

## Romanus the Melodist: Drama as an Instrument of Theology

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### Abstract

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By means of a close reading among several texts of Greek antiquity, the author demonstrates that in the hymnography of Saint Romanus the Melodist we see the advent of a new dramatic religious genre in the Byzantine tradition. By combining the schematic plots of the classical dramatist Euripides with a new poetic form, the kontakion, Romanus was able to provide the Church of his day with a vehicle for expressing and conveying her faith in the Triune God. Like its predecessors in the classical tradition, the kontakion was meant to produce in those who listened to it feelings of awe and understanding. Romanus's poetic works are the product of a complicated and intricate inculturative process that took several centuries to fully mature. In his works, a synthesis of Syriac form and classical dramatic and rhetorical convention has been created that is nearly perfect. Nevertheless, in the inculturative process we witness a collision of two different cultures that leads, ultimately, albeit haltingly, to a harmonious blending of the two cultures into a new culture, in the process giving birth to a theology that is at once dramatic and liturgical.



### *Introduction*

In the poetry of Romanus the Melodist, we see the beginnings of a new dramatic religious genre. The poet combined the poetic form called the kontakion with the vocabulary and schematic plot that he adapted from the work of the classical

dramatist Euripides. In the hands of Saint Romanus, schematic plot became an instrument to express the emerging pro-Chalcedonian theology in terms of a personal encounter with the Θεάνθρωπος that leads to light and peace. The work of Romanus represents a major achievement of the Early Byzantine period in the inculturation of Christianity in the Hellenic world. Through the kontakion, the vocabulary, the art, the plot scheme and the fundamental aims of classical drama are Christianized and used as a vehicle for Christian theology and liturgy. This study will show that Saint Romanus's use of the vocabulary and schematic plot of the classical dramatist Euripides, along with the form of the kontakion (whose roots are in Syriac religious poetry), allowed the poet to create plots, which, like their precedents in the dramatic tradition, lead from perplexity and fear to awe and understanding.

### ***I. Statement of the Problem:***

#### ***The Origin of the Dramatic Art of Romanus***

Romanus the Melodist was born in the city of Emesa, modern Homs, in western Syria sometime around AD 496. Very little is known about his life beyond the vaguest outline. We know that he was ordained to the diaconate for the Church of Berytus (modern Beirut), and that he served as a deacon for a time in the Church of the Resurrection in that city. At some point, probably during the reign of the Emperor Anastasius I (491–518), Romanus became a member of the clergy of the Church of Constantinople. He was, apparently, assigned the diaconal ministry in the Church of the Theotokos in the Kyrou. He remained in this position until his death sometime between AD 550 and 560.<sup>1</sup>

The legends surrounding the life of Saint Romanus already show forth the process of the inculturation of Christianity in Hellenic culture to an eminent degree. According to one legend, at some point after the poet's transfer to the clergy of Constantinople, the poet became disillusioned with his diaconal ministry in the Kyrou quarter because of his inability to

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Catafygiotu-Topping. *Sacred Songs: Studies in Byzantine Hymnography* (Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing, 1997), 19–20.

preach effectively. He was, according to the *Synaxarion*, the subject of considerable ridicule for his inadequacies in this area.

During this period, it was the poet's custom to celebrate the weekly all-night vigils in the Church of the Vlachernae, praying before the miraculous icon that was kept there. During the vigil of Christmas (we cannot be certain of the year), the legend relates that the Mother of God appeared to the poet and gave him the gift of poetry in the form of a little scroll that the poet was to eat.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the legend shows the profound influence of the classical tradition. The gift that is communicated to the poet by the Theotokos is the gift of song, not the gift of prophecy as we find in the Scriptural parallels. The classical inspiration for the legend, as Eva Catafygiotu-Topping claims, is the inspiration of the Muse as described in the *Theogony* of Hesiod.<sup>3</sup> The legend tells us that Romanus's life was changed by his encounter with the Theotokos as his "muse." The poet went on to compose over a thousand kontakia, or verse homilies consisting of a variable number of strophes arranged in the order of an acrostic message. In fact, the works of the saint were probably far fewer. Today, there are only fifty-six kontakia or verse homilies that are extant.<sup>4</sup>

The Roman province of Syria, where Romanus was born, and where he began his diaconate, was bilingual (Greek and Syriac) but extremely Hellenized, proof of which is seen in the presence of a major faculty of higher studies in the city of Beirut.<sup>5</sup> This "School of Beirut" was an old institution in Romanus's time, as a survival from classical days, and the curriculum, understandably, tended to follow classical lines and depart very little from models adopted without adaptation

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<sup>2</sup> The little scroll as a symbol of divine inspiration is a *topos* in Scripture, appearing in both the Old and the New Testaments (Ezekiel 2; Apocalypse 10:2).

<sup>3</sup> Eva Catafygiotu-Topping, *Sacred Songs*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Tamara Talbot Rice, *Everyday Life in Byzantium* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 199.