way for him to perform masculinity.³⁸¹ The room for Hysmine’s agency is thus limited, not only by her parents’ rule but also by Hysminias’ masculine behaviour towards her. Yet, she is still described as expressing her sexuality and acting according to her own desires. Indeed, in the novel one finds multiple modes of desire, and Hysmine’s desire exists simultaneously with the desire of Hysminias. As a woman, she appears to need secret strategies in order to act according to her desire. Jouanno argues that Hysmine is not a masculine woman ‘although she shows herself rather more enterprising than her male counterpart, and several times distinguishes herself by her acuteness’.³⁸² The acute and enterprising role that Hysmine is described as having, I would like to stress, is constructed by means of appropriations of femininity; it is not *in spite of* her femininity that Hysmine

³⁷⁹ Jouanno 2006, 162.

³⁸⁰ Goldwyn 2018, 123.

³⁸¹ Goldwyn 2018, 123.

³⁸² Jouanno 2006, 151–152.

embodies these qualities, but *because of* her active and subversive use of it in the narrative. In the passage discussed above, in which Hysmine is represented as a character who makes erotic advances, she is described as doing this by appropriating the feminine role into which she was born. The female character orients herself within a limited social sphere; Hysmine can be interpreted as a subject in a gendered social structure, where the agency that she exhibits does not seem to be allowed or suitable.

Partonopeu de Blois and *Hysmine and Hysminias* can both be read, with feminist theory, as at once reflecting and challenging both the social order and relations of power in courtly culture. From Irigaray's perspective, in a social order of men, femininity is produced as the subject's negation, or from Beauvoir's perspective, women desire what men desire: they desire to be desired (objects). Even if this form of patriarchal power relation indeed finds expression in twelfth-century narratives, Melior and Hysmine both seem to represent reactions against it. Both female characters seem to act according to a transcendent desire. They are both literary representations of women affected by a gender discourse that is inherent in the literary tradition, but both manifest a certain complexity in terms of their agency, which nuances the asymmetry. Among the female characters, the passive role of the chaste woman is manifested as a performance, a cultural construct. Melior and Hysmine both act as chaste maidens within their communities, concealing their sexual agency.

So, Melior and Hysmine both have agency in their respective narratives, which might defy literary conventions and social expectations. Both these characters exemplify how a feminine subject position can be written in a literary tradition and social context that conventionally does not really acknowledge it.

By elaborating upon traditional literary roles, both *Partonopeu de Blois* and *Hysmine and Hysminias* seem to create new possibilities for the female protagonists to act in the narratives. However, the behaviour that we have interpreted as subversive performed by the female characters is met with resistance in both stories. In the next section, I will add Anna Komnene's description of Bohemond to the analysis, along with the description of Partonopeu's beauty in the romance, in order to examine how

the *Alexiad* combines the feminine gaze with rhetorical discourse. Then, the analysis is positioned in relation to a discussion on representations of the objectifications of men in *Partonopeu de Blois* and its suggested intertexts *Hysmine and Hysminias* and, to some extent, *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*.

Speaking of Beautiful Men

In the texts under scrutiny in this thesis, feminine perspectives prove to be important for the texts on a broader level. In this section focus is put on the objectification of men as related to esteemed rhetorical discourse. As the feminine gaze is articulated, it can be seen as changing rhetorical conditions. From being a masculine domain, a feminine voice is created in the discourse of rhetoric. I believe that Anna Komnene's authorial voice is significant for this literary situation of the twelfth century. Through the combination of rhetorical knowledge and the entrance of the author's personal voice, a feminine *ego* is written into the literary tradition. This could be put in relation to the presence of feminine subjectivity in courtly romances and novels, in which feminine voices define the narrative *pothos*.

In the records of her father's deeds, Anna Komnene describes Bohemond, the Norman crusader who posed a great threat to Alexios Komnenos and the Byzantine Empire during the First Crusade.³⁸³ In her depiction of the emperor and Bohemond's meeting, Anna gives a lengthy description of the latter's appearance. I present the passage (almost) in full, since the length in itself is relevant in the discussion concerning how

³⁸³ Bohemond's beauty is described at length although he can be interpreted as, with Buckler's words, 'for Anna the *fons et origo malorum* in the Crusade and its aftermath [...]'; Buckler 1929, 469. Yet, indeed, a worthy 'antagonist' to Alexios ought to have been a worthy contestant (Buckler uses the formulation 'the two great antagonists', referring to them; Buckler 1929, 472). Moreover, Emily Albu argues that Anna praises Bohemond to such an extent that she 'implicitly places Bohemond over even her beloved father [...]'; Albu 2000; 165.

twelfth-century narratives make room for feminine perspectives of masculine beauty:

ἦν δὲ τοιοῦτος ὁ ἀνὴρ οἷος, ὡς ἐν βραχεῖ μὲν εἰπεῖν, οὐδεὶς κατ' ἐκεῖνον ὥφθη ἐν τῇ τῶν Ῥωμαίων γῇ οὔτε βάρβαρος οὔτε Ἑλλήν· θάμβος γὰρ ἦν ὀφθαλμῶν ὀρώμενος καὶ φημιζόμενος ἐκπληξίς. κατὰ μέρος δὲ ὑπογράψαι τὸ τοῦ βαρβάρου εἶδος, τοιόσδε· μακρὸς ἦν τὴν ἀναδρομὴν τοῦ σώματος ὥστε εἰς πῆχυν ἓνα μικροῦ τοὺς μακροτάτους ὑπερελαύνειν, τὴν γαστέρα συνεσταλμένος καὶ τοὺς λαγόνας, καὶ τοὺς ὦμους εὐρὺς καὶ τὰ στέρνα πλατὺς καὶ τοὺς βραχίονας καρτερός, καὶ τὴν ὅλην ἔξιν τοῦ σώματος οὔτε περιεπτισμένος οὔτε περιβριθόμενος ταῖς σαρκίν, ἀλλ' ὡς ἄριστα κεκραμένος καὶ οἶον εἰπεῖν κατὰ τὸν πολυκλείτειον κανόνα ἐνηρμοσμένος· τὰς χεῖρας ἀδρὺς καὶ τῶν ποδῶν τὰς βάσεις στερρὸς καὶ τὸν αὐχένα καὶ τὰ μετάφρενα εὐπαγής. ὑποκεκυφὼς δὲ μετρίως τῷ ἀκριβῶς αὐτὸν περιεργαζομένῳ ἐφαίνετο, οὐ τῶν νωτιαίων σπονδύλων τί πεπονθότων τῆς ράχews, ἀλλ' οὕτω μετρίως ἐκ γενετῆς, ὡς ἔοικε, τὴν διάπλασιν ἔσχηκε. τὸ χρῶμα κατὰ τὸ ἄλλο μὲν σῶμα λευκότατος, τὸ δὲ πρόσωπον μετὰ τοῦ λευκοῦ ἐπυρσοῦτο, καὶ ἡ κόμη ὑπόξανθος, ἀλλ' οὕμενον μέχρι τῶν μεταφρένων αἰωρουμένη κατὰ τοὺς ἄλλους βαρβάρους· οὐ γὰρ ἐτριχομάνει ὁ ἀνὴρ, ἀλλὰ κουρίας ἦν μέχρι τῶν ὠτων. τὸ δὲ γένειον εἴτε πυρσὸν εἴτε ἄλλο τι χρῶμα εἶχεν, οὐκ ἔχω λέγειν· ὁ ξυρὸς γὰρ ἐπεξῆλθεν αὐτὸ καὶ τιτάνου παντὸς ἀκριβέστερον· ἐδόκει δ' οὖν εἶναι καὶ τοῦτο πυρσόν. τὸ βλέμμα γλαυκὸν καὶ ἅμα θυμὸν καὶ ἐμβρίθειαν ὑποσημαῖνον. καὶ ἡ ρίς αὐτῷ καὶ ὁ μυκτῆρ ἐλεύθερον ἔπνει τὸν ἄερα, συνηγόρει δὲ τῷ μυκτῆρι διὰ τῶν στέρνων καὶ διὰ τοῦ μυκτῆρος τῇ τῶν στέρνων εὐρύτητι· ἡ γὰρ φύσις διεξόδους ἐδεδῶκει διὰ τῶν ῥινῶν τοῦ ἀπὸ τῆς καρδίας παφλάζοντος πνεύματος. ἡδὺ δέ τι καὶ ἐνεφαίνετο τῷ ἀνδρὶ τούτῳ, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἀπανταχόθεν φοβεροῖς ὑπεθραύετο· ὅλος γὰρ δι' ὅλου τοῦ σώματος ἀμεΐλικτος ἦν καὶ θηριώδης ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἀπὸ τε μεγέθους ἀπὸ τε βλέμματος· δοκεῖ μοι, καὶ ὁ γέλως αὐτοῦ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐμβρίμημα ἦν. οὕτως εἶχε ψυχῆς τε καὶ σώματος ὡς καὶ τὸν θυμὸν ἐν τούτῳ κορύσσεσθαι καὶ τὸν ἔρωτα, καὶ ἀμφοτέρους ὁρᾶν πρὸς πόλεμον.³⁸⁴

³⁸⁴ The *Alexiad*, 13.10.4–5. Throughout the thesis, I always quote Dieter R. Reinsch and Athanasios Kambylis' edition (2001).

The appearance of this man was, to put it briefly, unlike that of any other man whether Greek or barbarian seen in those days on the Roman soil. The sight of him inspired admiration, the mention of his name terror. I will describe in detail the barbarian's characteristics. His stature was such that he towered almost a full cubit over the tallest men. He was slender of waist and flanks, with broad shoulders and chest, strong in the arms; overall he was neither too slender, nor too heavily built and fleshy, but perfectly proportioned – one might say that he conformed to the ideal of Polyklitos. His hands were large, he had a good firm stance, and his neck and back were compact. If to the astute and meticulous observer he appeared to stoop slightly, that was not caused by any weakness of the vertebrae of the lower spine, but presumably there was some malformation there from birth. The skin all over his body was very pale, except for his face which was pale but with some colour to it too. His hair was light-coloured and did not go down to his shoulders as it does with other barbarians; in fact, the man had no great predilection for long hair, but cut his short, to the ears. Whether his beard was red or of any other colour I cannot say, for the razor had passed over it closely, leaving his chin smoother than any marble. However, it seemed that it would have been red. His eyes were light-blue and gave some hint of the man's spirit and dignity. He breathed freely through nostrils that were broad, worthy of his chest and a fine outlet for the breath that came in gusts for his lungs. There was a certain charm about him, but it was somewhat dimmed by the alarm his person as a whole inspired. There was a hard, savage quality in his whole aspect, due, I suppose, to his great stature and his eyes; even his laugh sounded like a threat to others. Such was his constitution, mental and physical, that in him both courage and love were armed, both ready for combat.³⁸⁵

In light of the discussion above, Anna Komnene's detailed description of Bohemond's appearance should be seen as part of the tradition of ancient rhetoric; to express the act of looking and desiring proved admirable skills. Added to this, the activity of looking and thus desiring can be seen

³⁸⁵ Throughout the thesis, I always quote Sewter's translation ([1969] 2003).

as metanarrative forces of desire in *The Golden Ass*. The ideals of rhetoric during the time of the ancient novels presumed that a good orator had proved himself to be masculine, whereas a bad orator was effeminate, feminine. Maud W. Gleason finds that:

The rhetorical performer embodied his civilization's ideal of cultivated manliness. The young men who consciously studied his [Favorinus'] rhetorical exempla unconsciously imitated the gestalt of his self-presentation. The result was, for many generations, the smooth-flowing cultural reproduction of the patterns of speech, thought, and movement appropriate to a gentleman.³⁸⁶

The performative aspect of the rhetorical tradition is worth pinning down explicitly. As literature was mainly expressed orally, the corporeality of the text was part of the transmission of literary tradition. *Paideia* is achieved by *speaking*:

Those who pursued *paideia* may have acquired their linguistic competence [...] initially by reading, but they had to display it by speaking. [...] educated men [...] did not display their level of culture by owning books, or even by having read books owned by others, but only by having absorbed books so completely that they could exhale them as speech.³⁸⁷

To speak the language of the learned and of tradition, is in this sense – i.e. the merely physical sense – a masculine activity. Anna Komnene places herself inside this tradition, preserving and renewing ancient literary and rhetorical ideals.

The quoted passage, in which Bohemond's beauty is described, can be explained in terms of *enargeia* and *ekphrasis*. As Anna writes that Bohemond's appearance inspired admiration, and then continues by giving a description of it, she proves competence in rhetorical ability to create imagery inside the mind of the audience, to arouse his or her emotions,

³⁸⁶ Gleason 1995, xxiv.

³⁸⁷ Gleason 1995, xxiv.

and to render Bohemond present in the minds of the audience, by the use of imagination. As Leonora Neville writes regarding Anna's choice of writing herself into her historical text, we note how the princess consciously performs a masculine activity: '[...] Anna was engaging in what were considered masculine activities in her culture. By participating in the Greek tradition of historiography, she performed a masculine rhetorical discourse – she wrote like a man'.³⁸⁸

Not only does Anna thus perform a masculine activity in her act of writing, but, in the description of Bohemond's appearance, she composes a digression in an ekphrastic style, painting a picture of a man for her audience to imagine. As she describes him as though he were a statue in the ideal of Polyklitos, Bohemond is rhetorically turned into a work of art, an object to behold – something beautiful to *appreciate*. Throughout the passage, the audience is encouraged to experience conflicting emotions about the alarming crusader: he arouses at once terror and admiration, and the beholder of Bohemond, according to Anna, discerns spirit and dignity, by looking at his blue eyes. Also, it is hinted that Bohemond's charms are intertwined with the threat that he poses.

Is this ekphrastic passage of Bohemond's appearance an example of when Anna, to echo Neville, *writes like man*? Considering the corporeality of performing rhetoric in the literary tradition, I find the question in itself rather obsolete. As Neville writes herself:

it seems that Anna did not want to speak consistently as a man throughout her history. Writing pseudonymously would have allowed her to compose her history in a uniformly masculine narrative voice. Anna rejected this option in favor of trying to be both 'woman and historian.' Sporadically throughout the *Alexiad*, Anna breaks with historical practice to speak with a voice her culture recognized as female.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁸ Neville 2016, 61.

³⁸⁹ Neville 2016, 61.

Anna can be said to cross the boundaries of gendered expression, performing at once masculine and feminine discourse.³⁹⁰ However, considering the performative aspect of literary composition, she can switch between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ discourse only to a certain extent. After all, in the flesh, Anna is a woman: her body is female as is her physical voice. Aware of her own body and voice, Anna still does not write under a masculine pseudonym, as Neville points out. She chooses to establish an autobiographical *ego* in her text, even though the historiographical models that she uses in her own literary composition have always been those of men.

As she applies the rhetorical ideals of *ekphrasis* and *enargeia* to her description of Bohemond, Anna can be said to effect a kind of gender subversion. In her text, the feminine voice objectifies a male body. Her audience is urged to visualise this man in front of their eyes. As the female eye is in charge of the gaze, it is indeed the female eye that is looking, and a female voice is articulated. This passage is an example of a text within which the feminine has a subject position in relation to the other, the masculine. As she takes on the tradition of rhetoric in her *Alexiad*, Anna does not ‘write like a man’, since she is not one. As she writes her own autobiographical voice into the literary tradition, Anna creates a feminine subject position within a masculine discourse, which, considering the question of her ‘masculine writing’ in modern reception, appears to risk resulting in a masculinisation of her voice. In the question of whether Anna writes like a man, the previously discussed anecdote of Beauvoir’s experience of speaking as a woman, and her voice’s relation to objective truth finds an echo: as we discuss and understand Anna as an author and historian in masculine terms, it appears as though her subjective, feminine voice becomes erased.

However, Anna still uses traditional rhetorical ideals in her descriptions, a discourse to which she – a female body – has no given place as a subject. There is not really any feminine voice in the tradition that she

³⁹⁰ Anna not only performed masculine discourse by, e.g., writing historiography, but she also arguably performed ‘feminine discourse’, such as that of grief; see Neville 2016, 61.

can use as a model. As Anna describes Bohemond's beauty in her text, and her perception of it, the audience is positioned within her perception. The effect in the audience is to visualise the man's beauty within their minds, from the perspective of a woman speaker. The premise of ancient rhetoric's competitive discourse, i.e. the greater the speaker, the more he proves himself to be masculine, and vice versa, is subverted in Anna's ekphrastic description. She follows traditional rhetorical models, yet, although proving great skill, she does not perform masculinity. With her text, Anna disrupts the hierarchy that deems poor rhetorical execution to be effeminate.

In the next section, I apply the discussion about women's gaze on beautiful men to the romance and novel genre. Anna's work of history was not written in a vacuum, but arguably during a time of flux – a time when articulations of feminine desire can be found in various sources.

Byzantine Sexualisation: Partonopeu's Beauty

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, the objectification of men does occur and, furthermore, it has a narrative function: it moves the plot forward. Based on Whitmarsh, one could speak of a feminine *pothos* as a metanarrative force. To demonstrate how representations of feminine desire drive the story towards an ending, I will focus on the objectification of male characters through women's gaze upon them.

At the beginning of *Partonopeu de Blois*, after the narrator's prologue, Partonopeu is introduced in the narrative as the king's nephew. In the description of our hero, Partonopeu appears as a chivalric ideal man, pleasing for women to gaze upon. The narrator explains the boy's beauty as soon as he introduces the knight into the story. Simons and Eley argue that the lengthy description of Partonopeu's beauty and good qualities imply homoerotic undertones.³⁹¹ This, they write, is seen especially in the passage underlines the king's love for him: 'The king loved him with a love greater than the one he had for his own son' (Li rois l'amoit de tel

³⁹¹ Simons and Eley 1999, 44.

amor | Que nis [le] fil de sa moillier | N'avoit il de nient plus cier).³⁹² This passage will be studied in detail below. According to Simons and Eley, the king's love and the description of Partonopeu's beauty sexualises him: 'When the poet reaches the description of his hero's lips he uses elements which definitely belong in a female, rather than male, portrait, and are also overtly erotic'.³⁹³

Uniquely, in *Partonopeu de Blois* in comparison to French courtly literature, the male hero is described as having lips that are *levrete* and *vermellete*, contoured and red. As Simons and Eley point out, the diminutives 'are a common feature of descriptions of mouths and lips, but in other texts they are only applied to women'.³⁹⁴ Considering how gender roles are reversed in the romance's use of the Cupid and Psyche story, *Partonopeu de Blois* could also be said to reverse gender roles in its description of beauty. Based on Simons and Eley, we can also note that the 'overt feminization and sexualization' in the description of Partonopeu's physical nature has no counterpart in the descriptions of the one character who is comparable to Partonopeu regarding objectification; namely, Melior's younger sister Urrique.³⁹⁵ Melior's appearance, in turn, gains no significant attention at all.

As we have seen, the description of Partonopeu in which he is at once feminised and sexualised has homoerotic implications, according to Simons and Eley, and they argue that this makes Partonopeu's sexual orientation ambivalent: 'The content and articulation of the male portrait [...] seem to be designed to keep the reader guessing about the precise sexual orientation of the hero during the initial phases of the opening adventure'.³⁹⁶ Due to the male character's apparent sexual ambiguity, they see the function of the scene of intercourse to be an assurance of his heterosexuality: 'Hence the explicit nature of the bedroom scene has to show

³⁹² *Partonopeu de Blois*, 538–540.

³⁹³ Simons and Eley 1999, 45.

³⁹⁴ Simons and Eley 1999, 45.

³⁹⁵ Simons and Eley 1999, 45–46. Regarding the Spanish connotations in Urrique's name; see Simons and Eley 1998, 194–195.

³⁹⁶ Simons and Eley 1999, 47.

that, despite his youth and inexperience, Partonopeu is instinctively and univocally heterosexual'.³⁹⁷

Simons and Eley suggest that it is the intertextual echoes of the *romans d'antiquité*, which they trace in Partonopeu's Trojan heritage and in other passages of the romance more generally, that create the connotations of homoeroticism in *Partonopeu de Blois*. By considering that, on several occasions, the romance is a reworking of the *romans d'antiquité* and specifically of *Eneas*, they argue that the audience:

cannot have failed to remember the conversation in which Lavine's mother forcefully accuses all Trojan men of having homosexual tendencies (*Eneas*, II. 8567–95). The prologue's detailed tracing of the ancestry must surely have planted a few seeds of doubt in their minds about the young man's sexual orientation.³⁹⁸

While acknowledging the connotations that the Trojan link might evoke in the audience, the description of Partonopeu's beauty does not in itself imply uncertainty regarding heterosexuality. The passage that possibly manifests homoerotic implications is the one that describes the king's feelings towards him, yet in this passage, Partonopeu is placed in an objectified position. Any possibly homosocial traits, or homosexual desire, of his own are nowhere to be found in the text. He is observed from afar, desired by men, perhaps – but his own desire remains unknown to the audience, at least until the bedroom scene previously discussed.

Furthermore, if the bedroom scene, as extraordinary as it is in the French courtly context, is connected to the Greek novel tradition and its reactualisation in Byzantium during the twelfth century, then Partonopeu's beauty could be interpreted from another angle.³⁹⁹ The passage that describes Partonopeu's beauty, as pleasing as it might be to a homoerotic discourse, does not describe his sexual orientation as unclear. In fact, it

³⁹⁷ Simons and Eley 1999, 47.

³⁹⁸ Simons and Eley 1999, 43.

³⁹⁹ Simons and Eley emphasise how unusual *Partonopeu de Blois* is in the context of French courtly romance due to its graphic and detailed scene of intercourse; see Simons and Eley 1999, 42.

does not describe his sexuality as having any orientation at all. It is only with the discovery of Eros in the darkened bedroom, and with the loss of his virginity, that one could interpret Partonopeu as being introduced to the god of love and thus gaining knowledge of his sexuality for the first time.

Simons and Eley make a remark worth examining further regarding the “‘come-to-bed” eyes’, suggested in the description of Partonopeu’s eyes as ‘soudprendans’.⁴⁰⁰ These captivating eyes indicate an activity in the passage. But this trait could be considered in relation to Leukippe’s beauty as captivating in *Leukippe and Kleitophon* (according to common descriptions of female characters in the Greek novel tradition). Leukippe represents striking beauty, but she has no control over her beauty’s power. Leukippe’s *beauty* might have agency in this regard, but *she* does not.⁴⁰¹ The same could be said about Partonopeu’s eyes, which seem to have an effect on their observer.

Instead of seeing this passage as an illustration of homosexual tendencies in Partonopeu, it could be considered as an implication of the possibility that this romance could be directed towards an (actual) audience divided in gender. The male character is objectified and sexualised, and could have pleased women, or amused them in a humorous manner; it may have pleased an audience of women who are otherwise used to stories in which only the female sex is objectified and sexualised. The passage states it explicitly, as the narrator inserts the claim that there is nothing for a woman to complain about regarding Partonopeu’s looks: ‘The lady can do nothing but enjoy it’ (N’a qu’amender el damoisel).⁴⁰² As Simons and Eley observe, the female character Melior’s appearance is not described at all, and regarding her sister they note how ‘the actual physical description of Urrique is, if anything, *less* overtly feminine than the portrait of the hero’.⁴⁰³ From the perspective of attraction, the female

⁴⁰⁰ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 560. in their article they quote the word as spelled ‘soudprendans’; Simons and Eley 1999, 45. The spelling in the quote above is drawn from Collet and Joris’ edition (2005), as stated above.

⁴⁰¹ Morales 2004, 164.

⁴⁰² *Partonopeu de Blois*, 564.

⁴⁰³ Simons and Eley 1999, 46.

characters do not appear to be very interesting. Thus, the actual audience needs to acknowledge the feminine gaze on a masculine desired object, as the authorial audience seems to denote those that would find objectifications of men pleasing. In order to understand the narrative, the actual audience needs to recognise this gendered vision, from a feminine perspective.

I suggest that the Byzantine aspect in interpreting Partonopeu's physical description is also important to consider in this context. Connected with the argument above, the sexualised feature of Partonopeu's appearance could imply an intertextual relation to Byzantine literature. In order to back up this argument, the scene where Partonopeu's beauty is described will be put in relation to *Hysmine and Hysminias* as well as to two other previously mentioned works composed at the Komnenian court; namely, Theodore Prodromos' novel *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* and Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*.

The third erotic dream of *Hysmine and Hysminias*, in which Hysminias is initiated into love, describes Hysmine's appearance. This passage narrates the acceleration of Hysminias' desire for Hysmine; he fantasises about making erotic advances. The description of Hysmine's looks is positioned within the erotic discourse of Hysminias' dreams. As in the case of Partonopeu, Hysmine's eyes are described as lively:

Hysmine and Hysminias

ὄφρ' ὤς μέλαινα, ἴρις τὸ σχῆμα ἢ
κατὰ σελήνην μηνοειδής· ὄμμα
μέλαν, γοργὸν καὶ μάλα φαιδρόν·
ὁ κύκλος αὐτῷ κατὰ μέρος
ὥξύνετο· καὶ ἦν τὸ σχῆμα τοῖς
ὀφθαλμοῖς κωνοειδὲς ἢ μᾶλλον
κυκλοειδής· ἡ περὶ τὴν
ἐπιβλεφαρίδα θορὶξ παντελῶς
ἐμελαίνετο· καὶ ἦν ὁ τῆς κόρης

Partonopeu de Blois

Les sorciols a noirs et voltis, |
Delgiés et grailles et traitis. | Les
iols a gros, vairs et rians, | Bien
envoisiés et souprensans.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁵ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 557–560.

ὀφθαλμὸς ὄντως Ἔρωτος
κάτοπτρον.⁴⁰⁴

Her eyebrows were black, curved like a rainbow or a crescent moon; her eyes were black, lively and very bright and her eyeballs had a certain sharpness and her eyes were cone-like in shape, or rather circular. The lashes on her eyelids were quite black, and the girl's eyes were truly a mirror for Eros.

His eyebrows are black and curved, fine and narrow. His eyes are big, lively, laughing; filled with charm and joy.

The description of Hysmine is more concrete than the one in the romance in terms of the shape and sharpness of her eyes. However, both Hysmine and Partonopeu are said to have black and curved eyebrows, a description that does not seem to be a matter of significance in other Old French romance sources of the time, except in the description of Camilla in *Eneas* – which indeed is noteworthy in the present comparative analysis.⁴⁰⁶ In Komnenian sources, dark and curved eyebrows are a common feature in descriptions of a beautiful face. In Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, for example, when she describes her father Alexios, she mentions his brows: 'His dark eyebrows were curved, and beneath them the gaze of his eyes was both terrible and kind' (μέλαινα μὲν γὰρ ἡ ὀφρῦς ἐκατέρωθεν ἐκυρτοῦτο,

⁴⁰⁴ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.6.1–2.

⁴⁰⁶ In Chrétien de Troyes' works, eyebrows are mentioned in two cases: in *Perceval*, where one finds: 'Les sorcis bruns et large antr'oil' *Perceval*, 1777, and in *Philomena*, where the eyebrows are described as 'Large antr'oel, sorciz aligniez', *Philomena*, 147. Black eyebrows do occur, however, in *Eneas*. In the description of Camilla, one finds her to have 'les sourcis noirs et bien deugiés', *Eneas*, 4078. The fact that Partonopeu, who is blond, has explicitly black and curved eyebrows is to my eyes a possible implication of how Byzantine literary connections might explain erotic beauty descriptions in *Partonopeu de Blois*, and possibly *Eneas* – the relationship between this romance and the Byzantine novels indeed needs further investigation. The verse in *Perceval* is transcribed from Méla's edition and the verse in *Philomena* is transcribed from Boer's edition (as stated above), both found in the collection of Chrétien de Troyes' romances (1994). The verse in *Eneas* is transcribed from Petit 1997.

τῇ δὲ ὀφθαλμὸς ὑπεκάθητο βλοσσυρὸν ἄμα καὶ ἡμερον ἐνορῶν).⁴⁰⁷ It is worth mentioning that *melaina* means not only ‘dark’ but also ‘black’, considering other descriptions of eyebrows as black in colour, including the one in *Partonopeu de Blois*.

In both *Hysmine and Hysminias* and *Partonopeu de Blois*, the eyes are described as lively and happy.⁴⁰⁸ If we compare these descriptions, the captivating power of Partonopeu’s eyes seems to correspond with Hysmine’s eyes being ‘a mirror for Eros’.⁴⁰⁹ Partonopeu’s ‘come-to-bed’ eyes, to use Simons and Eley’s formulation, could thus be considered intertextually connected to *Hysmine and Hysminias*, where Hysmine’s erotic eyes are represented in Hysminias’ erotic dream.

Furthermore, to have captivating eyes implies a relation with a beholder who is being captivated. The eyes must indeed captivate someone who looks at them. As Morales states, in her analysis of vision in ancient Greek literature, to capture someone’s gaze is not in itself an act of power. It does not imply that the beautiful woman (considering the gender aspect of vision) has any control over the effect that she has on others. The described discourse of vision in ancient Greek literature is then also affirmed in Beauvoir’s explanation of women’s beauty as an indication of passivity; in relation to the masculine gaze, women’s beauty results in the asymmetrical subject-object duality, as it is described in modern culture.⁴¹⁰ With both mentioned descriptions of vision; its role in ancient culture, and its role in Beauvoir’s description of her modern culture in mind, the traditional gender dynamic in relation to the gaze and objectification is faced with – in Partonopeu’s ‘come-to-bed’ eyes – a subversive shift of power. Partonopeu is accordingly a passive object. The purpose of his beauty could arguably be described as being *faite pour arrêter le regard*, to use Beauvoir’s words.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁷ The *Alexiad*, III.3.2.

⁴⁰⁸ γοργὸν and φαιδρὸν *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.6.2., compared to ‘vairs et rians’, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 559.

⁴⁰⁹ Ἐρωτος κάτοπτρον *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.6.3., compared to ‘soudreudans’, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 560.

⁴¹⁰ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 521.

⁴¹¹ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 521.

In the discussed novel and the romance alike, the descriptions move on, from focusing on the eyes, towards focusing on the face. In both stories, the characters are said to be pale, but with blushing cheeks. Hysmine's 'cheeks were white, unblemished white where there was no mixture of red; the centre was red, red that was separated off and imprinted there' (Παρειὰ λευκή· τὸ λευκὸν ἄκρατον, ἐς ὅσον οὐκ ἠρυθραίνετο· τὸ μέσον ἐρυθρόν· τὸ ἐρυθρὸν διεσπασμένον καὶ οἷον διεσπαρμένον).⁴¹² Partonopeu's 'beautiful face is pale and blushing, long with fine and clear contours' (Bele face a, blanche et rosine, | Longe et traitice, et clere et fine).⁴¹³ This could further be positioned in relation to Anna Komnene's description of Bohemond in the *Alexiad*, where the Norman is described as being entirely pale, except for having some redness to his face.⁴¹⁴

After the descriptions of blushing cheeks in *Hysmine and Hysminias* and *Partonopeu de Blois* alike, both stories' passages describe the characters' mouths:

Hysmine and Hysminias

Τὸ στόμα συμμέτρως διέρρηκται·
τὸ πολὺ τῆς σαρκὸς τῶν χειλέων
διέρριπται, καὶ ἄμφω τῷ χεῖλι
φοινίσσεται. Εἵποις ἰδὼν ῥόδον
ἐκθλῖναι τὴν κόρην τοῖς χεῖλεσι.
Χορὸς ὀδόντων λευκός, συστοιχίαν
φέρων εὐάρμοστον καὶ πρὸς τὸ
χεῖλος ἀνάλογον, ὡς παρθένοι τοῖς
χείλεσιν οἰκουρούμενοι.⁴¹⁵

Her mouth was parted evenly, most
of the flesh from her lips was
pressed back and both her lips were

Partonopeu de Blois

Bouce a petite, grosse levrete, |
Toute alumee, vermellete. | Les
dens avoit blans et menus, | Molt
bien assis et bien ve[n]us ; |
Basse a le bouce a bien bai-
sier.⁴¹⁶

His mouth is small. His lips are
flaming red. His teeth are white
and tiny, very well set and very

⁴¹² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.6.3.

⁴¹³ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 561–562.

⁴¹⁴ τὸ χρῶμα κατὰ τὸ ἄλλο μὲν σῶμα λευκώτατος, τὸ δὲ πρόσωπον μετὰ τοῦ λευκοῦ ἐπυρσοῦτο, the *Alexiad*, 13.10. (referred to above).

⁴¹⁵ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, III.6.3–4.

⁴¹⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 565–569.

tinted red. Seeing her you would say that the girl had crushed a rose with her lips. The chorus of her teeth was white, set in harmonious ranks and appropriate to her lips and were like maidens guarded by her lips.

alluring. His mouth is situated well on his face so that it is easy to kiss it.

These are obviously sexualised descriptions. The redness in both passages carries an erotic undertone. Their mouths' respective sizes are modest; Hysmine's is proportionate and Partonopeu's is small. This applies to a feminine ideal originating from the Roman world and early Byzantine times, where one sees that women's mouths are small and closed.⁴¹⁷ The lips, however, are vividly described in both passages. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, we read that 'most of the flesh of Hysmine's lips' is discernible, and that both lips are tinted red. Partonopeu's mouth is described as flaming red. As Simons and Eley note, 'the diminutive is identified [...] as a marker of female sensuality and sexuality, [...] also commonly used in the descriptions of breasts [...].'⁴¹⁸ Both characters' lips correlate with a norm of modesty, due to their mouths' modest sizes, and are sexualised in terms of the colour of their lips, which imply carnal undertones.

From the mouths and lips there follows a reference, in both passages, to the characters' teeth. They are said to be white and well placed in their mouths. Hysmine's teeth are 'set in harmonious ranks' and 'appropriate to her lips', and Partonopeu's teeth are very well set. In both passages, their mouths are described in terms of their availability to be kissed – but in a contradictory manner. While Hysmine's teeth are 'like maidens guarded by her lips', Partonopeu's mouth is situated on his face in a way well fitted for kissing. Both Hysminias' and Hysmine's virginities remain throughout the narrative. Partonopeu and Melior both lose theirs. The access to Hysmine's and Partonopeu's respective mouths can be said to reflect the stories' sexual scenes, as we have seen. Hysmine's virginity is protected, even when it is threatened by erotic temptation.

⁴¹⁷ See, for example, sculptures of women from Late Antiquity and the early Byzantine Empire, on which mouths were ideally small; Kalavrezou 2012, 515.

⁴¹⁸ Simons and Eley 1999, 45.

Partonopeu's virginity is lost in his initial meeting with Melior, who thus has clear access to his mouth.

However, although the description of Partonopeu's appearance seems to carry sexualising as well as feminising implications, which the potential connection to the description of Hysmine may further indicate, the idea of him as feminised should be nuanced. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, the narrator is Hysminias himself. His perspective is omnipresent in the narrative, even though a feminine perspective can be discerned in his retelling of female characters' agency and speech. This means that the narrative is not structured in a way that naturally gives space for a description of Hysminias' appearance, given that he does not gaze upon himself. However, if one takes other descriptions of beautiful men in Komnenian narratives into consideration, we get another picture, as for example in Theodore Prodromos' novel *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*.

The main characters have been separated during their adventure. In the passage that interests us, Rhodanthe talks about her beloved Dosikles' appearance to her friend Myrilla. The description that she gives might imply that descriptions of beauty do not necessarily have to do with specific gender codes in a Byzantine context. To describe someone as desirable and beautiful seems simply to be a convention in the Komnenian courtly context, regardless of gender.

Συμπατριώτης εὐγενῆς νεανίας, | κλῆσιν Δοσικλῆς, εὐπρεπῆς τὴν
ιδέαν, | ἄρτι χνοῶσαν ἀνατέλλων τὴν γένυν | καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον
εὐφυῶς περιστέφων | πρώτοις ἰούλοις τοῖς ἐπιγναθιδίοις, | τρίχας
προΐσχων, ὧ θεοί, καλὰς ἰδεῖν | (οἷον τὸ βοστρυχῶδες)· ἡ δὲ
ξανθότης – | τεράστιον τὸ κάλλος· ἡ δ' ὅλη χροὰ – | ὑπὲρ λόγον τὸ
θάμβος· ἡ δὲ λευκότης – | ἡλίκον εἰς ἔκπληξιν· ἡ δ' ἐρυθρότης – |
ἀμήχανον τὸ χρῆμα. Τί χρή μοι λέγειν | κόρης, παρειᾶς, ὀφρύος,
χεῖλους πέρι, | τῆς τετραγώνου, τῆς κεκανονισμένης, | τῆς
κυπαρίττω ξυγγενοῦς ἡλικίας, | ὧμων ἐκείνων καὶ σφυρῶν, χειρῶν,
πόδων; | Καλὴ μὲν ἡ χεὶρ, ἀλλὰ πολλῷ καλλίων | ὅταν ἐνήργει
φυσικῶς κινουμένη | (ἐρυθριῶ μὲν τὴν ἐνέργειαν λέγειν, | ἐρῶ
δ' ὅμως, Μυρίλλα, καὶ τί γὰρ πάθω;), | ἐμοῦ τραχήλου γνησίως
ἡρτημένη. | Καλὸν τὸ χεῖλος, ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ τὸ στόμα· ὅταν δὲ καὶ
κινοῖντο καὶ φθέγγοιντό τι | καλοῦντα καὶ γελῶντα καὶ φιλοῦντά

με, | ιαταται τό κάλλος αὐτοῖς ἡλίκον. | Τί μοι τὰ πολλὰ καὶ τί μοι
μακρὸς λόγος; | Θεοῦ τις ἦν ἄντικρυς ἡ πᾶσα πλάσις.⁴¹⁹

There was in my country a noble youth, | Dosikles by name, comely
in appearance, | with his beard just blooming on his chin | and his
face gracefully surrounded | by the first down on his jaw, with hair,
ye gods, beautiful to see | (how it curled!); the blond hue – | its
beauty is amazing; his whole complexion – | incredible beyond de-
scription; his witeness – | quite astonishing; his redness – | alto-
gether impossible. What should I say | of his eyes, his cheeks, his
eyebrows, his lips, | his sturdy, well-proportioned figure | close kin
to cypress, | his shoulders, his ankles, his hands, his feet; | his hand
is beautiful, but much more beautiful | when it has made advances,
moved by forces of nature | (I blush to speak of advances, | but yet
I am in love, Myrilla, and what have I to lose?), | and it is clinging
enthusiastically to my neck. | His lips are lovely, but so too is his
mouth; | and when they move and make sounds, | calling and laugh-
ing and kissing me, | oh indeed how great is their beauty. | But why
should I go on and why should I speak at length? | His whole bear-
ing was that of a god.

Dosikles is depicted as desirable and beautiful, but he is not feminised.
During a time when, as Jouanno writes:

Byzantine women in reality enjoyed a relative freedom, had mani-
fold rights and activities, especially in economic matters, and those
belonging to the highest court aristocracy could even be actively
involved in politics.⁴²⁰

Rhodanthe and Dosikles could have worked as ‘an expression of nostal-
gia’, and the novel could perhaps exemplify how changing times cause
‘fantasies about the security of traditional gender identities [...] to in-
crease’.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, VII.213–38.

⁴²⁰ Jouanno 2006, 161.

⁴²¹ Jouanno 2006, 161.

In the novel, Rhodanthe is abducted: both by her lover Dosikles, and by a robber. Jouanno argues that Rhodanthe is characterised by ‘weakness and submissive attitude’, and that Byzantine writers’ sexism ‘appears clearly in the use of the abduction motif’.⁴²² The claim that *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* is subversive is thus not particularly convincing. Instead, it seems as though Prodromos’ novel is an example of a Byzantine adaptation of Greek novels’ nostalgia for a past governed by patriarchal ideals.⁴²³ To be sure, as Goldwyn argues, the abduction theme and lack of consent are not categorically stated in negative terms in the novel, but the protagonist Dosikles himself ‘not only contemplates raping Rhodanthe, he even tells other people that he had considered it’.⁴²⁴ Indeed, Rhodanthe’s agency and her own desires can hardly be described as moving the plot forward. Nor are they taken into account in Dosikles’ rape deliberations, as Goldwyn further writes: ‘he even refers to himself as a rapist, thus affirming his own knowledge of and indifference to her withholding of consent.’⁴²⁵

Yet, Rhodanthe’s direct speech seems, nevertheless, to imply the presence of a feminine perspective in the novel. In the quoted passage, Rhodanthe explains the beauty of her beloved. In describing his physical appearance, she expresses desire and longing for Dosikles. This could be seen as a representation of feminine desire as being present in the novel, something with which women in the audience could probably identify.⁴²⁶

⁴²² Jouanno 2006, 152.

⁴²³ Jouanno 2006, 152.

⁴²⁴ Goldwyn 2018, 88.

⁴²⁵ Goldwyn 2018, 88.

⁴²⁶ Nilsson describes Rhodanthe’s desire to reach after and touch Dosikles (which could be described in terms of transcendent desire); see Nilsson 2017; 249. Another example of when Rhodanthe’s direct speech could be read as subversive is when she asks Dosikles to save her from Gobryas, who is trying to rape her. Rhodanthe flees the rapist and runs to her lover, to whom she says: “‘Save me,” she said, “from the brutish barbarian, | save, Dosikles, your dear maiden, | rescue me from the robberly brute. | You have destroyed me; make haste, indeed I am ruined”” (καὶ ‘σῶσον’ εἶπεν ‘ἐκ τυράννου βαρβάρου, | σῶσον, Δοσίκλεις, τὴν φίλην σοι παρθένον· | ἀπόσπασόν με ληστρικῆς τυραννίδος. | Ἀπώλεσάς με· σπεῦσον, ἢ μὴν ὄχόμην.’), *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, III.290–293. In this passage, one could argue that Rhodanthe

Descriptions of feminine desire given from a feminine gaze open up possibilities for the audience to identify with the female character. Indeed, in the Greek novel tradition, desire is often aroused with the gaze, and thus enters the soul, as Plato also puts it.⁴²⁷ Hence, the experience of desire arouses motions in one's soul; it stirs the subject.

In his readings of consent in medieval erotic narratives, Goldwyn discerns a lack of feminine perspective in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, which is contemporary with *Partonopeu de Blois*.⁴²⁸ After the scene describing Lancelot and Guinevere's sexual encounter, Goldwyn discusses how only Lancelot's perspective is presented, although both are indeed present in the narrated scene: 'It is his desire that is sated, his pleasure that is described, and his pains [...] that rises to the threshold of narratability. Her sexual experience, her pleasure, her emotions, remain unnarrated'.⁴²⁹ The lack of representations of feminine desire consequently creates a lack of knowledge regarding the woman's consent overall. Her lack of emotions and experience creates a narrative in which identification with the female part in the erotic relationship is challenged. How does one see things from a perspective that is never articulated? Goldwyn continues to explain that:

whereas Lancelot's every move, every adventure, every struggle is narrated in detail, about her [Guinevere's] journey he writes: 'Mes que valdroit se je contoie | Ne ses gistes ne ses jornees?' (But why

acknowledges that her position is quite hopeless: her agency seems nowhere to be found. Instead, she asks her first abductor, on whom she thus depends, to save her from her second abductor. Dosikles' own retelling of his abduction of Rhodanthe has been described as having a 'narcissistic focus on himself', which 'underscores the lack of reciprocity and consensuality'; Burton 2000,386.

⁴²⁷ An example of this is, of course, the prologue to Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*: 'For certainly no one has ever avoided Love, and no one will, as long as beauty exists, and eyes can see' (πάντως γὰρ οὐδεὶς ἔρωτα ἔφυγεν ἢ φεύζεται, μέχρις ἂν κάλλος ᾗ καὶ ὀφθαλμοὶ βλέπωσιν), *Daphnis and Chloe*, prol.4. Plato writes about desire's travel from sight to the soul, and Heliodorus picks up the same thematic, see Goldhill 2001, 170–171.

⁴²⁸ Regarding Chrétien de Troyes in relation to *Partonopeu de Blois*; see Eley and Simons 1999; Hilton 1984.

⁴²⁹ Goldwyn 2018, 133.

bother relating her journeys by day and her rests at night?).⁴³⁰ The seeming innocuousness of this rhetorical question, however, both elides women's experiences generally and, perhaps more significantly, rules out the possibility that women can be subjects of narrative at all. Though her adventures parallel Lancelot's in significant ways, his can be the subject of romance even as hers can be easily dismissed in two lines.⁴³¹

The lengthy description of Partonopeu's beauty should be read in this context. Indeed, his beauty is not a narration of the female character's experience, yet the description of him explains Melior's actions: why she chose him and why she arranges the beauty contest at the end, which will be discussed further below. Bruckner sees a bond between the romance's poet, the narrator and Melior:

Like the romancer, Melior is a creator of fiction, as she arranges Partonopeu's story to bring him to Chef d'Oire and entertain him during his sojourn. Like the narrator, she tells him stories of ancient times [...] and even contemporary French history [...]. Both the narrator and Melior are lovers whose love generates romance fictions; both seek to use fictions to invite and control the response of a beloved.⁴³²

Accordingly, the female character appears in a sense to be connected to the narrator and the actual poet, which as a consequence links the romance's perspective and voice to her.⁴³³ In contrast to the lack of possibility for female characters to be narrative subjects, which Goldwyn discusses regarding Chrétien de Troyes, *Partonopeu de Blois* can thus be interpreted as a narrative in which feminine subjectivity is found. It is the feminine gaze that is at play here – women can do nothing but enjoy the sight of the knight, as it were. The description of Partonopeu's beauty

⁴³⁰ Goldwyn 2018, 134. Goldwyn quotes David Staines' translation (1990). For the Old French verses 6414–6415; see Méla's edition (1994).

⁴³¹ Goldwyn 2018, 134.

⁴³² Bruckner 1993b, 112.

⁴³³ See Hanning 1981.

follows patterns from the Greek novel tradition, as we have seen. The composition of the passage, i.e. an ekphrastic passage that digresses from the informative stating of events, is structured according to a model found in Byzantine novels; moreover, it uses idealised features such as those also found in the *Alexiad*, such as black and curved eyebrows and pale skin with blushing cheeks. The ekphrastic description leads the audience to envision Partonopeu in front of their eyes, in all his beauty. As the narrator adds that Partonopeu's appearance is pleasing to the woman's eye, the (authorial) audience is consequently, one could argue, defined at an early stage in the story as consisting (at least in part) of women. The imagined women in the (authorial) audience are thus seemingly supposed to envision the described man in their minds and to draw pleasure from the image. As in the Greek tradition, desire is transported through the eye to the soul. Hence, by describing masculine beauty and women's pleasure at the sight of it, the text writes a feminine experience of pleasure into the narrative, an experience of seeing as a woman. One could, consequently, speak of a bond between Anna Komnene's ekphrastic description of Bohemond and Partonopeu's described beauty in the Old French romance, perhaps through the Komnenian novels. Drawing a red thread between these literary works, we could speak of the articulation of a shared language for the feminine gaze.

Compared with the description of Partonopeu's beauty, we find many similarities to it in Prodhomos' novel, which are worth noting. The two passages share a similar composition. Firstly, there is a presentation of the young men and a notion of them both being thoroughly beautiful. Secondly, as Partonopeu's character is described, there follows a description of his hair, and in Dosikles' case a description of his beard. Thirdly, the men's skin in both passages is described as shiningly white. Dosikles' skin also has a hint of a blush, something that Partonopeu is also said to have in a following verse. Fourthly, both descriptions focus on the area around the eyes, either before or after the descriptions of the eyebrows. The faces are later described as being proportionate, and so are their bodies. In both passages, the bodies form a good harmony: the shoulders, the hands, the feet. A certain focus is directed towards their

hands. Both men's lips are said to be good for kissing. Both men's bodies are impeccably complete. Dosikles has the look of a god, and Partonopeu is said to be perfect.

In the Byzantine context, the description of masculine beauty does not seem to be a matter of feminisation. The male character is objectified and eroticised, beautiful for a woman to look at. In *Partonopeu de Blois*, the narrator mentions that his appearance is enjoyable for a lady. Dosikles' beauty is described through the voice and perspective of his beloved Rhodanthe. His beauty, as well as the desire and longing expressed for him, are articulated from a woman's perspective. Partonopeu's sexualisation seems not only unusual in its French context, as Simons and Eley argue, but also, it appears that the passage is an expression of feminine desire, that could, possibly, be further connected to Komnenian literature.

As already mentioned, the narrator explicitly comments on Partonopeu's beauty, describing it to be pleasurable for women to look at. Also, when Partonopeu has broken the rule and brought light to the bedroom, and has, consequently, been banished from Melior's palace, his appearance is once again described as beautiful in women's eyes. As the women at the court come to criticise and shame Melior for her unchaste conduct, they circle around Partonopeu:

Les dames s'aproisment al lit, | Si l'ont esgardé un petit. | Après cel
poi l'esgardent [miés]: | Molt par ert beaus se il [fust] liés. | Après
le revont esgarder | Por sa beauté miols aviser. | Com plus l'avisent,
miols lor plest.⁴³⁴

The ladies approached the bed and looked quickly at him. Then they looked at him more carefully. They rejoiced at the sight of his beauty. Then they looked at him again, to better acknowledge his beauty. The more they saw it, the more they took pleasure from it.

Bruckner notes the remarkable number of variations of the verb *esgarder* (to look) in the passage, and she states more generally that when 'it comes

⁴³⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4847–4853.

to descriptions of beauty in this romance, Partonopeu, not Melior, is the primary object of our agreeable contemplation'.⁴³⁵ It seems as though Partonopeu is not only the object of Melior's desires, but that he holds a more general object position in the romance. Partonopeu is Melior's object of desire but, more than that, he is in general an object to observe, both for other women and for men. Further, the passage can be described as mainly narrating the act of looking; the text narrates women occupied with perceiving. The women are narrated as gazing. Partonopeu, once again, is the object of the story. In the passage, we see women appreciating beauty.

In Apuleius' novel, we saw that Psyche does not have the competence that would be required, by esteemed rhetorical ideals, to appreciate the object of her desires in a controlled manner. As she sees Cupid for the first time, she is described as losing her self-control, as swooning and being 'paled with enervation; her knees buckled' (*marcido pallore defecta tremensque desedit in imos poplites*).⁴³⁶ Although Psyche's desire works as a metanarrative force, moving the story onward as she searches for Cupid's return, the narration hardly describes her as being in control in any sense. She acts according to her desire but, nevertheless, she follows the paths that are already mapped out for her; if not by Cupid in his initiation of their relationship, then by Venus' conditions for accepting Psyche's reunion with her son.

Compared with Psyche's desire, desire is described differently in Anna Komnene's work of history. Of course, Anna does not write that she *desires* Bohemond; however, her ekphrastic description of his appearance can be said to position itself within a rhetorical discourse in which admiration of beauty and expressions of desire are expected. Anna places herself within a sophisticated, rhetorical discourse of articulation and admiration of beauty, a tradition of practices such as *ekphrasis* and *enargeia*. As she writes in this rhetorical tradition, which can be traced back to antiquity, she is writing a woman's eyes into the pursuit of education or *paideia*.

⁴³⁵ Bruckner 1993b, 129.

⁴³⁶ *The Golden Ass*, V.22.

Objectification: Embodiment and Refusal

In Apuleius' ancient story, Psyche is said to fall in love after having been wounded by Cupid's weapon. After being struck by his arrow, she is 'more and more enflamed with desire' (Tunc magis magisque cupidine flagrans Cupidinis).⁴³⁷ As she looks at him, Psyche desires Cupid: *now*, desire becomes a matter of reciprocity. Cupid leaves at the point when his relationship with Psyche becomes mutual in terms of desire: he refuses to be objectified. Objectification appears to signify a loss of control in the relationship; Cupid's rule is violated. As Psyche is transformed into the subject who catalyses narrative progression, her gaze is described, along with her erotic advancements.⁴³⁸ As she objectifies Cupid, he punishes her by leaving her: 'I shall punish you merely by leaving' (te vero tantum fuga mea punivero).⁴³⁹ As previously mentioned, the egocentrism that has been suggested to form Plato's theory of desire can, arguably, be traced in this scene. She places her desire in Cupid, whom one might describe, based on Vlastos, as a 'holy-image' for Psyche's love.⁴⁴⁰ Psyche

⁴³⁷ *The Golden Ass*, V.23.

⁴³⁸ 'Insatiably, and with some curiosity, Psyche scrutinised and handled and marvelled at her husband's arms. She drew one of the arrows from the quiver and tested the point against the tip of her thumb; but her hand was still trembling and she pushed a little too hard and pricked too deep, so that tiny drops of rose-red blood moistened the surface of her skin. Thus without knowing it Psyche of her own accord fell in love with Love. Then more and more enflamed with desire for Cupid she leaned over him, panting desperately for him. She eagerly covered him with impassioned and impetuous kisses till she feared about the depth of his slumber' (Quae dum insatiabili animo Psyche, satis et curiosa, rimatur atque pertrectat et mariti sui miratur arma, depromit unam de pharetra sagittam et puncto pollicis extremam aciem periclitabunda trementis etiam nunc articuli nisu fortiore pupugit altius, ut per summam cutem roraverint parvulae sanguinis rosei guttae. Sic ignara Psyche sponte in Amoris incidit amorem. Tunc magis magisque cupidine flagrans Cupidinis, prona in eum efflictim inhians, patulis ac petulantibus saviis festinanter ingestis, de somni mensura metuebat), *The Golden Ass*, V.23.

⁴³⁹ *The Golden Ass*, V.24.

⁴⁴⁰ Yet, this can be nuanced regarding Psyche, who desires desire itself. Psyche's desire can also be interpreted as that which Irigaray reads in Diotima's lesson, i.e. that it is not teleological. I suppose Psyche's desire is a combination of Vlastos and Irigaray: she desires desire, but nevertheless, she finds an object for that desire in the shape

ceases to be an object of Cupid's desire. Instead, she directs her desire towards him, after having seen him and been struck by his arrow: therefore, she loses him.

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, as we know, the case is reversed. Partonopeu is the one with the lantern. He lights up the bedroom and sees Melior. By comparing the perspectives of the characters Melior and Cupid in the moment before the room is lit up, we can see that Melior's feelings are noted, whereas Cupid's are not.

The Golden Ass

Nox aderat et maritus aderat
priusque Veneris proeliis velitatus
altum in soporem descenderat.⁴⁴¹

Night came, and her husband
came, and after skirmishing in
love's warfare, he dropped into a
deep sleep.

Partonopeu de Blois

Parmi le cambre en vient la bloie;
| De son ami a molt grant joie. | De
son mantel est desfublee, | Lés son
ami est acostee.⁴⁴²

The blond one enters the bed-
room, pleased in the presence of
her lover. She undresses her coat
and lies besides her lover.

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, Melior's perspective is highlighted; she enjoys her lover's presence. Even though the events in both narratives take place in an almost equal manner, Melior's perspective is focalised in *Partonopeu de Blois*, which Cupid's is not in *The Golden Ass*. The medieval romance frequently offers the feminine perspective in sexual matters, as it does here, which enhances the idea that the male character's activity has effects on other people; namely, on the woman towards whom he directs his actions.

In the quoted passage from *Partonopeu de Blois*, the emphasis is on Melior's nudity. The event continues, described from Partonopeu's

of the god in her bed. Thus, as Vlastos argues, when desire and love concerns people, one runs the risk at slipping into objectifying one's beloved (see above).

⁴⁴¹ *The Golden Ass*, V.21.

⁴⁴² *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4505–4508.

perspective. Before lighting up the room, he makes sure that Melior is naked: ‘When Partonopeu has touched her and is assured that she is entirely naked, he throws the quilt off and looks at her in complete brightness’ (Quant Partonopeus l’a sentue | Et seit qu’ele est trestote nue, | Le covertor a lonc jeté, | Si l’a veüe od la clarté).⁴⁴³ Subsequently, the narrative highlights his gaze on her naked body: ‘Having discovered her naked body he looks at her; he can observe her and be amazed at how he has never seen such beauty’ (A descoverit nue le voit, | Mirer le puet et veoir bien | Q’ainc ne vit mais tant bele rien).⁴⁴⁴

Like Psyche in *The Golden Ass*, Partonopeu finds himself in a subject position. He observes Melior for the first time, and now sees her entire appearance. However, compared to the myth of Cupid and Psyche, Melior is no god. She knows magic, but explains that the authority and magical powers that she did have are all lost due to his betrayal.⁴⁴⁵ Furthermore, before explaining how she arranged for Partonopeu’s arrival, and the consequences of his betrayal, Melior reacts by losing consciousness, *se pasme*.⁴⁴⁶ In contrast to Cupid’s reaction to Psyche’s actions, Melior faints; her reaction is non-verbal but corporeal, and thereafter Partonopeu understands that he has acted badly.⁴⁴⁷ She does not speak to Partonopeu, but her body can be interpreted as the representation of expression. When Melior finally tries to speak, she immediately begins to cry: ‘The lady fainted several times and said repeatedly that she was damned for being born. And when she began to utter words again, she returned instead to crying’ (La dame s’est sovent pasmee | Et dist sovent que mal fu nee; | Et quant recommence a parler, | Dont est regieres al plorer).⁴⁴⁸

Melior regains the ability to speak after this, but her primal reaction appears to be an experience of not being able to formulate her response

⁴⁴³ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4509–4512.

⁴⁴⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4514–4516.

⁴⁴⁵ I discuss Melior’s magic below. Her magic is part of her education and could also be seen as the art of storytelling; see Ferrante, 1984; Hanning 1981.

⁴⁴⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4517.

⁴⁴⁷ Cele se pasme et cil entent | Qu’il a over molt folement. *Partonopeu*, 4517–4518.

⁴⁴⁸ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4535–4538.

in words. The devastation described in Melior's reaction is expressed in a non-verbal sense; her language seems to consist of her bodily, physical expressions. As the audience knows from the verses above, Melior is naked in this scene. In the light, she is exposed, and her control is lost. Her body is unprotected from Partonopeu's gaze and desire. Compared with the passage in *The Golden Ass*, Melior's corporeal reaction is specific to *Partonopeu de Blois*.⁴⁴⁹

In *Partonopeu de Blois*' passage with the lantern, Melior goes through the same shift from subject to object as Cupid does in Apuleius' novel. Partonopeu lights up the room and observes her from head to toe. Her beauty is now for his eyes to behold. Like Cupid, Melior reacts with unease at being objectified but, unlike Cupid, her reaction is described as a bodily expression.

These differences could be interpreted as though Partonopeu's betrayal, as well as his and Melior's relationship, are depicted according to the code of courtly love: a knight desires a noble lady. Although Melior reacts reluctantly to this turn of events, it seems as though the story affirms a dominant gender hierarchy in which the man is subject and the woman is object. In other words, with his lantern, Partonopeu reestablishes the social order and his own superior, masculine position. The text could further be seen as participating in a French feudal discourse. Partonopeu's mother, who is the French king's sister, and the Bishop of Paris are the ones who convince Partonopeu to illuminate the room and it is they who give him the lantern:

C'est la mere Partonopeu | Qui molt entent a proier Deu | Qu'en
France retiegne son fis, | [...] | Mande l'evesque de Paris | Qui molt
est sages de sermon | Et molt seit bel dire raison.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁹ Kay discusses the significance of Melior's invisibility and exposure in an analysis inspired by Jacques Lacan: '[...] Partonopeu is *forbidden* to look at Melior from the place from which she sees him. And it does indeed turn out that, to paraphrase Lacan, "what he looks at is not what he wants to see" [...]'; Kay 2001, 281–282. However, I think that we also need to acknowledge how the feminine perspective is focalised and what this could tell us.

⁴⁵⁰ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4345–4347, 4350–4352.

It is Partonopeu's mother who prays extensively to God that she shall have her son back to France [...], she sends for the Bishop of Paris, who is very wise and can give counsel, and who knows well how to speak reason.

If we consider the royal mother and the bishop to be symbols of feudal society, then Partonopeu can be interpreted as acting badly – yet, according to courtly conduct.

Furthermore, the tension between Melior's bodily expression, along with her agency, and the more conventional courtly adventure in the romance, could be seen in terms of an entanglement of two imaginary spaces. A courtly French space – based on a strong gender hierarchy of masculine superiority – encounters an imaginary, imperial Byzantine space, in which feminine subjectivity is articulated. When Partonopeu objectifies Melior, one could view it as though a masculine order replaces a feminine one. With the courtly gender hierarchy reestablished, one could speak in the terms of how the available vocabulary is masculine, standing in opposition to women's bodily expression. According to this view, and based on Ann Rosalind Jones' discussion about modern French feminism, the newly established power dynamic between Partonopeu and Melior, along with Melior's bodily reaction, could be explained by stating that the courtly 'discourse [...] is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else – including women'.⁴⁵¹ Interpreting Melior as not having access to verbal articulations to express herself, as she finds herself trapped inside the masculine discourse that is established by Partonopeu's subjectivity and gaze, her body is now the source of her expression, through which we can read her resistance against objectification.

In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, the subversive feminine behaviour is counterattacked as well. After Hysminias has been introduced to Eros, he approaches Hysmine and her advances differently. This has already been seen in the sequence of his first erotic dreams. From having been afraid

⁴⁵¹ Rosalind Jones 1982, 248.

and modest, he now defies Hysmine in his mind, by stating that, by outbraving them, he will respond to her advances. Afterwards, he has a dream in which he uses force, trying to take her virginity. Not unlike the desire represented in Kleitophon's love for Leukippe in Tatius' ancient novel, Hysminias sees Hysmine as prey, a carnal object to be possessed.⁴⁵²

Hysminias' new approach to Hysmine has effects on her. Jouanno describes it as an 'apparent metamorphosis'. Hysmine 'unexpectedly begins to act more in accordance with the rules of female propriety' after having shown herself 'in an extremely brazen fashion', before Hysminias' initiation into love.⁴⁵³ This metamorphosis 'reflects the boy's new way of looking at Hysmine.'⁴⁵⁴

While lying awake, unable to sleep, Hysminias hears a noise in the garden outside, and jumps up. There he sees Hysmine, so he runs to her.⁴⁵⁵ He takes hold of her body and hugs her, to which she responds with modesty and fear. Hysminias says:

Καὶ μηδὲν αἰδεσθεὶς ὅλαις χερσὶ τὴν κόρην κατασχὼν κατεφίλησα·
ἢ δ' ἐξ αἰδοῦς καὶ θάμβους 'Τί πάσχεις;' ἀνέκραξε· 'τῆς ἀναιδεΐας
τοῦ κήρυκος·' ἐγὼ δ' 'Οὐδὲν' εἶπον 'ἄλλο πλὴν ἔρωτος τὴν πικρὰν
ταύτην καὶ γλυκυτάτην μοι πάθησιν'.⁴⁵⁶

Completely unabashed I clasped the girl with both hands and embraced her. She, out of modesty and fear, burst out, 'What has come over you? This is shameless for a herald!' 'Nothing,' I said, 'except the bitter-sweet experience of love'.

Hysminias' new experience of desire can be interpreted as causing Hysmine to respond with modesty and fear, displaying passivity according to social norms.

⁴⁵² For an analysis of the sexual conduct as violent assault; see Goldwyn 2018, 118–126.

⁴⁵³ Jouanno 2006, 159.

⁴⁵⁴ Jouanno 2006, 159.

⁴⁵⁵ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.21.

⁴⁵⁶ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.21.2–3.

Hysmine's shift in behaviour should be interpreted with consideration for Hysminias' perspective as narrator. After explaining his behaviour to be the result of experiencing love, Hysminias continues to embrace Hysmine:

Καὶ πάλιν κατεφίλουν αὐτήν, καὶ πάλιν συνέσφιγγον καὶ ὅλην εἵλκον πρὸς ἑαυτόν, καὶ πρὸς τὴν ψυχὴν μετεβίβαζον, καὶ τοῖς δακτύλοις κατέθλιβον, καὶ ὅλην κατέδακνον, καὶ ὅλην ἀνερρόφουν τοῖς χεῖλεσι, καὶ ὅλος ὅλην ὡς κιττὸς συνείχον κυπάριττον.⁴⁵⁷

And I embraced her again and clasped her again and held her very close to me and quite transported her into my soul and squeezed her with my fingers and nibbled at her and quaffed her with my lips and altogether was wound round her like ivy round a cypress.

As he has now been introduced to love, Hysminias describes Hysmine as being transported into his soul. These descriptions of the male character's view of his beloved have similarities with Beauvoir's description of the woman in love who merges into the existence of her lover, *le sujet souverain*.⁴⁵⁸ Hysminias continues: 'I was entwined with the girl, I was rooted in her, and I sought to unite our being and I wanted to devour her completely and gulp her down' (συνεπλεκόμεν τῇ κόρῃ, συνερριζούμεν αὐτῇ καὶ τὴν φύσιν ἐζήτουν κοινώσασθαι καὶ ἤθελον ὅλην καταφαγεῖν καὶ ὅλην αὐτὴν κατερεύεσθαι).⁴⁵⁹ As a parallel to how Beauvoir describes the woman in love as inessential in relation to her beloved, losing herself in him, Hysminias describes his desire to devour Hysmine completely and transport her into his own soul.

But, Hysmine does not merge into Hysminias' existence. The unification of the lovers into one identity, which Hysminias seems to experience as he describes himself as rooted in Hysmine, is the description of his perspective only. After the quoted passage, Hysminias kisses

⁴⁵⁷ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.21.3.

⁴⁵⁸ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 540.

⁴⁵⁹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.21.4.

Hysmine, and as he does so, she bites him: ‘As she is clasped to my mouth she bites my lips, and planted her teeth firmly on my lips’ (Ἡ δέ μοι γενομένη περὶ τὸ στόμα δάκνει μου τὸ χεῖλος καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας αὐτῆς ὅλους τοῖς ἐμοῖς κατεφύτευσε χεῖλεσι).⁴⁶⁰ Thus, Hysmine seems to act ambiguously. She responds modestly to Hysminias’ new erotic behaviour. It seems as though Hysminias gazes upon Hysmine differently, if we compare it to his previous, erotically inexperienced observation. Based on Goldhill’s aforementioned reading of Lucian, Hysminias previously *saw* Hysmine whereas now he actively *looks* at her. It is as though his new way of objectifying her consequently means that she is now (from Hysminias’ perspective) obliged to internalise his objectifying view of her.

The reality is, though, that this in fact never happens. Hysminias is hurt by Hysmine’s bite: ‘I was in pain, I compressed my lips and seemed to sigh; she said, “Do your lips hurt? But my soul was pained too when you so precipitously spurned my love at my father’s banquet”’ (Ἐγὼ δ’ ἀλγήσας συνέσχον αὐτὰ καὶ οἶον ἐστέναξα, ἢ δ’ ‘Ἀλγεῖς τὰ χεῖλη;’ φησὶν· ‘ἀλλ’ ἤλγησα κἀγὼ τὴν ψυχὴν, ὅτε μου ταῦτα καὶ σὺ τὸν ἔρωτα προπετῶς ἐπὶ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς τραπέζης ἐξεφάυλισας’).⁴⁶¹ In contrast to Hysminias’ view of her as the passive object of his desires, Hysmine appears to punish Hysminias for not having responded well when *she* directed *her* desires at him. This scene creates a narratological complexity in terms of focalisation. Hysminias is the narrator of the text, recounting his memory of the event. He explains the pain in his lip from Hysmine’s bite: what the (narrative) audience perceives is indeed what Hysminias himself perceives. Yet, in his narration, Hysminias responds to Hysmine’s conduct by not acknowledging her agency in the arts of seduction. In other words, Hysminias does not confess Hysmine’s desire in his own interpretation of, or perspective on, the event. Bal describes focalisation as ‘the relationship between the “vision”, the agent that sees, and that which is seen’.⁴⁶² In this case, the vision is Hysminias’ retelling of the event in the

⁴⁶⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.22.1.

⁴⁶¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.22.1.

⁴⁶² Bal (1985) 2009, 149.

garden, and the agent that sees is indeed Hysminias; however, that which is seen is something else. In this scene, Hysmine's desires are also seen, as is her agency, and through these two factors, Hysminias' incomprehension when responding to them is seen as well. The (authorial) audience thus perceives that which Hysmine perceives; they are made aware of that which Hysminias appears not to comprehend. Hysmine's advances were made in secrecy at her father's banquet, and as she receives Hysminias' kiss, she bites him as a response to his own modesty. Hysmine is an active agent in their relationship, but her agency appears to work covertly, and seemingly without Hysminias' awareness as well.⁴⁶³ Thus, the (authorial) audience sees more than the narrator Hysminias sees; in fact, they see the vision that Hysmine, the other agent, sees. Through this way of narrating Hysmine's perspective, feminine desire is seen as an active force in the narrative, arousing the male character's reactions, at the same time as the female character remains chaste and free from public shame.

Hysmine repeatedly acts subversively, in terms of defying expected feminine behaviour. Hysminias is introduced to Eros and subsequently sees Hysmine differently; he is indeed a desiring subject and, from his perspective, Hysmine is his desired object. This representation of desire in the novel could be understood with the help of Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*. In her reading, love is described as a mediator between two subjects, rather than a subject's aspiration for a desired object: 'elle [Diotima] faisait de l'amour le médiateur d'un devenir sans objectif autre que le devenir'.⁴⁶⁴ On the one hand (and conforming to a Platonic erotic tradition), Hysminias narrates from an ego-centric perspective. On the other hand, the object of his desires is a desiring subject as well, independent of his objectification.

Partonopeu de Blois is situated within a literary context where representations of feminine desire appear more rarely than representations of masculine desire. In his courtly treatise *De Amore*, Andreas Capellanus writes about how desire is constructed internally in one's mind, via sight.

⁴⁶³ Goldwyn 2018, 119.

⁴⁶⁴ Irigaray 1984, 39.

In his treatise, he describes desire's sensation from a strictly masculine perspective:

Quod autem illa passio sit innata, manifesta tibi ratione ostendo, quia passio illa ex nulla oritur actione subtiliter veritate inspecta; sed ex sola cogitatione quam concipit animus ex eo quod viridit passio illa procedit. Nam quum aliquis videt aliquam aptam amori et suo formatam arbitrio, statim eam incipit concupiscere corde; postea vero quotiens de ipsa cogitat, totiens eius magis ardescit amore, quousque ad cogitationem devenerit plenior. Postmodum mulieris incipit cogitare facturas, et eius distinguere membra suosque actus imaginari eiusque corporis secreta rimari ac cuiusque membri officio desiderat perpotiri.⁴⁶⁵

I can demonstrate by a clear argument that the feeling of love is inborn. A careful scrutiny of the truth shows that it arises not from any action, but solely from the thought formed by the mind as a result of the thing seen. When a man sees a girl ripe for love and fashioned for his liking, he at once begins to desire her inwardly, and whenever subsequently he thinks about her, he burns with love for her more each time, until then he reaches the stage of more detailed reflexion. After that he starts thinking of her several attractions, contemplating her different parts; he begins to picture the role he can play and pry into her body's hidden features. He longs to exercise the functions of each part.

Capellanus describes desire to be the result of one's imagination, after having seen someone who is perceived as desirable.⁴⁶⁶ The tradition of a rhetorical appreciation of beauty can be found in this passage, as well as the connection between masculinity and appreciating beauty. A man sees a girl who is ready for love; his desire is increased as he thinks about her; about her body and the functions that her body might have, as soon as he obtains it. Although the female part in this passage is *aptam amoris*, ripe for love, she is described throughout as a receiver of his desires. Her body is described from an external perspective, seen as an instrument for the

⁴⁶⁵ *De Amore*, I.1.8–10.

⁴⁶⁶ To be sure, the text's dialogical form turns the treatise on love complex as a whole.

pleasure of the lover. Not unlike Goldwyn's analysis in his reading of Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, in Capellanus' description of desire, women's experience remains unknown. The description of desire is the result of a masculine gaze.

After the bite and his reaction to it, Hysminias goes on to confront Hysmine's chastity, claiming it to be merely modest behaviour:

[‘]Εἰ δε μοι κέντρον φέρεις ὡς μέλιττα καὶ φυλάττεις τὸ φίμβλον καὶ πλήττεις τὸν τοῦ μέλιτος τρυγητήν, ἐγκαρτερήσω τῷ σίμβλω, τὸν ἐκ τοῦ κέντρου πόνον ὑφέξω καὶ τρυγήσω τοῦ μέλιτος· οὐ γάρ με στερλήσει πόνος γλυκύτητος μέλιτος, ὥσπερ οὐδ’ ἄκανθα ρόδου κωλύσει με.’ Καὶ πάλιν ἐφίλουν αὐτὴν καὶ πάλιν συνέθλιβον καὶ τι δρᾶν ἐπεχείρουν ἐρωτικώτερον· ἡ δ’ ‘Ἄλλ’ οὐκ ἔσται σοι τοῦτο, νῆ τὴν Ὑσμίνην’ φησίν· ἐγὼ δ’ ‘Οὐκ ἀνήσω, νῆ τὸν Ὑσμινίαν’ ἀντέλεγον. Καὶ ἦν ἔρις παρ’ ἡμῖν Σωφροσύνης καὶ Ἐρωτος, εἰ μὴ τις Αἰδῶ τὴν Σωφροσύνην ἐκείνην ἐθέλει καλεῖν⁴⁶⁷

[‘]If you are waving a sting at me like a bee and are guarding your hive and are lashing out at the honey thief, I will take over the hive, put up with the pain from the sting and harvest the honey. For the pain will not deprive me of the honey's sweetness, as the rose's thorns do not turn me away from the rose'. And so I kissed her again, and I crushed her once more and I made a more amorous advance. 'By Hysmine', she said, 'you won't get anywhere with that'. 'By Hysminias', said I, 'I'm not going to give up'. And so we had a contest between Chastity and Eros, unless you might call Chastity Modesty'.

In his recognition of the erotic game between the two, Hysminias still does not acknowledge the agency of Hysmine. In his utterance, it is merely the presence of Hysmine's beauty in front of his eyes that is the cause for his temptation. Hysmine's part in the erotic dialogue is, in his view, passive; she exposes herself to him, and he chases after her. In

⁴⁶⁷ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IV.22.3–4. I discuss the erotic scene in *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to this passage, and erotic violent conduct in the Greek novel, in Söderblom Saarela 2016a.

Hysminias' perspective, he never ceases to be the agent between them, pursuing the object of his desires. In his utterance, Hysminias expresses the satisfaction that he wants to obtain, regardless of her resistance or the *akantha rhodou* so-to-speak, 'the rose's thorns'. Yet, as we have seen, Hysmine's desires are pursued by activity. Her desiring agency, however, seems not to fit Hysminias' masculine gaze, thus he defines their dynamic differently. In other words, Hysminias can be interpreted as considering Hysmine to be *aptam amoris*, a beloved object (ripe for love), whereas with her bite and confrontation, Hysmine can be interpreted as accusing Hysminias for not having seen her erotic activity, or for not having seen her as a desiring subject.

In both *Partonopeu de Blois* and *Hysmine and Hysminias*, female characters resist the male characters' objectification of them. Melior loses her power and control when Partonopeu sees her in the bedroom. She then refuses the objectified role, and banishes him from her city, similarly to how Cupid leaves Psyche after she has lit up the bedroom in Apuleius' novel. In Makrembolites' novel, Hysmine is also seen through a masculine gaze, but she does not confirm his objectification of her. Instead, she acts according to her own desire, as though she does not recognise Hysminias' objectifying, and thus pacifying, gaze.

Melior loses her subject position in the Old French romance after Partonopeu has lit up the bedroom, but then she takes it back by breaking up their relationship. As discussed above, in Melior one finds a combination of different feminine roles in one character. Furthermore, as Bruckner writes, Melior's:

laments correspond to the desired image of the lady in love, although she also appears as the haughty, rejecting *domna* feared by the lover. This is the role she plays the morning after Partonopeu's betrayal and continues to play in public, despite her regrets and change of heart, in order to shield her true feelings from court gossip.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁸ Bruckner 1993b, 125

Melior's behaviour can thus be described as a conscious play with existing feminine stereotypes. Like Hysmine, Melior appropriates cultural norms of femininity, and uses them to her own advantage. Neither of these two characters ever denies the femininity of their gender; they do not gain power or agency by transcending it. Instead, *Partonopeu de Blois* and *Hysmine and Hysminias* work differently to articulate configurations of feminine subjectivity.

Through the subversive agency of Melior's and Hysmine's respective behaviours, the masculine discourse within which these characters are created is altered. Melior and Hysmine desire the male characters in their respective narratives. In these texts, feminine subjectivity can be traced in the female characters' bodily expressions. In the multiple modes of desire that are simultaneously at work in the novel and the romance, the hierarchy of masculine discourse is destabilised.

VOICE

Making Space for Her Story

In an oration written by Byzantine intellectual Michael Psellos (1018–1078), to be performed by empress Theodora (981–1056), we read: ‘Do not be amazed that I will speak words somewhat superior and indeed loftier than the nature of a woman [κρεῖττον τι τῆς τοῦ θήλεος φύσεως καὶ ὑψηλότερον].’⁴⁶⁹ As Stratis Papaioannou writes, ‘Theodora must begin by acknowledging that lofty speech, worthy of the topic, audience, and occasion [...] cannot in fact be proclaimed by a woman. She is *by nature* incapable of such discourse’.⁴⁷⁰ In the speech, Papaioannou traces a strategy for a woman to transgress her inherent discursive inferiority: ‘Only through royal status and studied manners – the mixing of feminine traits [...] with masculine qualities [...] – can Theodora assume the role of speech-maker, which normally belongs to a man.’⁴⁷¹ In her study on Anna Komnene, Neville finds the same sort of rhetorical gender transgression: ‘While some aspects of her self-presentation in the prologue model Anna on male historical others, others draw on ideal models of female behavior, casting her as a devoted daughter and loving wife’.⁴⁷²

The sentiment that there is an inherent inferiority in women’s voices ‘is a topos of Byzantine writing’, Papaioannou argues, ‘supported

⁴⁶⁹ *Selection Proclaimed during the Reign of Queen Kyra Theodora = Or. min. I.I–II.*, as transcribed and translated in Papaioannou 2013, 215, which was the only version accessible to me. Photius (ca. 815–893) describes Pamphile’s writings from the first century CE, which were a collection of anecdotes (touching on the history genre for sure), in similar terms, i.e. that there is an inherent inferiority in women’s speech; see Papaioannou 2013, 215.

⁴⁷⁰ Papaioannou 2013, 216.

⁴⁷¹ Papaioannou 2013, 216.

⁴⁷² Neville 2016, 37. Neville connects Anna’s self-presentation to Psellos’ speech for Theodora; see Neville 2016, 36.

by a well-established tradition, amplified by both Graeco-Roman convention and Christian morality'.⁴⁷³

In the French context, women are also positioned in the secular, political sphere, but, as we have seen, Ferrante notes in her study on correspondence involving medieval women that these 'women are of necessity aware of themselves as women, even as they perform the functions of men "virilely"'.⁴⁷⁴ Indeed, as Green notes in his survey on women readers and authors in the Middle Ages (in the West), women are seen as inferior based on the presumption found in the Christian tradition, according to which they are weaker at the intellectual, ethical and physical levels, as well as marginalised in terms of learning.⁴⁷⁵ Women authors therefore seem to work around this general idea of themselves as inferior:

women's self-deprecating admission of ignorance to suggest instead a higher source of inspiration, their claim to act as a medium for God's message, their ambiguous position, at once inferior, but also superior to the spiritual directors involved in their writing, and finally their writings as a form of public teaching, traditionally forbidden to their sex.⁴⁷⁶

As in the case of Byzantium, in the West we see a prevailing idea of women's inability to achieve men's standard in speaking and writing, the idea of an inherent inferiority that women need to transgress in order to find their voices. Ferrante also notes that 'women who exercised secular power could also rise above their sex by virtue of their official roles'.⁴⁷⁷ The body of the woman is thus described in negative terms when it comes to speaking – the female body and access to speech make for a combination that is not *natural*.

⁴⁷³ Papaioannou 2013, 216.

⁴⁷⁴ Ferrante 1997, 11 (see above).

⁴⁷⁵ Green (2007) 2011, 220.

⁴⁷⁶ Green (2007) 2011, 220.

⁴⁷⁷ Ferrante 1997, 68.

Yet, this does not mean that women did not take part in textual production. One can, on the contrary, speak about women ‘readers and writers [having] shaped the course of French literature from its inception’, as Krueger writes, ‘although their history is a fragmented one that includes silence and engagement, marginalisation and empowerment, convention and originality, fragmentation and continuity’.⁴⁷⁸ This chapter discusses *Partonopeu de Blois* in terms of these kinds of relations: women’s speech as caught between marginalisation and empowerment. How can feminine subjectivity fit into a discourse that excludes women, that defines women as inferior speakers by nature?

Between Marginalisation and Empowerment

Melior, the female protagonist of *Partonopeu de Blois*, can be interpreted as a representation of a feminine voice that differs from Psellos’ speech to Theodora; Melior never acknowledges her speech to be something *beyond* her sex. As Papaioannou argues regarding Theodora’s described ‘inferior nature’ in Psellos’ oration, it ‘represents one approach in rhetorical contexts; women may speak authoritatively as long as they admit to their natural limitations and submit to the moral expectations of men’.⁴⁷⁹ It is thus at the expense of their own gender that women, within the rhetorical discourse among the learned (in this case specifically in Byzantium), may claim authority and access to speech. ‘Within the horizons of such constraints’, Papaioannou writes, ‘female voices can be expressed almost exclusively from a male perspective’.⁴⁸⁰ Melior seems to represent something different from this masculine perspective, as we will see. Rather than representing a misogynistic view of authority based on admitting the idea that women were inherently inferior by biology, Melior appears to

⁴⁷⁸ Krueger 2000, 10.

⁴⁷⁹ Papaioannou 2013, 217.

⁴⁸⁰ Papaioannou 2013, 217.

represent feminine expression from another angle, or more specifically, from a feminine perspective.

Melior's Magical Storytelling

Melior imposes authority on the male character, Partonopeu. She is a learned 'Byzantine' imperial woman. In this chapter, we will look at how she uses her speech in order to claim authority. Bruckner argues that Melior's knowledge and imperial status seems to be a human embodiment of the common 'Celtic model' of fairies found in *lais*; the powerful woman is not, in this romance, from 'the other world':

Melior is Empress of the Byzantine Empire, an exotic and fabulous world to be sure and a source of considerable power with twenty-five kings under Melior's sovereignty; but it is not the Other World of Celtic myth, situated on a supernatural plane. As represented in the romance, Byzantium operates according to the same feudal hierarchies as contemporary France. Furthermore, Melior's powers are not the 'natural' endowment of a fairy, but rather the result of hard work and years of study.⁴⁸¹

Chief d'Oire is an enchanted city that appears to represent an imaginary Byzantine city.⁴⁸² Constantinople was certainly a city to which many people travelled during the twelfth century. In her study on Western and Byzantine relations, Ciggaar finds that people travelled to the metropolis for various reasons:

Among travellers to Byzantium and the Byzantine world one can distinguish several categories. These would include ambassadors and pilgrims (lay persons and ecclesiastics), refugees and fugitives, mercenaries and merchants, artists (in particular writers) and scholars, and finally the many crusaders who travelled from all over

⁴⁸¹ Bruckner 1993b, 123.

⁴⁸² See Černáková 2019; Deveraux 2012; Bermejo 2001; Bercovici-Huard 1982.

Western Europe to Jerusalem and who often stopped over at Constantinople or elsewhere on Byzantine territory.⁴⁸³

With this real situation in mind, where ‘crusaders, laymen and clerics, soldiers and private people, men and women, and even children, travelled’, the ‘realistic’ aspect of Melior’s magic – being the result of years of study – could be connected to the existing cultural intersections during the period, rather than being a pure fantasy.⁴⁸⁴ Considering how the Mediterranean Middle Ages appear to have been filled with cultural exchange, something that the many travellers to Constantinople exemplify, Byzantine women in general were possibly known in the foreign public image as learned, and perhaps Anna Komnene in particular.

In the romance, Melior tells Partonopeu that she often amused her father by performing miracles:

Et j’en ai tant fait maintes fois | Et mervelles de tels endrois | En
mes cambres priveement, | Que se ce fust devant la gent, | Par tot
en fust la renomee⁴⁸⁵

And many times I have achieved [miracles from my scientific knowledge], and marvels in the space of my private chambers. Had I created this in front of everyone, then I would soon be known as the most esteemed.

Moreover, she explains to Partonopeu that she has kept these activities private:

Mais n’en vuel estre decreee. | Quant nos estiemes a sejour | Et
plaisoit a l’empereor | Que li feïsce aucun deduit, | Si me mandoit a
mienuit | Et mes maistres ensamble od moi | En se camber tot a
secroi.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸³ Ciggaar 1996, 21.

⁴⁸⁴ The quotation is from Ciggaar 1996, 21.

⁴⁸⁵ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4609–4613.

⁴⁸⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4614–4620.

I did not want to be discredited. When we had leisure and it would amuse the emperor that I performed some entertainment, he would have me come to the privacy of his chamber along with my masters.

As has been suggested by both Ferrante and Hanning, Melior's described entertainment can be understood as her competence in storytelling.⁴⁸⁷ Again, the romance thus paints a scenario of gender reversal; in this case, it is not women who partake in the composition of courtly romances in the roles of patrons or sponsors (in Green's terminology) to a male poet, but rather, the male character has the receiving function in this story, and the female character is the poet. Hanning argues that 'Mélior's art is here clearly equated with that of a composer of chivalric romance, and her father functions as its commissioning patron'.⁴⁸⁸ In this understanding of her character's relation to the act of storytelling, and consequently to the composition of the romance itself, Melior can be read as a representation of a woman storyteller, a woman poet. With its female protagonist, the romance thus creates a representation of a woman speaking in front of an audience of men.

Yet, even though Melior is the representation of a skilful storyteller, the need to keep her literary performance a secret can also tell us something about the reception of women's access to performing as poets or storytellers in public. But, not unlike Krueger's description of women's access to speech during this time, Melior's ability to create magic in the emperor's chambers can be understood as a perception of the female character's speech as admirable and powerful – but also as forced into silence, marginalised.

The romance gives several indications of the unfavourable position of women in masculine discourse. For example, in another passage, where the narrator defends women and blames clerics who discredit them:

⁴⁸⁷ Ferrante 1984, 32; Hanning 1981, 18.

⁴⁸⁸ Hanning 1981, 18.

Cil clerc ont des dames mesdit, | S'en me[n]tent molt en lor escrit.
 [...] N'a si bon clerc ne si proisant | El siecle, se si bien parlant, |
 S'il les dames voloit blasmer | Et a moi d'eles desputer, | Jo n'en
 preïsce a lui estrif | Et nel feïsce tot restif.⁴⁸⁹

Clerics who blame women tell plenty of lies in their writings [...]
 There is no cleric – no matter how esteemed or eloquent he may be
 – who, would he intend to blame women and debate them with me,
 I would not dispute until he lost his breath.

Both Melior and the narrator of the romance express a defiant attitude towards men in different ways; after the initial meeting and subsequent sexual encounter between Partonopeu and Melior, she tells him that men mock women with whom they have had sexual intercourse: 'You men really know how to mock and disparage us after you have got what you desired' (Car vos gens savés tant de gas | Que quant vos avés fait vos sés, | Al departir nos en gabés).⁴⁹⁰ Considering that Melior can be interpreted as forming a connection with the narrator and the romance poet himself, as Bruckner argues, the combination of how Melior expresses the idea of herself as marginalised in the discourse, and how the narrator explicitly accuses misogynistic texts of lying about women, which he wants to dispute, together could be interpreted as forming an argument in the text against misogyny.

Ferrante links Melior's knowledge to a context in which the 'enthusiasm for education in the twelfth century is real', and where an idea existed about knowledge, saying that it 'can provide wonderful powers, sometimes magical'.⁴⁹¹ She connects fictional women in romances to a general discussion about actual learned women of the Middle Ages. There are indeed examples from the twelfth century of women who received a notable education.⁴⁹² In addition to studying historical women,

⁴⁸⁹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 5487–5496.

⁴⁹⁰ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1318–1320.

⁴⁹¹ Ferrante 1984, 34.

⁴⁹² Ferrante focuses specifically on Héloïse, Hildegard of Bingen and Marie de France. Green also writes about learned women authors in Green (2007) 2011.

Ferrante also uses literary sources, indicating that these women were esteemed for their education. One of these sources is *Partonopeu de Blois*.

In the continuation of her speech about her magical skills, Melior explains that she made the room change size:

La faisoie par mon savoir | La cambre croistre et grant paroir. | Tant
par ert grans, ce lor ert vis, | Que tot proprenloit le païs. | Dedens
faisoie tel clarté | Con enmi un bel jor d'esté⁴⁹³

There, using my knowledge, I made the room grow and seem large. I made it so large that it seemed to them that it covered the entire country. Inside the room, I created such brightness that it seemed as though I had placed there a beautiful summer's day.

In Melior's description of her great knowledge, it is clear that rhetoric is an important factor. As a representation of the effects of rhetoric, Melior says that she can make the room grow at will, as well as making warriors appear and disappear:

Et puis faisoie cevaliers | Venir armés sor los destriers, | Mil u .ij.
mil a mon Plaisir | Et entr'aus mesler et ferir. | Ja ne verés plus dur
estor | Ne plus meslé qu'estoit li lor. | Tant con moi plaisoit se mes-
loient | Et puis a nient repairoient⁴⁹⁴

Then I had armed knights coming, mounted on their destriers – one or two thousand, whatever I felt like. And I had them throw themselves at each other in fierce battles. You will never see a fight as brutal or intense as theirs. They fought each other for as long as I wished, and then they returned to nothingness.

Although Melior describes herself as exceptionally powerful, her abilities seem to remain within the frame of the other's imagination.⁴⁹⁵ As though she was giving a description of the effects of *ekphrasis* and *enargeia*,

⁴⁹³ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4621–4626.

⁴⁹⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4627–4634.

⁴⁹⁵ Ferrante 1984, 32.

Melior can be interpreted as explaining the powers of rhetoric, being able to create visions inside the minds of her listeners. As Ferrante points out:

One cannot help thinking that the poet is describing the powers of the creative artist here, the one person who can actually make worlds appear and disappear at will, particularly since Melior also tells stories to her lover to entertain him.⁴⁹⁶

Indeed, when Partonopeu experiences the beautiful new city and life with his lover, the narrator describes how Melior entertains him with stories at night: ‘He went to the chamber’s bed, where he found Melior to his pleasure; there he found great enjoyment and laughter. It is not strange that he experienced such joy, for the blond one knows so well how to tell stories’ (En le cambre est al lit alés. | Od Melior a son delit ; | Assés i jue, assés i rit, | Et n’est mervelle s’il a joie, | Car tant li seït conter la bloie).⁴⁹⁷

In line with Hanning’s analysis, we can understand Partonopeu to symbolise the involved romance audience, whose active interpretative practice as listeners to a romance forms an essential part of the meaning of the story. Meaning is thus made dialogically, on every occasion that the narrative is told and heard. If Melior represents the poet who creates wonders and marvellous worlds in the imagination of the listener, then Partonopeu rather adds a sort of cynical realism to Melior’s enchantment, exemplified in his choice to bring light to the bedroom and thus break the magical world that Melior has created. Hanning writes that: ‘Partonopeu’s act of involvement, interpretation and desire for clear understanding permanently deflates Mélior’s illusions, re-establishes the social dimension of the romance’s world [...]’.⁴⁹⁸ In this sense, Partonopeu is at once Melior’s lover and audience.⁴⁹⁹

Partonopeu is described as taking pleasure from Melior’s storytelling, yet he interrupts it with his lantern. Melior’s knowledge seems to correspond with an actual appraisal of learned women in the twelfth-

⁴⁹⁶ Ferrante 1984, 32.

⁴⁹⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1856–1859.

⁴⁹⁸ Hanning 1981, 18.

⁴⁹⁹ Hanning 1981, 17.

century Western European context. According to Ferrante ‘the educated woman [...] can command the respect and attention of the male establishment, and the educated heroine [...] can elicit the sympathy of the audience.’ Thus, the educated twelfth-century woman is seen in a positive light.⁵⁰⁰ At the same time, in *Partonopeu de Blois*, we could interpret a reaction against accepting educated women into the male establishment. Melior can indeed be interpreted as the representation of an admirable storyteller and intellectual, yet her use of speech deals with an enforced marginalisation: she performs as a poet in private, defends herself against the slander that she expects from men after the sexual intercourse, and has her entire story disrupted by Partonopeu’s choice to objectify her with his lantern, as seen above. In Melior’s character, we thus see how desire and power relate to speech. Thus, when it comes to Melior’s access to speech, she finds herself caught between empowerment and marginalisation.

A Feminine Authorial Voice

As Neville argues, scholarship has perceived Anna Komnene in a fashion that is at odds with how Anna describes herself. Rather, subsequent perceptions of Anna might ‘have been shaped by the cultural challenges she faced in writing history as a woman’.⁵⁰¹ It seems as though, to the Byzantines, Anna was known for being an intellectual, which differs from the modern view of her as being an ambitious woman of intrigue.⁵⁰²

Anna writes herself into a literary discourse in which she has no ‘natural’ place. Since she is a woman, her entrance into the tradition of

⁵⁰⁰ Ferrante 1984, 34–35.

⁵⁰¹ Neville 2016, 92.

⁵⁰² Neville 2016, 92–93. Although she was the first-born child of Empress Eirene Doukaina and Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, her brother John became the ruler of the empire after their father’s death. It has been assumed, mostly due to Niketas Choniates’ records, that Anna Komnene tried to stage a coup against her brother after their father’s death, so that she could inherit the throne. This idea has only recently been questioned – for a long time, Anna was perceived as a woman of intrigue.

historical writing is in itself an act of defiance against the belief in women's inferiority as speakers. Neville describes Anna's need to combine the ideal of the history genre and the ideal of her gender at the same time. In a genre dominated by men, Neville argues that Anna's way of balancing identities – woman on the one hand and historian on the other – has had an effect on her modern reception as well. Accordingly, the modern reception has 'not recognized [...] Anna's vigorous efforts to look like a good woman while participating in a male activity [...]'.⁵⁰³

Writing a work of history in Anna's case is performative, in the sense that it *does something* in its mere act of writing historiography itself. The very writing of history, as a woman in the twelfth century, is in itself a gender transgression.⁵⁰⁴ Anna is described as *writing like a man* due to her use of masculine rhetorical models and her way of placing herself inside the masculine discourse. Yet, we can instead see that her voice itself changes the meaning of the discourse by including women and femininity through the performative act of uttering it. In other words, Anna's use of literary tradition and the masculine discourse does not erase her gender; rather, she fundamentally changes the meaning of rhetorical skill and competence, the very order of the tradition, and thus tradition itself – by including herself in it through the act of writing.

Women were involved in the creation of literature, both fiction and history, during the twelfth century. Anna stands out as being the first woman historian; however, her voice is only one of many feminine voices in literary sources of the time. Her historiographical work is best understood when it is not seen as composed separately from such a context. The *Alexiad* was written at a time during which literary subjectivity was under development and women were active interpreters within the courtly audiences. I believe that, if we read *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to Anna Komnene, we can reach deeper understandings of courtly women's participation in romance compositions as well as appreciating that there existed an idea of the court at Constantinople as a space for powerful women. In the following section, I will discuss Anna's way of

⁵⁰³ Neville 2016, 15.

⁵⁰⁴ Neville 2016, 15.

writing herself and women into the tradition of historiography in relation to *Partonopeu de Blois*, and more specifically to Melior's speech in the romance. Intellectual Byzantine women, and Anna specifically, could have worked as a source of inspiration for the romance, composed as it was within a culture that esteems learned women. Through the connection to Anna, I believe that *Partonopeu de Blois* creates a speaking female character who can escape the misogynistic premise, according to which women are able to speak only if they affirm their gender as inferior; as if, in order to speak, their female body would be something they needed to transcend.

Educated Daughters

The following scene in *Partonopeu de Blois* portrays Melior's verbal response to Partonopeu's act of lighting up their bedroom. After her non-verbal reaction, discussed in chapter 3, Melior regains her ability to speak and tells Partonopeu about herself. This passage is compared with Anna's presentation of herself in the prologue of the *Alexiad*.

The Alexiad

ταῦτα δὲ διεγνωκυῖα ἐγὼ Ἄννα,
θυγάτηρ μὲν τῶν βασιλέων
Ἀλεξίου καὶ Εἰρήνης, πορφύρας
τιθήνημά τε καὶ γέννημα, οὐ
γραμμάτων οὐκ ἄμοιρος, ἀλλὰ καὶ
τὸ ἐλληνίζειν ἐς ἄκρον
ἐσπουδακυῖα καὶ ῥητορικῆς οὐκ
ἀμελετήτως ἔχουσα καὶ τὰς
ἀριστοτελικὰς τέχνας εὖ
ἀναλεξαμένη καὶ τοὺς Πλάτωνος
διαλόγους καὶ τὸν νοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς
τετρακτύος τῶν μαθημάτων
πυκάσασα (δεῖ γὰρ ἐξορχεῖσθαι
ταῦτα, καὶ οὐ περιαιτολογία τὸ
πρᾶγμα, ὅσα ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ περὶ τὰς
ἐπιστήμας σπουδὴ δέδωκε καὶ ὁ

Partonopeu de Blois

Je fui fille l'empereor | Qui fu
casés de ceste honor. | De Cos-
tantinoble fu sire; | Quanqu'i
apent fu son empire. | Molt fu
cremus et molt amés | Et molt fu
ricement casés. | N'ot un seul
home en tot le mont | Tant feïst
ne tant eüst I | Fors seul le fier so-
dant de Perse, | Car se ricoise est
trop averse. | Mes peres par argu
fu cers, | Des ço que fui petis en
bers, | Qu'il n'avroit nul autre oir
que moi. | Si prist grant cure et
grant conroi | De moi afaitier et
garnir | Por l'empire par sens
tenir. | Maistres oi buens et de

Θεὸς ἄνωθεν ἐπεβράβευσε καὶ ὁ
καιρὸς συνεισήνεγκε)⁵⁰⁵

grant pris | Et je molt bonement
apris. | Maistres oi de grant essi-
ent | Par foïes bien plus dun cent.
| Deus me dona gracie d'apprendre
| Et d'escriitore bien entendre.⁵⁰⁶

I, Anna, daughter of the Emperor Alexios and the Empresse Eirene, born and bred in the purple, not without some acquaintance with literature – having devoted the most earnest study to the Greek language, in fact, and being not unpractised in rhetoric and having read thoroughly the works of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato, and having fortified my mind with the *tetrakus* of sciences (these things must be divulged, and it is not boasting to recall what Nature and my own zeal for knowledge have given me, nor what God has apportioned to me from above and what has been contributed by circumstance) [...].

I am the emperor's daughter, to whom I owe my honour. He was regent of Constantinople, so vast was his empire. He was much feared and much loved. And he was very rich; not a single man in the entire world would have had his power or wealth, except for the proud Persian sultan, since his fortune is extremely great. Having thought of it well, my parents were certain that from when I was but a baby, there would be no other heir but me. So they put much care and consideration into refining me and empowering me to hold the empire by using my intelligence. I had good and distinguished teachers and I learned a lot and well. Many teachers I had, sometimes many more than a hundred, God graced me to become learned and to become very wise through writings.

In the *Alexiad*, Anna introduces herself by referring to her powerful parents and solid education. Her legitimacy as the work's author is claimed by a description of her great knowledge of Greek literature, with reference to Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoras. Anna thus describes herself as

⁵⁰⁵ The *Alexiad*, prol.1.2.

⁵⁰⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4559–4580.

being solidly educated in the Greek literary canon of men thinkers, and places herself in their tradition by writing in a traditional Atticising Greek, and in the genre of historiography.

By comparing Anna's presentation of herself as a legitimate author with the passage in the Old French romance where Melior presents herself to Partonopeu, we can see that both 'the distinguished Anna' and 'the honoured Melior' owe their gratitude to their imperial home, which introduced them to the wonders of learning. Like Anna, Melior is described as an emperor's daughter. Anna refers to herself as honoured or distinguished, a self-image that also resonates in Melior's speech.

Moreover, Anna emphasises her privileges in her self-description, which Melior also does in the speech that she gives to Partonopeu: in both passages, learning is explained by their imperial upbringing. Melior had many distinguished teachers.⁵⁰⁷ Anna thanks her fortunate circumstances for her education. This privilege is also, in both texts, described as due to God's grace.

One could speak of a certain paternal identification in both passages. Fostered by their parents, the two speaking voices could be interpreted as linking learning with the connection between father and daughter. This could indeed, one could argue, be read in relation to the view of an inferiority inherent in the female sex, as though the act of writing or of speaking – by *nature* – is not something that women can pursue; thus, a connection with the father is required. In this sense, an erasure of the feminine in both Anna's and Melior's voices can be seen as a strategy to articulate one's voice as a woman – but, as will be demonstrated, this explanation is not sufficient to interpret either case.

Claiming authority by alignment with the father echoes Beauvoir's utopian descriptions of an androgynous world at the end of *Le Deuxième sexe*, describing the need for *fraternité*.⁵⁰⁸ Beauvoir depicts a world in which girls are raised on equal terms with boys, and with both their

⁵⁰⁷ Moreover, Melior's knowledge has been argued as possibly alluding to interests that Manuel Komnenos was known to have; Becovici-Huard 1982, 122.

⁵⁰⁸ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 645 and 652.

parents as role models. According to Meghan Burke, this is not a representation of a desire to make women similar to men, or to erase sexual difference. Instead, Beauvoir is interpreted as creating a new utopian space, by using masculine terminology.⁵⁰⁹ In speaking the language of men, Beauvoir transforms the concept of *fraternité*, and forces it – by her performative act of writing it – to include women into a tradition from which they have been excluded. Anna writes about the importance of her mother as well as her father, which will be analysed more deeply below. Moreover, in the Old French romance passage, Melior tells Partonopeu that both her parents decided the shape of her upbringing. There is no trace in these texts to suggest that this authority comes from ‘transcending’ one’s sex. Neither the voice of Anna nor that of Melior affirms the idea of being inferior by nature, due to their female sex. Rather, they include themselves into the sphere of learning by defining themselves as daughters.⁵¹⁰

Modest Storytellers

As already mentioned, Melior’s magical entertainment in her father’s chambers has been connected to the act of storytelling. Moreover, her storytelling forms part of her lustful activities with Partonopeu. Furthermore, the representation of storytelling in the romance could be positioned in relation to the social occasion of literary performance in the twelfth century, in both the East and the West. The passage where Melior speaks about her ability to create miracles in the privacy of her room, discussed above, could be compared with Anna’s description of her father Alexios’ storytelling. Anna describes her father’s ways of telling war stories for their circle’s amusement. Based on Ferrante’s and Hanning’s analyses, we could read Melior’s ability of magical entertaining as metaphors for storytelling, while, simultaneously, we could also read it as inspired by Anna’s description of Alexios’ storytelling. As already seen,

⁵⁰⁹ Burke 2018, 4.

⁵¹⁰ For Anna’s way of balancing between being a good historian and a good daughter, which was a difficult combination; see Neville 2016, 43–60.

Melior describes her ability to make the room change size, to make it bright, and then have armed knights enter, whom she made to fight each other in intense battles.⁵¹¹ In the same vein, Anna describes Alexios' stories from battle:

συγχύσεως δὲ πολλῆς οὐσης τῶν μὲν φευγόντων, τῶν δὲ διωκόντων φθάνουσιν αὐθις ἕτεροι Σκύθαι τὸν βασιλέα, καὶ ὃς παραχρῆμα ἐπιστραφεὶς πλήττει τὸν διώκοντα, οὐκ αὐτὸν δὲ μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἄλλους, ὡς οἱ τότε συμπαρόντες διενίσταντο, ἀνεῖλεν. εἷς δὲ τις Σκύθης Νικηφόρον τὸν Διογένην ἐξ ὀπισθίων φθάσας πλήττει ἔμελλεν, ὃν ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ θεασάμενος πρὸς τὸν Διογένην ἐφώνει· ‘ὄρα καὶ ὄπιθεν, Νικηφόρε’· ὁ δὲ γοργῶς ἐπιστραφεὶς πλήττει αὐτὸν κατὰ τῆς ὀψεως. καὶ ὡς τοῦ βασιλέως ἐν | ὑστέροις χρόνοις διηγουμένου ἠκούομεν, οὐδέποτε τάχος τοιοῦτον ἢ περιδεξιότητα ἀνδρὸς ἐθεάσατο, καὶ ὡς ‘εἰ μή’, φησὶν, ‘ἐγὼ τὴν σημαίαν κατεῖχον κατ’ ἐκείνην τὴν ἡμέραν, ὑπὲρ τὰς ἰδίας τρίχας πλήξας ἂν Σκύθας ἀνεῖλον’, οὐ περιαιτολογῶν. τίς γὰρ τοσοῦτον εἰς ἔσχατον ταπεινότητος ἤλασεν; ἀλλὰ γὰρ ὁ λόγος καὶ τῶν πραγμάτων ἢ φύσις αὐτὸν ἠνάγκαζε καὶ τὰ κατ’ αὐτὸν πρὸς ἡμᾶς κυκλόθεν τοὺς οἰκείους αὐτῷ ἐνίστε ἐκλαλεῖν καὶ ταῦτα παρ’ ἡμῶν πολλὰ βιαζόμενον· πρὸς δὲ τοὺς ἔξωθεν οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀπάντων ἤκουσεν ὑπέρκομπόν τι τὸν αὐτοκράτορα διηγούμενον.⁵¹²

In the great confusion, with some fleeing and others chasing, other Scythians again caught up with the emperor, who quickly wheeled round and hit the pursuer who was closest to him. Nor was he the only one to be killed by the emperor; according to the evidence of eyewitnesses, others met the same fate. One Scythian came up on Nikephoros Diogenes from behind and was about to strike, when the emperor saw him and shouted to Diogenes, ‘Look out! Behind you, Nikephoros!’ Turning swiftly Nikephoros hit hard at the man’s face. In later years we have heard Alexios tell that story; never, he said, had he seen such agility and speed of hand. ‘If I had not been holding the standard that day,’ he went on, ‘I would have killed more Scythians than I have hairs on my head’ – and he was not bragging. Was there ever a man who took modesty to such degrees?

⁵¹¹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4621–4634 (see above).

⁵¹² The *Alexiad*, VII.3.11.

However, when the conversation and the subject of discussion compelled it, he would sometimes tell of his adventures to us, his relatives, in our own circle, especially if we put much pressure on him to do so. But nobody ever heard the emperor say anything boastful in public.

Not unlike how Anna describes a battle of intense confusion, Melior describes how she creates intense battle in the romance.⁵¹³ As already seen, Melior defends her choice of keeping her stories inside her private chambers due to the risk of being discredited.⁵¹⁴ In the quoted passage from the *Alexiad*, Anna defends Alexios' choice of telling his adventures to his relatives in their own circle, due to his reluctance to brag in front of everybody, which in turn could be compared to Melior's reluctance to create miracles in front of the people. In her prologue, Anna also expresses fear of the public's suspicion: 'Now that I have decided to write the story of his life, I am fearful of wagging and suspicious tongues: someone might conclude that I am glorifying myself' (ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς ἐκείνου πράξεις προελομένη συγγράφειν δέδοικα τὸ ὑφορμοῦν τὲ καὶ ὑποτρέχον, μὴ ποτε λογίσαιτό τις τὰ τοῦ ἐμοῦ πατρὸς συγγράφουσιν τὰ ἑαυτῆς ἐπαινέειν).⁵¹⁵ Thalia Gouma-Peterson argues that Anna thus describes herself as belonging to the 'most important rooms of the imperial palace': 'By placing herself in this space, both physically and symbolically, at the beginning of her text, Anna establishes the importance of her own life, which she will press forward in terms of both physical and chronological detail'.⁵¹⁶ The fear of being miscredited expressed by Melior in *Partonopeu de Blois* could be interpreted in relation to Anna's expressed fear of suspicion, or women's access to speech seeming to be problematised and questioned by a general opinion.

⁵¹³ Et entr'aus mesler et ferir. | Ja ne verés plus dur estor | Ne plus meslé qu'estoit li lor, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4630–4632 (see above).

⁵¹⁴ En mes cambres priveement, | Que se ce fust devant le gent, | Par tot en fust la renomée, | Mais n'en vuel estre decreee, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4611–4613 (see above).

⁵¹⁵ The *Alexiad*, prol.II.2.

⁵¹⁶ Gouma-Peterson 2000, 110.

In the passage from the *Alexiad*, Alexios' speech is quoted in Anna's description. It is as though Anna describes the scene for the audience to imagine, hearing Alexios' words spoken through her voice to evoke the feeling of *his* having been present. In this sense, the passage can be understood as having the effect of *ekphrasis*, recreating Alexios' storytelling in the audience's mind. There is thus a difference between this and the Old French passage, since Melior tells Partonopeu about how *she*, not anyone else, created magic. Melior tells about her storytelling (if we agree on interpreting the magic as such) indirectly, mentioning only its effects. In fact, Melior tells about the effect of *enargeia* in her audience, compared with the quoted passage from the *Alexiad*, which could be read as narrating such a rhetorical practice. In this sense, Melior can be interpreted in relation to both the Alexios figure from Anna's narration, and Anna herself, who tells her story. Once again, Melior can thus be read as connected to the narrator and the romance poet; her described storytelling in private could be read in relation to Alexios' retold storytelling, but even more so in relation to Anna, the rhetorician.

Thus, it may be suggested that, by reading *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to the *Alexiad*, we could see Melior's character as the representation of a powerful authority that, with her (imaginary) Byzantine aspect, forms another kind of character than those which may be found in other works of courtly literature.

Powerful Women

As mentioned in the example of Psellos' speech to be given by Theodora, women who speak must work around the idea that they do not have the ability to speak on the same terms as men. Indeed, from Anna's way of appropriating the history genre and ideal rhetorical models, along with linking her education to her imperial upbringing, she could at first glance be seen as excusing the inferiority of her sex by compensating for it with her closeness to her father. She can hence be read as applying the rhetorical discourse, in which 'women may speak authoritatively as long as they admit to their natural limitations and submit to the moral

expectations of men’, as Papaioannou writes.⁵¹⁷ Within these discursive frames that trap women in an inferior position, feminine voices are almost exclusively expressed from a masculine perspective.⁵¹⁸ Within these frames, Anna can be described as writing like a man. Yet, I would like to stress that there is a difference between what Psellos does in his oration to Theodora, and what Anna does in her *Alexiad*. Anna does not erase femininity in her self-presentation as being competent on masculine terms. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Anna emphasises the women role-models who, along with her father, have been important to her. Gouma-Peterson argues that Anna ‘forcefully establishes her maternal genealogy as a model and organising image for her own social relations and authorial production, in spite of the fact that throughout her text she is careful to remind us that she is her father’s devoted daughter’.⁵¹⁹ By linking herself to the women in her family, Anna thus establishes her authorial identity: she is the daughter of the emperor – but not least of a line of mothers.

In one passage in particular in the *Alexiad*, Anna writes that, during her childhood, she used to observe her mother reading books at the dinner table: ‘Many a time when a meal was already served I remember seeing my mother with a book in her hands’ (μέμνημαι τῆς μητρὸς καὶ βασιλίδος πολλάκις ἀρίστου προκειμένου βιβλὸν ἐν χειροῖν φερούσης).⁵²⁰ The passage continues with a description of the veneration that the young Anna had for her mother’s reading of dogmata and philosophy. Therefore, Anna writes in her text, she once asked her mother how she dared to consume such abstract and intellectual words:

καί μοι πολλάκις θαυμάζειν ἐπήει καὶ θαυμάζουσα ἔφην ποτὲ πρὸς αὐτήν· ‘πῶς αὐτόθεν πρὸς τοσοῦτον ὕψος ἀπέβλεψας; ἔγωγε τρέμω καὶ οὐδ’ ἄκροις ὥσιν ἀποτολμῶ τούτων ἐπαῖειν· τὸ γὰρ πάνυ θεωρητικόν τε καὶ νοερὸν τοῦ ἀνδρός, ὥς φασιν, ἱλιγγον παρέχεται τοῖς ἀναγινώσκουσιν’. ἡ δὲ μειδιάσασα ἔφη· ‘ἐπαινετὴν οἶδα τὴν

⁵¹⁷ Papaioannou 2013, 217.

⁵¹⁸ Papaioannou 2013, 217.

⁵¹⁹ Gouma-Peterson 2000, 109.

⁵²⁰ The *Alexiad* V.9.3.

δειλίαν ταύτην· καὶ οὐδ' αὐτὴ ἀτρέμας ταῖς βίβλοις ταύταις
 πρόσειμι, ἀλλ' ὅμως ἀποσπᾶσθαι τούτων οὐ δύναμαι. σὺ δέ μοι
 μικρὸν ἀνάμεινον καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις ἐγκύψασα βίβλοις πρότερον καὶ
 τῆς τούτων ἀπογεύσῃ ἡδύτητος'. ἔτρωσέ μου τὴν καρδίαν ἢ τῶν
 ῥηθέντων μνήμη καὶ ὥσπερ εἰς πέλαγος ἄλλων διηγημάτων
 ἐμπέπτωκα⁵²¹

It often occurred to me to wonder at this, and as a result I once asked her: 'How could you of your own accord aspire to such sublimity? For my part, I tremble and dare not consider such things even in the smallest degree. The man's writing, so highly abstract and intellectual, makes the reader's head swim'. She smiled. 'Your reluctance is commendable, I'm sure', she replied, 'and I myself do not approach such books without a tremble. Yet I cannot tear myself away from them. Wait a little and after a closer look at other books, believe me, you will taste the sweetness of these'. The memory of her words pierces my heart and plunges me into a sea of other reminiscences.

In her description of her mother's reading, Anna initially describes a fear of appropriating the masculine tradition, and then she ridicules this fear. Her mother's reading is at first described as hubris: Anna herself (ἑγωγε) would never dare to study such venerated subjects, especially the theories and intellectual affairs of men (τοῦ ἀνδρός).⁵²² The passage is framed by rhetorical markers indicating that the scene is not part of the informative staple of events, but that it should rather be considered a digression. Before writing about her mother's reading habits, Anna introduces the

⁵²¹ The *Alexiad* V.9.3.

⁵²² This could, moreover, be compared to Christine de Pizan's use of her autobiographical voice. Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet describes Christine to 'reprend à la fois des images masculines de l'écriture, la forge, par exemple, mais auxquelles elle ôte leur caractère sexuel masculin pour les adapter à sa situation de femme'; Cerquiglini-Toulet 1994, 83. She can thus be described as appropriating the masculine discourse to utter her own voice. In the passage where Anna Komnene describes her mother's reading of men's texts, we could see the same sort of appropriation, where a woman turns the language and tradition that have not set out to include her, into her own. In the prologue, we have seen that Anna had indeed turned the masculine tradition into her own.

passage by saying that she will digress from her narrative, and that rhetoric allows her to: ‘I will digress here for a moment – the law of rhetoric will not grudge me that privilege’ (ἀλλά τι μικρὸν παραδιηγῆσομαι· δίδωσι γάρ μοι τοῦτο νόμος ῥητορικός).⁵²³ Thus separated from the main plot of her historical account, the passage works as an ekphrastic image from Anna’s childhood. The audience of the *Alexiad* is invited into young Anna’s perception, to see, after dinner has been served, her mother holding a book. The audience is placed in a concrete, informal, setting, and Eirene is described as holding a book in her hands – the text thus describes this mother-daughter relationship in a concrete way, leading the audience, who sees the admirable mother through the young girl’s eyes, to identify with the girl. An experience of being a young girl is written into a tradition dominated by men.

Yet, the reader is also invited to see the scene through *adult* Anna’s eyes, as she writes about her reaction to the memory that she describes.⁵²⁴ The scene at the dinner table, as it is described in the text itself, has the effect of *enargeia*. Through the use of rhetoric, the scene depicting the mother’s reading writes the body of growing up within a masculine discourse: the fear of men’s books and the experienced exclusion from them. The audience is invited to identify with these described feelings, to see the discourse through the eyes of the excluded. The narrative audience, based on Rabinowitz’ categorisation, can be interpreted as taking Anna’s modest rhetorical markers literally; as she describes her mother’s piety, piety and modesty can appear as that which the narrative audience appreciates. The authorial audience, however, can be interpreted as taking into account also Anna’s voice and eyes; the autobiographical account that also depicts the woman author at work. The actual audience must, as Rabinowitz argues, understand the authorial audience in order to understand

⁵²³ The *Alexiad*, V.9.3. The passage then concludes with Anna saying that the law of history obliges her to continue her narration: ‘But the law of history forbids me: we must return to the affairs of Italos’ (ἀλλά με θεσμός ιστορίας ἀπείργει· ἔνθεν τοι καὶ πρὸς τὰ κατὰ τὸν Ἰταλὸν ἀνατρεχέτω ὁ λόγος), *The Alexiad*, V.9.3.

⁵²⁴ This could be seen in comparison to Christine de Pizan’s descriptions during the process of discovering the path of learning in *Le Chemin de longue étude*. Both Anna and Christine write their perceptions and bodies into their respective works.

the text in question. Thus, using her autobiographical voice in her text, Anna imposes her experience as a girl facing high literature on her audience.

In this way, Anna's anecdote can be compared to Beauvoir's previously discussed anecdote, in which a man tells her that her opinion is the result of her sex. As Anna's notion of the girl's access to the masculine tradition is told as a story, more specifically as a dialogue between herself and her mother, the experience can be described as a philosophical dialogue, using Moi's words from her discussion on Beauvoir's anecdote: 'The dialogue is the form or the genre closest to the heart of the kind of philosophy that proceeds from ordinary language'.⁵²⁵ Anna's description of fear against masculine texts can be compared to Beauvoir's description of irritation when faced with the man's utterance, according to which her voice can articulate only the voice of the 'other'. Both Anna and Beauvoir thus use their own identities in order to question their position as 'other' in relation to men.⁵²⁶ The passage in the *Alexiad* not only describes venerable respect towards literature, but also a defiant approach to the fear that it imposes. Eirene's smile, as a reaction to young Anna's comment, could be interpreted as a response to the idea that the sphere of learning and rhetoric is inaccessible to women due to their 'nature'. In her discussion on Beauvoir's anecdote, Moi describes the effects of turning 'one's own experience into a philosophical example':

To speak is to participate in the production of meaning. What I mean by my words will be taken as partly constitutive of what the words mean in the language. Fundamentally, it follows from this

⁵²⁵ Moi 1999, 219.

⁵²⁶ This could, furthermore, be compared with Christine de Pizan's use of her own autobiographical voice in her writings. Cerquiglini-Toulet describes how Christine uses the feminine identity and position that the literary tradition forces upon her, to her own advantage by exploiting this feminine condition to construct a narrative persona; Cerquiglini-Toulet 1994, 81–82. Cerquiglini-Toulet writes that Christine thus positions herself within a global tendency of the fourteenth century, however, as we can see in Anna Komnene's writings, this way of forming an autobiographical, feminine voice can be traced already in the twelfth century.

that my usage exemplifies the meaning of a word as well as anyone else's usage.⁵²⁷

As they write themselves and their personal experiences into their texts, both Beauvoir and Anna bring new meaning to the tradition and discourse, from which they seem to be excluded. Indeed, as Gouma-Peterson notes (and Anna writes herself), the *Alexiad* is not only a work of history, but also Anna's autobiography.⁵²⁸ At the same time throughout her work, the historian establishes that she is writing the truth.⁵²⁹ Both Beauvoir and Anna can thus, in their respective writings, be seen as defining themselves as speaking subjects, albeit without renouncing their feminine identities.

All that being said, the worship of men's writings that Anna describes in this passage from her childhood has already been nuanced in her prologue, as discussed above. Although Anna describes her childhood fears of approaching the masculine tradition, she has already distanced herself from this very fear earlier in the same text. As we have seen, in her prologue Anna describes herself as having read esteemed authors such as Plato, Socrates and Pythagoras. Thus, she assures her reader of her distinguished education and ability to understand abstract theories and intellectual affairs, formulated by men before her. In the reminiscence of her childhood, Anna describes her mother to be her inspiration in daring to incorporate difficult literature into the *Alexiad* – a work that in itself, indeed, can be said to symbolise a woman's fearlessness towards the masculine tradition.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁷ Moi 1999, 227.

⁵²⁸ Gouma-Peterson 2000, 107.

⁵²⁹ Gouma-Peterson 2000, 119. Moreover, this can also be seen in light of Christine de Pizan. Cerquiglini-Toulet describes her to 's'inscrire dans un paradigme des défenseurs et martyrs de la vérité', and argues that Christine thus places herself in the tradition of Aristotle and Socrates (for proclaiming monotheism); Cerquiglini-Toulet 1994, 80.

⁵³⁰ This interpretation should be put in consideration of Dalven's emphasis on admirable piety in the passage, and the passage as relating to Eirene's overall admirable modesty; Dalven 1972, 65. However, this should then in turn be seen in the light of Anna's way of proving her literary knowledge and education through the, with Neville's words, 'vocabulary and textual fabric of her writing'; Neville 2016, 35. The

When Anna claims authority by inscribing her own authorial *ego* into her historiographical work, as well as by defining herself as closely connected to her parents, we might say that she uses the same strategy as Beauvoir does in her appropriation of the word *fraternité*. Anna writes within an exclusively masculine tradition. By placing herself in that tradition, describing herself in her text as its author, she appropriates a masculine discourse, placing herself within it. By writing her feminine voice into the masculine tradition, Anna fundamentally changes this tradition through the performative act of writing.

In the *Alexiad*, we see that Anna makes her world androgyne in Beauvoir's sense.⁵³¹ She describes herself as being brought up with the expectations of learning on masculine terms, by both her parents. In the *Alexiad*, Anna could be interpreted as identifying with both of them.

Anna attributes authority to women role-models. She repeatedly describes the intelligence and political influence of her mother and grandmother in the text. In one particular passage, she describes how her father Alexios made his mother, Anna Dalassene, an equal ruler to himself, while he was absent from the court during warfare. The situation is described as though the power was indeed transferred to the women's quarters. As if aware of the controversy of such a statement, Anna prevents the (narrative) audience from blaming the emperor for it, as she underlines the intelligence of the women in her family:

καὶ ἦν τὸ πρᾶγμα ὅλως τοιοῦτον· ἐκεῖνος μὲν γὰρ σχῆμα βασιλείας εἶχεν, ἡ δὲ τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτήν· καὶ ἡ μὲν ἐθεσμοθέτει, διώκει τὸ πᾶν, ἐπρυτάνευεν, ὁ δὲ τὰς διοικήσεις ἐκείνης καὶ τὰς ἐγγράφους καὶ τὰς ἀγράφους, τὰς μὲν χειρί, τὰς δὲ φωναῖς ἐπεσφράγιζε, καί, ὥς οὕτω γε φάναι, ὄργανον ἦν αὐτῇ βασιλείας, οὐ βασιλεύς. ἡρέσκετο γὰρ ἐφ' ἅπασιν, οἷς ἡ μήτηρ διαγνοίη καὶ | διορίσειε, καὶ

text not only speaks, but it also *does*, so-to-speak. The modesty that Anna describes in admiration of her mother is thus combined with an overall defiance against that which, as she is faced with it, a woman should be modest about.

⁵³¹ Beauvoir, (1949) 1976, 645.

οὐχ' ὡς μητρί μόνον καταπειθέστατος ἦν, ἀλλὰ γὰρ ὡς ἐξάρχῳ βασιλικῆς ἐπιστήμης ταύτη προσεῖχε τὸν νοῦν.⁵³²

I can sum up the whole situation thus: he was in theory the emperor, but she had real power. She was the legislator, the complete organizer and governor, while he confirmed her arrangements, written and unwritten, the former by his signature, the latter by his spoken approval. One might say that he was indeed the instrument of her power – he was not emperor, for all the decisions and ordinances of his mother satisfied him, not merely as an obedient son, but as an attentive listener to her instruction in the art of ruling.

As we can see, then, governing here is not considered to be the exclusive privilege of men, something that is also the case in *Partonopeu de Blois*.⁵³³ In the romance, Melior tells her lover that he will be the ruler in the official sense, if he obeys her. Being her parents' only heir, Melior is the true ruler of the Empire. She needs a husband, for which reason she has brought Partonopeu to her palace: 'The entire Byzantium is my empire; you shall be its king and sire, if you wish to follow my lead, which will not be a demanding task for you' (Tote Besance est mes empires, | Vos en serés et rois et sires | Se mon conseil volés tenir, | Qui legiers vous ert a souffrir).⁵³⁴ Partonopeu is in this sense comparable to Alexios in the quoted passage from Anna's text. He is an instrument for the woman, so that, in fact, she can act as ruler.

If the feminine voices in Byzantine discourse are, as Papaioannou describes them, almost exclusively a reflection of the masculine idea of feminine inferiority, then Anna's *Alexiad* represents something different, a feminine voice that does not seem to conform to the limits of men's expectations. Instead, Anna's literary voice appears to define a different view of gender, as she ascribes herself the same legitimacy as men authors have, by informing us about her own erudite learning and experience of reading. Although she depicts herself as well-read in the

⁵³² The *Alexiad*, III.7.5.

⁵³³ Gouma-Peterson describes that Anna Dalassene was seen as a matriarch in the text; Gouma-Peterson 2000, 114.

⁵³⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1337–1340.

masculine tradition, she also writes about her corporeal experience as a young girl who feared it. As she describes Empress Eirene to be an educated exemplar during her upbringing, portraying the childhood vision of her mother with a book in her hands as they sat at table, she does not write the feminine voice from a masculine perspective. Rather, using rhetorical techniques, she invites her audience to envision that which she herself saw as a child; thus, she invites her audience to see with the eyes of a young girl, as well as the eyes of a woman who remembers that young girl's experience.⁵³⁵

If we read *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to Anna's *Alexiad*, I believe that we could increase our understanding of the time's literary situation, and what the romance genre was able to articulate. The speeches uttered by the female protagonist Melior could be read in relation to Anna's writings; her way of presenting herself and her legitimacy as an author. In her speeches, Melior claims authority and power in relation to her lover; as she speaks, she gains control in her relationship, and the directives that she utters progress the romantic plot: her speech defines the relationship rules, it banishes Partonopeu from her city, and it will then have him win her hand in marriage – which we will see subsequently. Melior's proposed marriage arrangement entails an equality between her and Partonopeu, with them both being influential parties in the Empire.

Melior echoes Anna's feminine voice, her *ego* (ἐγώ), as it were, written into a masculine tradition. As she defines herself as the speaker of her historical record, Anna's *ego* holds a subject position in relation to her audience (*tu*).⁵³⁶ Thus, by writing herself into her text, Anna writes a

⁵³⁵ In Christine de Pizan's *Le Chemin de longue étude* we could see a similar occurrence of narrating a young girl's experience and perspective, as in the closing of her text where her mother wakes her up from her long dream of learning, described as amazed that young Christine is still in bed although it is so late (Ja estoye bas desjuchee | Ce me sembloit, quant fus huchee | De la mere qui me porta, | Qu'a l'uy de ma chambre hurta, | Qui de tant gesir s'emerveille, | Car tart estoit, et je m'esveille), *Le Chemin de longue étude*, 6395–6398.

⁵³⁶ Indeed, this alludes to Benveniste's description of language subjectivity; Benveniste 1976, 259–260.

feminine voice into the genre of history. Melior appears to channel a similar feminine voice in her speeches. The feminine voice is a representation of power, yet, at the same time, it acknowledges an experience of marginalisation. In the space between marginalisation and empowerment, feminine subjectivity finds space for articulation.

Speech as a Struggle

As mentioned above, the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois* accuses misogynistic clerics of telling lies in their writings when they blame women for bad conduct. The narrator can thus be said to play a polemical role in relation to others in the sphere of writing. In the prologue, the narrator defies clerics who write in Latin, thus making their writings inaccessible to many: ‘These clerics say that it is of no use that I write about ancient times since I do not write in Latin, and that I am just wasting my time’ (Cil clerc dient que n’est pas sens | Qu’es[c]rive estoire d’antif tens | Quand jo nes escriis en latin, | Et que je perç mon tans en fin).⁵³⁷ He further states that what he does, as opposed to what the accused clerics do, is accessible for everyone to hear, see and draw meaning and examples from.⁵³⁸ With these sorts of extradiegetic digressions from the narrative, the narrator defines a conflict between himself and the clerical discourse. Adding the claim that his story will be accessible for everyone to find meaning in, as well as the claim that misogynistic clerics lie in their writings, the narrator becomes the configuration of a stance in opposition to a masculine literary discourse. The romance thus appears to distance itself from this discourse through the narrator’s voice. The narrator represents, it seems, a different voice from the apparently misogynistic one of clerics.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 77–80.

⁵³⁸ Et cil i partent seulement | Qui od els sont al giu present; | Mais al mien deduit partiront | Tuit cil qui l’oront et veront. | S’en pora l’on traire tos tens | Et grant exemple et grant sens, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 89–94.

⁵³⁹ I discuss this also in Söderblom Saarela 2016b.

In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, one also finds a critical view of the masculine discourse. The protagonists have become slaves; after having been separated since Hysmine had been thrown into the sea during their adventure, they are now reunited, but can show affection only by pretending to be brother and sister in front of their masters. While deliberating upon their unfortunate fate, and how to find a solution, Hysmine argues that Hysminias must show affection for her mistress Rhodope, who desires him. Hysminias, however, does not want to be affectionate with anyone but Hysmine, which he explains by articulating his passion for her: ‘The fiction and pretence of passion for Rhodope I reject; on you alone, Hysmine, and your graces have I bestowed all my eyes’ (Τὸν δέ γε πρὸς Ῥοδόπην ἔρωτα καὶ μέχρι πλάσματος ὀκνῶ καὶ σκηνῆς· σοὶ γάρ, Ὑσμίνη, μόνῃ καὶ χάρισι σαῖς ὅλους ἐχαρισάμην τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς).⁵⁴⁰ Hysmine responds: ‘I do not respect passion with words alone, because I hate the profit that brings me a penalty’ (οὐ γλώσση μόνῃ τὸν ἔρωτα σέβομαι, ὅτι καὶ κέρδος μισῶ ζημίας μοι πρόξενον).⁵⁴¹ For fear of being punished, Hysmine wants to remain chaste and instead try to persuade Rhodope to grant them freedom. Hysminias responds to her by quoting Euripides’ *Medea*, claiming that women become vile when they are mistreated in bed:

Κἀγὼ φημι πρὸς αὐτήν· ‘Κἂν φύσει τὸ θῆλυ θερμότερον, κἂν φύσει τρεπτόν, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὴν τραγωδίαν | ὅταν <δ> ἐς εὐνήν ἡδικομένη κυρῇ, | οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλη φρὴν μαιφονωτέρα’.⁵⁴²

I said to her, ‘Even if the female sex is more ardent, and more changeable by nature, nevertheless, as the tragedy says, | When she is wronged in the marriage bed, | there is no mind more bloodthirsty’.

⁵⁴⁰ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.22.3.

⁵⁴¹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.22.4–5.

⁵⁴² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.23.1.; E. Jeffreys, 2012, p.253, n.282. Furthermore, I discuss this and the following passage also in Söderblom Saarela 2016b.

In his use of ancient tragedy, Hysminias can be interpreted as making use of the tradition in order to win his argument with Hysmine, by claiming her sex to be vicious and dangerous. Hysmine responds to his accusation by also quoting an ancient tragedy, this time Sophocles' *Electra*:

Ἡ δ' ἀλλὰ μικρὸν ὑποσσηρυῖα τὴν παρειὰν 'Μακάριόν μοι' φησὶ
'τὸ τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἄτρεπτον καὶ πρὸς ἔρωτος θερμὴν ψυχρότερον. |
Τὶ γάρ με λυπεῖ τοῦθ', ὅταν λόγῳ θανὼν | ἔργοισι σωθῶ
κάξενέγκωμαι κλέος;⁵⁴³

Her cheeks quivered slightly as she said, 'Blessings on men's constancy and their cold good sense in face of passion's fire. | Why should this upset me, when I die in word | but am saved by action, and carry off the glory?'

As mentioned in the discussion on Anna Komnene's transformation of the tradition in which she participates, by the mere act of writing as a woman, the female character ventriloquises the ancient tradition into her own mouth and, in repeating it, the tradition is transformed into her own words: the tradition established by men – the ancient tragedies – becomes accessible for her to use. In the mere citing of ancient tragedy, we see articulations of subjectivity; Hysmine takes Sophocles' words and turn them into her own, through her voice.

In both *Partonopeu de Blois* and *Hysmine and Hysminias*, we see the idea of tradition as an area of struggle between men and women. Yet, we also see a reaction against a masculine, in fact misogynistic, discourse. Both texts deal with language. As we have seen, Melior's access to speech can be read as an instrument of power in her relationship with Partonopeu: by speaking, she states the conditions of their relationship as well as her status as powerful.

Hysmine's relation to speech appears a bit more complicated. As noted above, in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, both main characters 'pay mere lip-service' to chastity, as Jouanno puts it, in their 'outward sign of

⁵⁴³ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.23.2.; E. Jeffreys 2012, 253, n.283.

modesty'.⁵⁴⁴ We can see an example of such conventional modesty when the lovers are released from slavery and reunited, celebrating with a feast in a priest's house in the presence of Hysmine's parents. Hysminias has recounted their adventures, and the priest then turns to Hysmine, asking her to complement his story with her own. Hysmine however, refuses to speak, by referring to modesty:

Ἡ δὲ πρὸς αὐτόν· ‘Φεῖσαι γλώσσης ἐμῆς, πρὸς Ἀπόλλωνος
Σωτῆρος· | γλώσση (γὰρ) παρθενικῇ αἰδῶς τοι προσκαθιζάνει. |
Μηδὲ γὰρ οὕτω πάντολμος εἶην, ὥς τὸν πατέρα μὴ φρίττειν καὶ τὴν
μητέρα περιφρονεῖν· σιγὴ παρθένοις κόσμος καὶ γλώσσης
φειδῶ’.⁵⁴⁵

Spare my tongue, by the saviour Apollo; for modesty inhibits my maidenly tongue. I would never be so bold as to alarm my father and shock my mother. Silence and sparing speech are a maiden's adornment.

Thus, the narrative stresses the female character's passivity in conversation.⁵⁴⁶ In the Komnenian novels, we see representations of difficulties 'in keeping with the ideal of virginal modesty'.⁵⁴⁷ Put in another way, the novels could be described as balancing dominant norms and ideals by simultaneously resisting them. From this perspective, *Hysmine and Hysminias* is an example of a literary work in which a culture of masculine dominance is challenged, by means of reflecting a feminine experience through the male narrator's voice.

In the quoted passage, Hysmine actively confirms Byzantine feminine ideals, opting to remain silent when the priest wishes her to speak. Her father, Sosthenes, does not approve. It thus seems as though a dilemma is described in Hysmine's situation. She can either disobey cultural norms or disobey the priest and her father's wishes. Sosthenes is

⁵⁴⁴ Jouanno 2006, 162.

⁵⁴⁵ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.11.2.

⁵⁴⁶ Jouanno 2006, 145.

⁵⁴⁷ Jouanno 2006, 145.

angry at his daughter's apparent hypocrisy; norms mean nothing if they are not put into practice, he says.⁵⁴⁸ Hysmine's reluctance to speak in front of the priest and her father could be seen as a representation of difficulties in keeping with dominant ideals of women's silence.

If we add the consideration of Anna Komnene's authorship (along with her and other women's patronage) to the described play on double meaning in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, then Hysmine's silence, combined with her provocative agency, can be interpreted as a depiction of a feminine perspective on the cultural context of the twelfth century. Neville argues that Anna consciously uses a masculine discourse: 'Anna knew she was unusual and developed her own ideas about what a history written by a woman should look like'.⁵⁴⁹ She also points out that Anna consciously transgressed certain norms by writing as a woman: 'She knew that history was written by men, and she can be counted on to have thought through how her history might be different'.⁵⁵⁰

Although Anna's writing is arguably one of a kind in the twelfth-century context, it can be read as an illustration of courtly women's situation. On the one hand, she embodies (aristocratic) women's increased access to education, and her text can be interpreted as an expression of the idea that women deserve to be listened to on equal terms with men. Yet, on the other hand, Anna embodies conventional feminine ideals, and she indeed highlights 'feminine virtues' in the *Alexiad*. She is arguably the most prominent example of a woman intellectual of her time, living

⁵⁴⁸ 'She was silent, and only wept. Sosthenes gazed at her intently, casting fierce looks at her, and said, "It is not a silent tongue that is the definition of chastity, but appropriate actions and seemly behaviour. You had no modesty when you behaved so badly, yet you are now ashamed to speak of it. I would pray most devoutly, Apollo, for her to be ashamed to act rather than to speak"' (Ἡ δ' ἐσίγα καὶ μόνον ἐδάκρυεν· ὁ δέ γε Σωσθένης ἀτενῶς ἰδὼν πρὸς αὐτὴν καὶ δεινὸν τοῖς ὁμμασιν ὑποβλέπων, 'Οὐ γλώσσης σιγὴ' φησὶ 'τῆς σωφροσύνης ὄρος ἐστίν, ἀλλ' ἔργων κοσμιότης καὶ ἥθους εὐπρέπεια. Σοὶ δ' αἰδῶς μὲν οὐκ ἦν πραττούση κακῶς, εἰπεῖν δ' αἰσχύνῃ. Ἐμοὶ δ' εὐκταϊότατον, Ἀπολλόν, αἰδεῖσθαι ταύτην πράττειν μᾶλλον ἢ λαλεῖν'), *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.12.3–4.

⁵⁴⁹ Neville 2013, 196.

⁵⁵⁰ Neville 2013, 196.

under a gender hierarchy that ascribes different qualities to women and men.

This double nature, in the act of confirming a gender norm at the same time as transgressing it, can also be traced in *Hysmine and Hysminias*. By the end of the story, both Sosthenes and the priest of Apollo want Hysmine to tell her adventures. As Nilsson writes, her contribution to the retelling of the lovers' adventures is significant for the entire novel to be complete. The narrator is Hysminias, and up to this point the story has not included anything that he himself has not experienced. As Nilsson puts it, the 'significance of Hysmine's speech is further underlined by her unwillingness to tell it, the priest of Apollo has to exhort her twice before she, trembling, starts to speak'. Compared with *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, in which Leukippe also tells her adventure, 'Leukippe narrates only part of her story herself, since Kleitophon has already told most of it, "edited" according to his own judgement', Hysmine's speech is required if the listeners – including the narrator Hysminias and the audience – are going to see the whole picture.⁵⁵¹ In other words, the narrative creates a yearning for Hysmine's speech. Both Hysminias and the audience desire Hysmine's voice to be heard; thus, they want to have a conclusion to the story. In this sense, the feminine voice works as a metanarrative force, to speak with Whitmarsh; Hysmine's story is now the object of Hysminias' as well as the audience's desire.

The priest, the father, the lover, and the audience – all are waiting for Hysmine to finish the story. Compared with *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, the narrative of *Hysmine and Hysminias* depends on Hysmine to fill in the gaps. Hysminias, the narrator, has no knowledge of Hysmine's experience; she is the only one who can tell it. In a context where women seem to some extent to have gained entrance into the field of literature and learning, we may trace a certain symbolism in the importance accorded to Hysmine's voice. She is the only one who is able to articulate her experience. The male narrator does not have the required vocabulary. The narrative depends on Hysmine's story, which further indicates the

⁵⁵¹ The quote is from Nilsson 2001, 246–247.

significance of the feminine perspective for the novel to be written at all. As Nilsson describes it: ‘The suspense is hinted at in the very expression “fill out the crescent”, which is a metaphor for the novel’s gradual revelation of “the whole truth”’.⁵⁵² Hysmine’s story is a narrative within the narrative; it is the narration of a woman’s storytelling in front of an audience. Anna Komnene’s voice, written into the Byzantine literary field, could be read as intertextually related to the novel and more specifically to Hysmine’s speech. The novel might in this way have been an intertext – along with ancient historical and philosophical works – from which Anna draws inspiration, or vice versa, depending on the dating of the novel.⁵⁵³ At any rate, her autobiographical voice in the *Alexiad* should arguably be read as intertextually related to the polyphony of the novel genre, where feminine voices find articulation. In turn, both Anna’s and Hysmine’s voices might have offered ways for the feminine voice in *Par-tonopeu de Blois* to be uttered.

Hysmine, ‘drenched with perspiration and tears and with faltering tongue and breath catching at her voice, kept her eyes fixed intently on the ground and said’ (Ἡ δὲ περιρρεομένη πυκνοῖς ἰδρῶσι καὶ δάκρυσι καὶ τῇ γλώσσει διαμαρτάνουσα καὶ τὴν φωνὴν παρακοπτομένη τῷ ἄσθματι καὶ ὅλους τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἀτενῶς τῇ γῇ προσερείδουσα)⁵⁵⁴ to her listeners that Hysminias ‘has told you everything that happened as far as the ship, the sea and the storm’ (Τὰ μὲν δὴ μέχρι νηὸς καὶ θαλάσσης καὶ κλύδωνος εἴρηται’ φησὶ ‘τῷδε τάνδρι·[’]).⁵⁵⁵ In his speech, Hysminias has explained that Sosthenes had announced that Hysmine would be married off to someone other than him, and that he and Hysmine had thus escaped from Eurykomis. They had fled on a ship, but to make a sacrifice to Poseidon the crew later had to throw Hysmine into the sea:

⁵⁵² Nilsson 2001, 246–247.

⁵⁵³ For discussions on the history genre’s relation to fiction, see Agapitos 2012; Nilsson and Scott 2007.

⁵⁵⁴ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.13.1.

⁵⁵⁵ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.13.1.

Κληρούμεθα τοῦτο, καὶ ἦν ὁ κλῆρος ἐπὶ τὴν Ὑσμίνην πεσών.
Ἐκσφενδονᾶται τοίνυν ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν, καὶ νηνεμίαν εὐθὺς τῇ
θαλάσῃ χαρίζεται. Τὸ δ' ἐφεξῆς ἀναβιοῦσαν ταύτην ὁρῶ, πῶς δ',
οὐκ οἶδα νῆ τὸ φρικτὸν ἐκεῖνο κλυδώνιον, νῆ τὸν Ποσειδῶνα καὶ
τὴν πικρὰν δουλείαν, νῆ τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα καὶ τὸ τῆς ἐλευθερίας
γλυκύ.⁵⁵⁶

We cast lots for this and the lot fell on Hysmine. So she is cast into the sea and immediately restores calm to the sea. Subsequently I see her still alive, how I do not know, by that dreadful storm, by Poseidon and bitter servitude, by Apollo and the sweetness of freedom!

Thus, Hysminias explains to the audience what happened to Hysmine, and she confirms it. As she then tells her story, Hysmine adds her experience to Hysminias' report:

ἐπεὶ δ' ἐξεσφενδονήθην εἰς θάλασσαν, δελφὶν ἐπὶ νῶτόν με δέχεται,
τοῖς κύμασι κυβιστῶν καὶ ὅλος κούφως νηχόμενος· ἐγὼ δ'
ἐπενηχόμεν μὲν γυμνὴ τῷ θηρὶ καὶ τοῖς κύμασιν ἐκυκώμην καὶ
πρὸς τὴν θάλασσαν ἱλιγγίων καὶ πρὸς τὸν τοῦ θηρὸς φόβον τὴν
ψυχὴν ἐσπαρattόμην αὐτήν. Εἶχον ὡς σωτήρα τὸν θῆρα καὶ τὸν
ὑπηρετήν ἐλογιζόμεν ἐχθρόν· ἔφριττον τὸν σωτήρα, τὸν ἐχθρόν
ἐφίλουν, καὶ ὡς σωτήρι μὲν συνεπλεκόμεν αὐτῷ· ἐπεὶ δὲ θῆρ ὁ
σωτήρ, ἐξήτουν φυγεῖν· ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐθάρρουν τοῖς κύμασι, καὶ ἤμην
κατακλυδωνιζομένη καὶ λογισμοῖς καὶ κύμασι καὶ θηρί.⁵⁵⁷

When I was cast into the sea, a dolphin takes me on its back as it plunges through the waves and swims on lightly. I, in my nakedness, rode on the wild beast, confused by the waves and made dizzy by the sea, and in my fear of the beast my soul was quite torn apart. The creature was my salvation, yet I thought my benefactor was my enemy; I was terrified of my saviour but I loved my enemy and I entwined myself around him as though he were my saviour. Since my saviour was a wild beast, I sought to escape from him, but I

⁵⁵⁶ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.7.1–2.

⁵⁵⁷ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.13.2–4.

dared not trust the waves, and I was buffeted by my thoughts and the waves and the creature.

Compared with Hysminias' storytelling, we can see that Hysmine not only adds new information regarding what happened to her, but her speech offers a scene with much more description than Hysminias' speech did, which was rather a recapitulation of the events. Hysmine's speech enables the audience to identify with her position by its use of the durative aspect. The events are placed one after the other in a simultaneous temporality. The durative aspect places the audience in the moment of the told event. If translated with emphasis on this temporality it could read: 'But I, in fear of the beast in my nakedness – being thrown around by the waves, feeling dizzy from the sea and feeling terror in face of the beast – my soul was being torn apart'.⁵⁵⁸ Compared with Hysminias' version, here we see a subjective experience of the events previously told. Hysmine does not only add events to Hysminias' version; he who is at once the character in the presence of the priest and Sosthenes, and the narrator of the novel as a whole. She also tells the audience what he did not know and thus has not told. She also adds her perspective on the adventures that she has experienced. The durative aspect of her speech places all the events in one single scene. Hence, her speech can be read as an *ekphrasis* rather than an informative narration. The speech can be described as painting a picture of Hysmine's inner experience, which the audience – both her intradiegetic audience and the novel's actual audience – is invited to see before their eyes, and thus to engage in the feelings described. The passage can be read as a rhetorical case of *enargeia*, creating the effect in the audience of becoming involved in what they hear.

The priest asks Hysmine to tell her adventures 'so that the narrative persists eternally and the miracle does not fade' (ἵν'εἴη τὸ διήγημα αἰωνίζον καὶ μὴ φθίνον τὸ τερατούργημα).⁵⁵⁹ The word used for

⁵⁵⁸ My translation, for the purpose of putting emphasis on the temporal aspect in the original.

⁵⁵⁹ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, XI.12.2.

narrative, *diegema*, ‘implies a structured, although not necessarily written, narration’, as Nilsson points out: ‘the story of Hysmine and Hysminias is by now, so to speak, “becoming a book”’.⁵⁶⁰ The use of *diegema* works as ‘a signal to the reader, subverting the effect of the fictionally oral discourse: the narration that will come (Hysmine’s story) is the missing part of the nearly finished book’.⁵⁶¹

Hysmine moans in front of the priest and the father when she is asked to speak. She can be seen to represent a simultaneous act of conforming – subjugating herself to existing norms – while disobeying and discreetly performing independent agency. Like Anna Komnene, Hysmine illustrates a woman’s balance between a social structure imbued with gender hierarchy and the claiming of her own will and desire within this structure. Her agency, combined with her reluctance to speak, could be read as a discrepancy between social expectations and feminine agency. When her father commands that she speaks, she is forced into what Irigaray describes as woman’s resort to femininity as defined in a masculine discourse. According to Irigaray, women’s social inferiority:

se renforce et se complique du fait que la femme n’a pas accès au langage, sinon par le recours à des systèmes de représentations ‘masculins’ qui la désapproprient de son rapport à elle-même, et aux autres femmes.⁵⁶²

The father in the narrative could thus be interpreted as an incorporation of social authority, forcing the woman to speak a language that is predicated upon her exclusion, due to her femininity.

However, in her speech, Hysmine describes her experience, as we have seen, articulating her own perspective on what has happened, and thus she makes the language forced upon her into her own. The (authorial and narrative) audience knows that a dolphin saved her, but Hysmine’s episode – as she tells it – has a durative temporal aspect. In Hysmine’s

⁵⁶⁰ Nilsson 2001, 247.

⁵⁶¹ Nilsson 2001, 248.

⁵⁶² Irigaray 1977, 81.

speech, the experience of the female character's fear, confusion and desire is represented for the audience through her perception. The novel's audience is thus required to identify with the female character. The narrative as a whole demands the female character's experience in order to be completed. In this sense, the feminine experience is essential for the story to exist. From a Kristevan perspective, this could be seen as a reinvention of language and gender, as the novel writes the experience of the feminine subject into the tradition.

Feminine subjectivity is further represented through Hysmine's corporeal behaviour. Her agency can be interpreted as a feminine language that has *transcended* the masculine discourse, rather than having no access to speaking at all. *Hysmine and Hysminias* displays a contemporary use of literary tradition, renewing the novel genre by borrowing and creating new variations out of well-known patterns. Margaret Alexiou writes that Makrembolites, by his conscious borrowings and personal innovation, 'was clearly familiar with many of the ancient romances, but he has chosen to alter the whole perspective'.⁵⁶³ The Komnenian literature's impact on *Partonopeu de Blois* can perhaps be traced in these sorts of alterations of perspectives, which, as I have shown, can be read as articulations of feminine subjectivity. To understand *Partonopeu de Blois*, I think we would benefit from recognising intertextual relations between twelfth-century Old French and Byzantine literature. The novel and romance discussed here are different in many respects, but they all employ an alteration of perspective.

Melior as une de nos and Partonopeu's Desired Body

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, Melior's speech functions at the end as a metanarrative force, similarly to how Hysmine's story is needed to complete the plot in *Hysmine and Hysminias*. As noted above, in the Old French romance the narrator gives a detailed description of Partonopeu's beauty. Furthermore, he motivates the choice to do so: 'Before the book

⁵⁶³ Alexiou 1977, 36.

is finished it will be demonstrated why I commend his beauty so much. For he not only had good qualities but they happened to be a great rescue for him' (Avant el livre ert bien mostré | Por coi je lo[e] tant se beauté, | Car od ço qu'il ot bones mors | Li fist se beauties grant socors).⁵⁶⁴ The end of the narrative gives the explanation for the stated importance of Partonopeu's beauty: he must win a beauty contest.

The final tournament, the winner of which gets to marry Melior and be crowned Byzantine emperor, has taken place. Partonopeu and the Persian sultan have fought a final battle, which Partonopeu has won. However, the wealth of the sultan is then considered among the courtly judges, who express doubts regarding whom they should name winner. One of the men, Ernoul, presents a political argument for the choice of Partonopeu, claiming that his Christian faith makes him more reliable (the sultan would, however, convert if elected).⁵⁶⁵ The narrative then tells us that Melior hears her name being mentioned, and that she consequently wants to come to her own rescue.⁵⁶⁶ She therefore enters the men's discussions, answering Ernoul: 'You say that my will does not concern you' (Ernol, fait ele, dit avés | Que mon vouloir n'i esgardés).⁵⁶⁷ Expressing the importance for a woman to choose a husband, Melior's speech continues: 'But choosing a husband is a definite choice, which will remain for eternity. Therefor a lady must look far and wide for the one to whom she chooses to give herself' (Mais segnor prendre est cose estable, | A tos tans doit estre durable; | Si doit dame molt esgarder | A cui el se doit se doner).⁵⁶⁸ Melior's utterance clearly opens up a discussion about marriage from a woman's point of view. In comparison with the judges'

⁵⁶⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 579–582.

⁵⁶⁵ Mais eslisons le bon François | Qui est estables en nos lois. | [...] | Se ma dame m'en set mal gré, | N'i esgart pas sa volenté, | Ains i esgart, al dire droit, | Itel qui trestornés ne soit, *Partonopeu*, 10251–10252, 10259–10262. It is possible to interpret this as meaning that Ernoul, who plays the role of a wise confidant to Melior, argues for Melior's desire but using a political argument.

⁵⁶⁶ Mais Melior, qui s'ot nomer, | Se volra vers lui escuser, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10267–10268.

⁵⁶⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10269–10270.

⁵⁶⁸ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10281–10284.

concern about how Melior's marriage will influence politics and alliances, her speech deals with the same topic, but from a different angle. This passage exposes how political marriage alliances affect the spouses involved. Explicitly, the female character utters concerns regarding women's conditions. In Melior's utterance, agency is ascribed to the bride in the marriage. As the men try to marry her off, Melior talks about the bride's active choice of a man. In her analysis of the romance, Bruckner finds it to 'keep in motion the interplay between male and female power'.⁵⁶⁹ Not only does the narrator 'frequently picture himself in his interventions as identifying with ladies, their point of view, their actions, and their values.'⁵⁷⁰ But, more generally, Bruckner argues:

that the romancer's experiments in fiction, as inscribed in his text, are not limited to esthetic effects, that his play with the crossing of history and romance, truth and fable, gender and genre, leads, on the one hand, to the self-empowering of romance as its own source of authority and, on the other, to romance as a powerful tool for change in the (dis)course of history, as it shapes vernacular society's views of itself.⁵⁷¹

One might thus interpret the recognition of women's inclusion in feudal marriage arrangements as not only a case of elaborating new ways of narrating, but also as a way of discussing the courtly culture within which the romance was composed. Considering the performative aspect of chivalric romance, the audience's reactions and interpretations of the narrative are required in the construction of the romance's meaning.⁵⁷² Thus, it is worth noting, as Hanning writes, that in 'the unusual unfolding of its plot *Partonopeu de Blois* presents its hero's career as almost literally the creation of its heroine'.⁵⁷³ As previously stated, Partonopeu has the role of the object of desire in the romance on a general level, which could be

⁵⁶⁹ Bruckner 1993b, 150.

⁵⁷⁰ Bruckner 1993b, 150.

⁵⁷¹ Bruckner 1993b, 150.

⁵⁷² Hanning 1981, 16.

⁵⁷³ Hanning 1981, 17.

read as a comic twist by an (actual) audience, who would expect the opposite. It could also be read in relation to Melior's role as storyteller and to her link to the narrator and the romance poet; as she defines Partonopeu's career, she can be interpreted as composing a counter-story in the courtly context. In a way, in this romance, the female character can be said to create the male protagonist's feudal advancements, from knight to ruler. Also, as previously stressed, the female character can be interpreted as creating stories. With Melior's perspective on marriage, as seen here, the romance again narrates a feminine perspective; perhaps to an actual audience of women, but at any rate arguably to an authorial audience that is denoted as hearing Melior out as well as desiring (including in the sense of narrative *pothos*) her wish to be granted. Thus, the actual audience, regardless of gender, is required to sympathise with the woman about to be married off.

In Melior's speech, an apparent parody of gender roles can be said to appear, as she talks about the necessity of having an attractive husband. She proposes a beauty contest to choose the winner:

Assés a li François bonté, | Mais ne l'ai veü desarmé. | S'il est assés
beaus, bien otroi | Que j'aie lui et il ait moi; | Si non, si s'en voist
od les Frans | Et me remaigne li sodans. | Assés me vient miols a
plaisir, | Por qu'il se vuelle convertir.⁵⁷⁴

The Frenchman is beautiful, but I have not seen him unarmed. If he is really handsome then I will accede to your choice. Then I will have him, and he will have me. If not, then let him part with the French, and I will be with the sultan. I would find this way much more pleasurable, assuming that he would like to convert.

Partonopeu's extraordinary beauty has already been established in the narrative, and Melior has said that she did choose him especially because

⁵⁷⁴ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10285–1292.

of it.⁵⁷⁵ Therefore, the beauty contest seems to be a strategic move for her to make, which the audience can be assumed to know. Melior continues her speech by pointing out the honour of her men, asking them to obey her command:

Ernol, entendés a m'onor, | Et vos trestot, por Deu amor, | Car ja
escir ne m'en verés | De quanque vos esgarderés; | Et vos, Corsolt,
par quel raison | N'i avés dit ne ol ne non? | Desploiés, kiele, cel
savoir!⁵⁷⁶

Ernoul, and all of you, respect my honour, for the love of god! For you can be sure that I will not disapprove of whomever you may choose. And you, Corsolt, why have you not said yes or no? Unfold your famous wisdom!

This passage is comic; Melior's utterance links together the noble men's famous wisdom with her carnal desire for Partonopeu. The utterance ridicules the political discussion and emphasises the importance of acknowledging women's desire in marriage arrangements.

The fact that Partonopeu's beauty has already been described is significant for the interpretation of this passage. In this regard, the audience has more information than the powerful men in the story. The audience knows that Partonopeu's beauty is outstanding, and that Melior knows it as well. The comic aspect of the scene is in this sense developed at the men's expense: Melior is playing with them, in alliance with the narrator, to the audience's amusement. Therefore, her recognition of the men's wisdom can be interpreted as being said with a comic twist – they are indeed not as wise as they might think they are. In her speech, Melior convinces her men to do as she wishes by flattering them: 'You always

⁵⁷⁵ De vos disent tantes bontés, | tant buenes mors, tantes beautés | Et ensement la gentelise, | Que sempres fui de vos souprise. *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1365–1368, and: Qar toute beautés vos abonde, | Et tant avés de gentelise, | Ja ne lairai ne vos eslise, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1498–1500.

⁵⁷⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10293–1299.

judge so truthfully' (Ja soles vos jugier si voir).⁵⁷⁷ Melior continues in her speech, and emphasises their own desire to be the same as hers:

Tans dis con dura li tornois | Vos oï dire mainte fois | Li quels en
estoit vostre eslis. | Ne sai s'en estes resortis, | Mais mien vuel
eüssiés cangié, | Car j'ai tot autre part gaitié;⁵⁷⁸

I have heard you many times during the tournament saying who would be your choice. I do not know if you have changed opinion, then you would have changed my will. But I do not think so.

Significantly, the speech nevertheless finishes emphasising the importance of following Melior's demands: 'However, it would be inappropriate of you to not respect what I am asking of you' (Mais lait vos ert d'aler ariere | De vostre dit par ma proiere).⁵⁷⁹ The final emphasis is placed where it was at the beginning of the speech: on the female character's own opinion regarding her marriage. This could be seen in the light of Irving Singer's description of courtly love. Accordingly, in its poetic representations of extramarital desire, courtly love worked as an 'attempt to recommend the value of sexual courtesy and individual choice in an area of life that had been controlled by economic, political, and largely impersonal considerations'.⁵⁸⁰ Thus, the narrative can be interpreted as addressing an issue familiar to people at court.

The men decide that Melior can see the knights unarmed, so that she will know, based on her vision, which one to choose.⁵⁸¹ As previously noted, *Partonopeu de Blois* can be read as referring to a view of love as transmitted through vision. As aforementioned, in the tradition the

⁵⁷⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10300.

⁵⁷⁸ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10301–10306.

⁵⁷⁹ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10307–10308.

⁵⁸⁰ Singer 1984, 29.

⁵⁸¹ Alés en la tor a secroi, | Si viegne a vos cascuns par soi, | Si vos dient priveement |
Ço qu'il taisent devant le gent, | U tot avant, se vos volés, | Les voies avant desarmés,
| Que par vos iols saciés de voir | Le quel vos volrés miols avoir, *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10343–10350.

privileged perspective is usually masculine; in the case where it is human, the observed object tends to be a woman.⁵⁸² Thus, gender hierarchy is affirmed through the gaze. In this sense, *Partonopeu de Blois* represents a view of desire (transmitted in this tradition through the Cupid and Psyche myth) in which the judges' explicit decision to give Melior control over the gaze materialises as a gender subversion. Thus, resonating with ideas that connect the gaze with desire, Melior says explicitly that, to her, physical appearance is important:

Si ne voel pas que soit celé | Que jo tir molt a le beauté. | Molt vuel
que cil soit beaus et gens | Qui de moi fera ses talens | Et qui m'avra
tote ma vie.⁵⁸³

I do not wish to hide the fact that I attribute much importance to the aspect of beauty. I really want him, who will fulfil his desires with me and have me for all my life, to be beautiful and of good quality.

If desire is stirred by looking, then Melior's speech could be interpreted as a manifestation of (courtly) women's right to desire. Unlike Beauvoir's description of women embodying a double nature in their desire – desiring to be desired by the masculine subject – or Irigaray's theory on women's inability to express themselves in masculine discourse, the woman's speech in *Partonopeu de Blois* expresses transcendent, feminine desire.

The ability to articulate a feminine subjectivity in this way can be related to the Byzantine narrative space as an androgynous world. According to Beauvoir, identity is based on norms, one's body, and the surrounding world. In an androgynous world, Beauvoir describes women as not being forced into passivity by the world around them. There, they are not driven by a sense of impotence, nor oriented towards passivity.⁵⁸⁴ One

⁵⁸² For examples of how this can be seen in literature, see the cases of Andreas Capellanus and the Greek ocularcentric aspect of erotic narrative above.

⁵⁸³ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10355–10359.

⁵⁸⁴ Beauvoir (1949) 1976b, 645–646. In this sense, Melior's upbringing in relation to both her mother and father is relevant, since it is by having both men and women as

could argue that the imagination of a Byzantine space in the romance represents a comparable view of androgyny to the courtly French audience.

More precisely, the story's setting in a Byzantine space could imply that the authorial audience is indicated to imagine the Byzantine world as one in which women possess authoritative positions, and where feminine desire finds pronouncement. The narrative explicitly states that Melior's behaviour is an act of gender subversion: "But do not act surprised by this", she tells the men, "for is this not the case for anyone of you when he has to choose one of us?" (Si ne vos en mervelliés mie, | Car si coisist cascuns de vos | Quant il doit prendre une de nos).⁵⁸⁵ The way in which Melior is described as including herself in the deliberations among the men about their choice of emperor seems to be a way of introducing a feminine perspective on marriage arrangements into the narrative. By referring to herself as a woman in terms of belonging to a group – *une de nos* – Melior can be read as an illustration of the situation for women at court more generally, when it comes to marriage.

Moreover, addressing women's unfavourable social conditions is a recurrent theme throughout the narrative. Another speech worth mentioning is after the scene of intercourse, where Melior defends her honour: 'After you have had your pleasure, you leave us with mockery. But I will not be mocked if was taken by you; no harm shall come my way if I did as you pleased' (Que tant vos avés fait vos sés, | Al departir nose n gabés; | Mais jo n'en doi estre gabee | Se jo de vos sui alumee, | N'a moi n'en doit nus mals venir | Se jo ai fait vostre plaisir).⁵⁸⁶ Furthermore, when Melior begins to speak after her devastating reaction to Partonopeu's betrayal, she blames herself for the trouble in which she finds herself: "Alas!", she says, "I am such a fool for having betrayed myself! I am now dishonoured by my own making. I was too fast with my mission, thus now I am put to shame["]' ('Lasse, fait ele, con par sui fole! | Con je

rolemodels that the girl grows up in an androgynous world, in Beauvoir's description.

⁵⁸⁵ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10360–10362.

⁵⁸⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 1319–1324.

me sui par moi traïe | Et con sui par mon fet honie! | Trop me hastai de mon servise, | Par tant me sui a honte misse['])).⁵⁸⁷ From these examples in combination with Melior's speech regarding the decision of her husband, we see that not only does she address the situation for women in marriage arrangements, but in terms of sexuality more generally.

Returning to the passage of marriage deliberations, we see that, aware of Partonopeu's beauty, Melior then says that she will accept the men's judgement of the two contestants' beauty: 'He, whom they choose as spouse, shall have been judged by my eyes to have my heart. So as long as the judges do their part, I will do mine and follow their will' (A cui que il facent acuel, | Od mon cuer jugeront mi oel. | Por quant les rois pas n'en forspart | Que jo n'ensive lor esgart).⁵⁸⁸ Not unlike the observation that characters in Byzantine novels seem to pay mere lip-service to following social norms, Melior seems to address the social structure in which women are being married off for political reasons, at the same time as she arranges for her own desires to influence the decision in her favour.

In preparation for the contest, the sultan's noble men remove his armour. The judges observe him and praise him for his beauty. Partonopeu is unarmed, and described as dressed only in a tunic, due to the heat.⁵⁸⁹ He places himself in the middle of the gathering so that everyone can see him. The judges have never seen such a beautiful man.⁵⁹⁰ This, however, could also be seen in light of the feminine gaze discussed in chapter three. If we read this compared to the Greek novel tradition, we see that Partonopeu's undressed position echoes Daphnis' body in the eyes of Chloe, in Longus' ancient novel. In the beginning of *Daphnis and Chloe*, Chloe has already started to desire Daphnis, after having seen him bathe:

⁵⁸⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 4540–4544.

⁵⁸⁸ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10365–10368.

⁵⁸⁹ Partonopeu ot eü caut, | Desfublés fu en un bliaut, *Partonopeu de Blois*, (10393–10394).

⁵⁹⁰ Que onques mais devant cel jor | Si bel home veü n'avoient | Cil qui l'eslection faisoient, *Partonopeu de Blois* (10400–10402).

ἔπεισε δὲ αὐτὸν καὶ λούσασθαι πάλιν καὶ λουόμενον εἶδε καὶ ἰδοῦσα ἤψατο καὶ ἀπῆλθε πάλιν ἐπαινέσασα, καὶ ὁ ἔπαινος ἦν ἔρωτος ἀρχή.⁵⁹¹

She also persuaded him to have another bath; and as he bathed, she watched him, and after watching she touched him; then she went away, thinking again how handsome he was. And that thought was the beginning of love.

In the progression towards also having Daphnis discover love's effects on people, a beauty contest takes place between him and the cowherd, Dorcon, of which Chloe is judge, and of which the winner will give her a kiss.⁵⁹² Although Dorcon boasts about being bigger than Daphnis and having food and wine to offer, Daphnis wins after speaking of his sweet mouth to kiss. Chloe thus kisses Daphnis, and he is introduced to love and caught with desire.⁵⁹³ With this scene in mind, the beauty contest in *Partonopeu de Blois* can be seen as yet another feature from the Greek novel tradition – an articulation of feminine desire.

Returning to the beauty contest in the Old French romance, and Partonopeu's undressed, exposed position before the courtly observers, we could compare Melior to Chloe's desiring gaze in Longus' novel. The men do not see that Melior's heart, at the sight of her beloved, starts beating so hard that she almost loses her breath. The narrative describes how she has to keep herself from running to him and embracing him and ending up in a situation where she must excuse her bad behaviour.⁵⁹⁴ It thus seems as though the beauty contest is a pleasurable event for her. While in *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysmine follows commands when she serves Hysminias the wine, and at the same time she makes erotic advances

⁵⁹¹ *Daphnis and Chloe*, I.13.5.

⁵⁹² *Daphnis and Chloe*, I.15.4.

⁵⁹³ *Daphnis and Chloe*, I.16–17. Daphnis' mouth, fitted for kissing, can be put in relation to Partonopeu's mouth described as well-positioned for kissing as well, as seen above.

⁵⁹⁴ A Melior li cuers trassaut, | Por poi l'alaine ne li faut. | A grant paine s'est retenue | Qu'el ne li est seure corue | Pour lui baisier et acoler | Et son mautalent pardonner, *Partonopeu de Blois*, (10407–10412).

without anyone seeing them, here, Melior performs appropriate social conduct at the same time as she is described as not feeling the appropriate feelings; described as experiencing erotic pleasure while the political arrangements are taking place.

Partonopeu wins the beauty contest and is asked to tell everyone about his origins, which he does. Lohier, the French king, then adds to his story, explaining the deeds that Partonopeu has performed. In comparison to the structure of *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Partonopeu and the king are repeating events and information that are already known to the romance's audience. Then, the text describes Partonopeu as turning his gaze toward Melior and sighing discreetly so that no one except her hears it.⁵⁹⁵ Not unlike *Hysmine and Hysminias*, here both Melior and Partonopeu express their respective passion, but conceal it from the other people present. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysmine serves wine to her father Sosthenes, her mother Panthia, and Hysminias, the herald, at the banquet. In doing so, in the presence of her parents, she expresses her desire discreetly to Hysminias: 'I hold out my hand to take the cup and she presses my finger', Hysminias says, 'and as she does so she moans and breathes a gentle sigh as if from her heart' (Προτείνω τὴν χεῖρα λαβεῖν, ἡ δὲ τὸν δάκτυλον ἐπιθίβει μου καὶ θλίβουσα στένει καὶ φύσημα λεπτὸν ὡς ἐκ καρδίας φουσᾷ).⁵⁹⁶ In the same vein as both Melior and Partonopeu conceal their respective passions – *A Melior li cuers trassaut* and *Partonopeu envers s'amie regarda | tant sospire*⁵⁹⁷ – Hysmine conceals her moans and sighs. In both stories, one thus finds what Jouanno describes as a literary play on double meaning. All the characters are socially modest, and described as concealing their erotic desire.

The narrator's description of the extraordinary beauty of Partonopeu in his introductory passage has a function for the plot, being a preparation for the final beauty contest. Partonopeu's introduction into the narrative establishes him as an object of desire, which, in a way, could be

⁵⁹⁵ *Envers s'amie regarda; | Tant sospire celeement | Que nus ne mes li ne l'entent, Partonopeu de Blois*, (10538–10540).

⁵⁹⁶ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, I.11.3.

⁵⁹⁷ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 10407 and 10538–10539 (see above).

considered to be his major function in the narrative structure; his role in the narrative is to be Melior's object of desire.

Partonopeu de Blois and *Hysmine and Hysminias* differ in terms of what is required for the stories to be completed, but the narrative structures are similar: Hysmine's speech is needed for the novel to be finished, whereas Partonopeu's beauty points to the romance's happy ending. Moreover, if Hysmine's speech could be interpreted as going against the gender hierarchy, so can the description of Partonopeu's beauty be interpreted as a form of gender subversion. The objectification of Partonopeu suggests that the romance's main perspective is feminine.

Letters, Language and Love

In Makrembolites' novel, when the protagonists are enslaved, they act as though they were brother and sister, as we have seen. Before this charade, however, Hysminias is not aware of Hysmine's presence. He sees her and believes her to be a slave girl, one whom he does not know, but who resembles his beloved. Another slave girl hands him a letter, which reveals Hysmine's identity.⁵⁹⁸ The letter reveals that Hysmine is alive and in his presence, as well as letting Hysminias know that her virginity is preserved for him.⁵⁹⁹

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, Partonopeu also receives letters during the time when he is separated from his beloved. After he has left his homeland, due to his anger towards his mother for her manipulative scheme to have him light up the bedroom, he attempts to commit suicide in the woods. However, Melior's sister, Urraque, finds him there. She and her relative Persewis, along with Urraque's subjects, transport him to her island Salence. There, the two maidens take care of him in order to restore

⁵⁹⁸ *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.8–9.

⁵⁹⁹ Margaret Mullett discusses the letters found in Byzantine fiction, including *Hysmine and Hysminias*, and compares them with the ancient novel and epistolary traditions and actual love-letters in Byzantium; Mullett 1999, 7.

his strength and spirit. They also prepare him for the final tournament during which he must win Melior's hand. As Urrique looks after Partonopeu, she hands him fictional letters, saying that they come from Melior:

Sovent li fait faus briés venir | Qui molt li dient son plaisir | Con s'il
de Melior venissent; | Molt l'en haitent et aliegissent. | Par ce qu'il
a tant ses aveaus, | Molt en amende et devient beaus.⁶⁰⁰

Often, she had false letters handed to him that were pleasurable to him, as though they had come from Melior. They had him much recovered and made him feel better. Since he took so much joy from them, they helped him a great deal and recovered his beauty.

In both these stories, one finds a play taking place in terms of fictionality. Hysmine and Hysminias' act that claims them to be brother and sister, is, furthermore, also described as *plasma*, a creation or fiction.⁶⁰¹ Similarly, Urrique's fictional letters help Partonopeu to recover. Fiction can be interpreted as comparable to a sculpture, and the poet is the artist at work. As Hysminias reads the letter written by Hysmine, he does not know whether he should believe the letter or 'reality':

Οὕτω μὲν οὖν εἶχε τὸ ἐπιστόλιον, οὗ πιστεύειν τοῖς γράμμασιν οὐ
συνεχωρούμην τοῖς πράγμασι, καὶ τοῖς πράγμασι πιστεύειν ἐθέλων
οὐ συνεχωρούμην τοῖς γράμμασι· τὸ μὲν γὰρ δὴ γράμμα πείθειν
ἐμάχετο τὴν παιδίσκην Ὑσμίνην εἶναι καὶ τῆς Ὑσμίνης τὸ
ἐπιστόλιον· ὅλον γὰρ δρᾶμα τὸ καθ' ἡμᾶς ἀνεπλάττετο· τὸ δὲ τοῦ
πράγματος καινὸν καὶ ὑπέρμεγα οὐ συνεχώρει μοι πιστεύειν τῷ
γράμματι.⁶⁰²

These were the letter's contents, but while I had faith in what was written I could not accept the facts, and while I wanted to have faith in the facts I could not accept the letter. For the letter strove to

⁶⁰⁰ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 6207–6212.

⁶⁰¹ See for example *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.16.

⁶⁰² *Hysmine and Hysminias*, IX.10.1–2.

persuade me that the serving girl was Hysmine and the communication came from her, since it described all our affair, but the novelty and magnitude of the situation did not allow me to believe in the letter.

In Hysminias' reaction, we see how the written word conflicts with plausible 'truth'. The strangeness and magnitude of the effect that the written word would have on his concrete reality, the text says, does not allow Hysminias to be persuaded by it. Yet, the text is indeed telling the truth, and Hysminias must accordingly adjust his view of reality. In this sense, Hysminias' situation and perspective are moulded by reading text and, in the same way, text can be read as shedding new light on reality.

In the same way, Urrique's letters to Partonopeu adjust the situation in question: Partonopeu recovers the strength that he needs, and this enables him to return to Melior. Thus, with the help of Urrique's fictional letters, the narrative can return to the track it has been pursuing, and conclude itself in a fashion customary for a chivalric romance. Hanning interprets Urrique, along with Melior, as controlling the story; their control over the narrative progression 'represents two models of romantic artistry, and the work moves from one mode to the other thanks to Partonopeu's decision to become an active participant in his 'romance' once he has been drawn into its spell by the artist's skill'.⁶⁰³ As Partonopeu reads Urrique's letters, he recovers. He is thus an active interpreter of what he reads; he is imagining Melior, and feels better as he does so. Again, the rhetorical effect on the receiver is illustrated in the text; Partonopeu, the reader, engages in that which he reads and is affected by it. In consideration of Partonopeu's breaking of the illusion of Melior's 'story', as he lights up the bedroom, Hanning reads Urrique's fabrication to be – in contrast with Melior's – a realistic story that never becomes disenchanting:

Partonopeu's act of involvement, interpretation, and desire for clear understanding permanently deflates Mélior's illusions, re-

⁶⁰³ Hanning 1981, 18.

establishes the social dimension of the romance's world, and calls into being, as it were, a new kind of artist, Urrique, whose gifts are less sensational but finally more attuned to the exigencies of the imperfect world in which hero and artist live. We can thus read the climax of the romance, at one level, as a complimentary figuring forth of the audience it is in the process of creating.⁶⁰⁴

As Hysminias searches for an understanding that is applicable to his reality, after having read the text (τῷ γράμματι) of the letter, Urrique can be read as the interpreter's search for an understanding of how to apply literature, or text more generally, to his or her reality. As Partonopeu returns East, the rest of the narrative concerns the tournament, the winner of which will marry Melior. Thus the narrative returns to a chivalric story that is more faithful to the genre, compared with the marvellous erotic darkness of Melior's 'story'. Both *Hysmine and Hysminias* and *Partonopeu de Blois* can thus be said to incorporate reflections on fictionalisation within the narratives.

The narratives in both stories could further be said to depend on feminine perspectives, as seen above. The narrator in *Hysmine and Hysminias* needs the female character's story in order for the novel to be completed, and the narrator of *Partonopeu de Blois* makes the objectification of the male character an essential factor for the narrative progression. Partonopeu's beauty initiates the story: it is the reason why Melior chooses him. It also ends the story: it assures his victory. In other words, Partonopeu's knightly deeds are secondary in relation to his status as an object of desire. Partonopeu's agency does not really seem to affect the turn of events. Melior's narratological subjectivity moves the story forward: she chooses him, takes him to her and into her bedroom, and she makes him the final winner of the tournament. Only his beauty matters in the plot's key events.

It thus appears as though the female characters' speech not only carries significance in itself in both *Partonopeu de Blois* and *Hysmine and Hysminias*, but the narratives also appear to discuss fiction on a

⁶⁰⁴ Hanning 1981, 18.

metalevel. In *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysmine sends Hysminias a letter to give him new information about the actual situation, and in *Partonopeu de Blois*, Urrique aids Partonopeu's recovery by her composition of fictional letters. Moreover, the letters can be compared to the narrative and rhetorical practice in terms of how the letter inherently evokes desire in its receiver, an image inside his or her imagination. Margaret Mullett describes the letter in the following way: 'The idea of separation stems naturally from the connexion of letters with friendship. Letters are the means of maintaining presence in absence, of carrying on a conversation at a distance, of conjuring up an illusion of presence'.⁶⁰⁵ Accordingly, we see the connection between the letter and the narrative *pothos* and the rhetorical practices such as *enargeia*. With these aspects in mind, we see literary composition being accomplished within the fabula in the Old French romance and the Byzantine novel alike. The narrated letters could be interpreted as reflections on fictionality, of the poetic creation's relation to the 'real world'. Within these two stories, women fill the role of active storytellers, proving themselves to know the art of erotic composition. As both Hysminias in the Byzantine novel, and Partonopeu in the Old French romance, are active interpreters of stories and letters, we could read their interpretations as reflections of an audience interpreting a feminine voice's storytelling. In both narratives, women express themselves in writing, and – as narrated in both stories – by doing so, they have an effect on their reality. Perhaps, in both stories' respective letters, we could interpret a reflection of the appreciation of women's participation in the making of courtly literature.

The Courtly Knight and the Tongue of Eros

At the near end of *Partonopeu de Blois*, at the tournament, Partonopeu is reunited with the French. He has saved the French king Lohier, and is praised for it: 'The French admired him greatly, they praised him much for all his deeds. They saw very well that he was French, but he responded

⁶⁰⁵ Mullett 1981, 79.

to them in Greek' (Li François l'ont molt esgardé, | Molt l'ont de tote rien loé. | Bien lo rest vis qu'il est François, | Mais il lor respont en grijois).⁶⁰⁶ The shift in language can be interpreted as Partonopeu having been assimilated into Melior's court, an imaginary Byzantine space of women storytellers. To analyse this linguistic shift further, we could add Charis Messis and Nilsson's description of the discursive character of emotions: 'Each culture defines in its own way the emotional baggage of erotic and amorous feelings and emotions, exploits its various contents differently, and emphasizes some of its aspects and manifestations'.⁶⁰⁷ We could see how the narrative presents the Greek erotic tradition as being fused into Old French romance, by observing Partonopeu's new language. Thus, Partonopeu's erotic experience and emotions can be interpreted as a product of the erotic discourse traced in the Greek and Byzantine novel.

Since he has been introduced to Eros, as was seen in the second chapter of this thesis, he is no longer an *enfes*. Like Hysminias in Makrembolites' novel, Partonopeu is *ouketi parthenos*, no longer chaste. We thus see language as being intertwined with desire; Partonopeu's love for Melior is discernible in his choice of Greek language as he addresses the Westerners. Partonopeu has read Urrique's (Greek) letters, and previously he has enjoyed Melior's (Greek) stories in the darkness of their bedroom. In Partonopeu's mouth we could possibly trace the notion of *metafora* or 'transfer' that Agapitos describes regarding the Medieval Greek literary context.⁶⁰⁸ The erotic narrative of the Greek novel tradition, the story matter, is transferred to French romance, which seems, furthermore, to be symbolised in the mouth of the French knight. By his choice of language, Partonopeu can be interpreted as embodying the Greek erotic tradition.

Partonopeu is reassured from reading the false letters, recovered from his desire to see Melior again. His choice of addressing the French by speaking Greek can be interpreted as related to his overall assimilation

⁶⁰⁶ *Partonopeu de Blois*, 8709–8712.

⁶⁰⁷ Messis and Nilsson, 2019, 159–160.

⁶⁰⁸ Agapitos 2012; 247–248 (see above).

into the new culture of *Besance* – Melior’s culture.⁶⁰⁹ In *Besance*, feminine desire is combined with women’s power and access to speech. In this culture Partonopeu’s love is made. Thus, Urraque’s letters and Melior’s storytelling can be interpreted as effecting Partonopeu profoundly: he now speaks their tongue. In her study on representations of Byzantium in the romance, Bercovici-Huard writes that: ‘l’auteur sait créer une atmosphère de luxe et de richesse à séduire le lecteur médiéval, mais il se sert du merveilleux byzantin – où la merveille naît de la simple observation du réel’.⁶¹⁰ The Byzantine narrative space in itself contributes to effect the imagination of the audience. The use of this narrative space along with different literary influences thus makes it possible for the poet to create something new, a subjective voice. Bercovici-Huard argues that the play on connotations to the *real* Byzantium is one of the poet’s major innovations:

Notre auteur a la volonté de mêler la réalité et fiction, poésie et données géographiques réelles. C’est là une des originalités du roman qui échappe ainsi au merveilleux traditionnel et à l’exotisme documentaire.⁶¹¹

I agree. As we have seen, we can read *Partonopeu de Blois* as a narrative that fuses influences from the Graeco-Roman novel tradition with possible views at courts of Byzantine imperial women. Combined, the romance articulates a voice of its own, a feminine voice.

Based on Kristeva’s description of the desiring subject’s endless reinvention of itself in the tradition, we could interpret Partonopeu’s new language in terms of his erotic experience having been mobilised in a continuous relationship between love and language. The romance can be read as reproducing the ‘emotional baggage’ of the Greek novel tradition, transferred into Old French romance verse.

⁶⁰⁹ In the romance, ‘Besance’ is used to describe Melior’s empire. For a recent and relevant study of this word in the romance; see Černáková 2019, 48.

⁶¹⁰ Bercovici-Huard 1982, 125.

⁶¹¹ Bercovici-Huard 1982, 117.

Returning to the role of erotic education in the Greek novel, we see that not only has Partonopeu learned about desire, but he is also, as one could interpret it, now familiar with Greek rhetoric, as it is seen in his choice of Greek language: ‘*Paideia* [...] makes the man’, as Goldhill puts it: ‘A Greek education is an education in Greekness, in becoming a Greek’.⁶¹²

The erotic reciprocity in *Partonopeu de Blois* seems inevitably connected to the Komnenian literature and Greek novel tradition, combined with the reworking of the Cupid and Psyche story from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*. As we have seen in the present chapter as well as chapter three, feminine desire can be interpreted as the romance’s main narrative *pothos*, created from patterns of traditional erotic narratives, as seen in chapter two. We can thus see that to write is to reinvent desire or love.

⁶¹² Goldhill 2001, 158. It could, however, be worth mentioning that the Byzantines rather referred to themselves as ‘Romans’, and Constantinople was often called ‘New Rome’.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have explored possible connections between Old French romances and Byzantine literature by focusing on the anonymous, twelfth-century *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to Eumathios Makrembolites' *Hysmine and Hysminias* and Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*. The main purpose has been to demonstrate the presence of feminine subjectivity in these medieval narratives. The texts are indeed different from each other, regarding both form and content, yet they appear to articulate feminine subjectivity in similar ways, which can be explained by the intercultural relations between the Western vernacular romance and the Byzantine novel and tradition more generally.

I have approached the material with a narratological focus, aiming to understand the occasional aspect and function of the texts – what they in fact do, and with whom they may communicate. The audience perspective has thus played an important role in the interpretations of the romance and the novels, and their connections.

The theoretical question underpinning this study is whether and how feminine subjectivity can be articulated when women are defined as the 'other' in a discourse shaped by masculine domination. My point of departure is Simone de Beauvoir's description of the difficulty for a woman to speak in such a discourse in *Le Deuxième sexe*, in which she nevertheless also creates a space for her own voice through the practice of writing itself. In this study, I apply this feminine subversion of the position of the other to Anna Komnene, whose historiographical voice changes the rhetorical and historiographical tradition by introducing a feminine authorial *ego*. Anna writes her own experience into the literary canon – her perspective and memories as a girl of her admiration for her mother. At the same time, throughout her work, the historian establishes that she is writing the truth. As she 'speaks', we could thus say that she ceases to inhabit the position of 'other'. Anna places herself within the

dominant masculine tradition, claiming her utterances to be stating objective truth, yet she never defines herself as detached from her female sex or deprived of subjectivity.

Furthermore, in this study, I have demonstrated how the feminine voice that we find in the *Alexiad* can be brought into relation with the romance and novel genre that is under development during the twelfth century in the West and Byzantium. In the Byzantine *Hysmine and Hysminias*, Hysmine is a character whose desire propels the plot forward, regardless of Hysminias' eventual comprehension of it. Moreover, with her speech, the narrative creates a scene in the minds of the audience by using rhetorical techniques such as ekphrastic descriptions and *enargeia*. The speech tells of her experience of helplessness at the hands of violence, something of which the male character has no knowledge, and thus no ability to articulate himself. The novel balances the Greek novel tradition with its own, medieval world. Hysmine can be interpreted as the representation of a woman who desires and pursues her desire in action, but who also has to conceal both this desire and her agency.

To be sure, the *Alexiad* is indeed something different from *Hysmine and Hysminias*. Anna Komnene's work is not a novel, but a text about Emperor Alexios' reign. Yet, in the transgressive act of writing a history as a woman, Anna also writes down the experience of being educated in the Greek canon of men thinkers, and the experience of being a young girl who is afraid of approaching this body of work. In this historiographical work about her father, Anna describes her women role models; how, as a young girl, she saw her mother reading, thus inviting her audience, in their imaginations, to see that which she describes herself as seeing in her own memory. Thus, the text, through the description of her mother self-assuredly holding a book in her hands after dinner has been served, invites the audience to identify with a woman in her upbringing. The text also invites the reader to observe the crusader Bohemond through a feminine gaze. His physical description can be interpreted as appearing through the narrator Anna's memory, composed in the traditional rhetorical style of beauty.

In *Partonopeu de Blois*, we seem to find traits similar to both *Hysmine and Hysminias* and the *Alexiad*, as well as to other intertexts discussed in the study. In this romance, the heiress of the Byzantine Empire, Melior, can be interpreted as the central character in the story, considering that her desire is the crucial motivation for the plot. On the one hand, this is constructed by working the Cupid and Psyche story into the main plot by means of a gender reversal, but, on the other hand, Melior can also be read from a Byzantine angle. If we read the romance's female character in relation to Byzantine representations of the imperial family – such as Anna Komnene the intellectual, Anna Dalassene the woman ruler, and Alexios the storyteller – we may better understand the Old French romance and the potential views and knowledge of the Byzantine court among the romance's audience.

Also, the narrative finds a way to represent the female protagonist as a desiring and loving agent whom I define in terms inspired by Julia Kristeva's and Luce Irigaray's theories of feminine subjectivity and its relation to language. Furthermore, if we read *Partonopeu de Blois* in relation to the Greek novel tradition, Melior's character can be interpreted as simultaneously incorporating two figures from the Greek novel: the instructive, seductive antagonist, and the chaste, maiden protagonist. Rather than being trapped in a feminine role that resists erotic advances to guard her chastity, Melior can be interpreted as acting according to social expectations of chastity at the same time as she is the desiring agent who seduces her chosen beloved object. The narrative thus creates a new sort of female character: the combination of a narrative subject and a feminine subject of desire. The same can be seen in Hysmine in the Byzantine novel, who displays a new sort of subjective agency in comparison with the female protagonist of the Greek novel. *Hysmine and Hysminias* and *Partonopeu de Blois* are both narratives that present desiring female characters in comparable ways.

By reading the twelfth-century Old French romance in relation to Byzantine literature, we are given new opportunities for interpretation; from this intercultural perspective, *Partonopeu de Blois* seems to tell us things that we were not previously able to hear. By challenging the idea

of literature as belonging to an isolated linguistic and geographical field, we can better understand medieval women's literary activity at various courts, as well as the articulation of feminine subjectivity in the narratives at hand.

This study takes one step towards a better understanding of the transcultural situation in the twelfth-century Mediterranean world through comparative readings. Nevertheless, we need further investigations in this vein in order to develop a wider and more elaborate picture of the circulation of medieval literature. *Partonopeu de Blois* was a medieval best-seller. The romance played an important role in the literary scene of medieval Europe and demonstrates our need to continue investigating the Old French and Byzantine literary traditions' relation to each other. For, as we have seen, it seems that the Greek novel not only has a considerable influence on the shaping of new novels in Byzantium, but also on the creation of the vernacular romance in the West.

Through rereadings, we detect the presence of feminine subjectivity and voices that were able to co-shape and respond to the dominant masculine tradition, inside which they were articulated. In this sense, re-reading can remedy historical amnesia and work as a reinvention of love and desire.

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