

Agnieszka Heszen  
Jagiellonian University, Kraków

The Dramatic Structure of *Tetraodion for Holy Saturday* by Kassia the Nun

ABSTRACT: This article presents Kassia's canon for Holy Saturday in terms of its dramatic structure. The content of the work is Christ's descent into hell, which, according to tradition, took place after His death and before the Resurrection. This theme provided opportunities for the poet to introduce various speaking characters, such as prophets, and in addition to the praise section, there are mini-scenes with dialogues in the canon. This study analyses the relationship of the stanzas of the canon to the biblical canticles, and shows the poet's creative arrangements in the construction of the odes of the canon, as well as in their number. Kassia introduces many different speaking subjects in the work, making the structure of the canon, intended to be sung during services in monasteries, very dramatic and reminiscent of an older type of liturgical poetry, namely kontakia. The dramatic dimension also applies to the actualisation of the liturgy.

KEYWORDS: Kassia the Nun, Byzantine canons, Byzantine liturgy, tetraodion, canticle, Holy Saturday, kontakia

Of the works of the Byzantine poet and nun, Kassia (ca. 810–867), the most important and best known is the troparion for Holy Wednesday, sung to this day in the Orthodox Church, Κύριε, ή ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις.¹ Kassia wrote many troparia about the saints, which were included in the *Menaia*, a series of books designed for each month of

¹ Edition: Tripolitis 1992. The troparion for Holy Wednesday has been studied many times by scholars, among others: Catafygiotu Topping 1981, Catafygiotu Top-

the liturgical year.² Kassia is also the author of a very interesting work, the canon for Holy Saturday, which, together with a piece on the sinful woman, is included in the *Triodion*, a liturgical book for Lent.³ In the study of Byzantine canons, this work by Kassia has yet to be analysed, even in works that take a complementary view of the phenomenon of this liturgical genre.⁴ In this paper I would like to examine this canon with the background of other middle Byzantine canons and the liturgical poetry of this time.⁵ I will first give a brief overview of what the canon is, then analyse the content and structure of Kassia's work, with particular focus on its dramatic aspect, both in the sense of literary structure and drama understood as a religious experience.

Canon as a literary and liturgical work was invented by Andrew of Crete (650–740),⁶ the next canons were created by John of Damascus (ca. 676–749), Cosmas of Maiuma (ca. 685–750) and Kassia the Nun. The canons originated as an embellishment and supplement to monastic (as opposed to cathedral) liturgy, and were mainly sung during morning services, the Matins, i.e. *Orthros*. It is the place and time of performance that implies the structure of the piece: nine biblical canticles were sung in the convents and accompanied by new songs, forming a canon, so the dependence of the individual odes of the canon on the biblical canticles is very apparent. The most model example of this genre, the *Great Canon* of Andrew of Crete, contains precisely nine songs; the canon of John of Damascus *On the Resurrection* contain eight songs, as custom dictated that the second ode should be omitted in canons unrelated to penance; likewise the canon of Cosmas *On the Nativity* has eight odes; thus the number of nine or eight odes is the basic pattern of the canon. The dependence of the odes on biblical canticles is also evident in the content, although this is usually reduced

ping 1982; Dyck 1986; Kazhdan 1999: 315–326; Tsironis 2003; Silvas 2006; Heszen 2014a; Heszen 2014b; Mellas 2020: 141–168.

² See Tsironis 2003; Heszen 2020.

³ I follow by Antonia Tripolitis, who argued it for attribution to Kassia, based on two manuscripts of Mt. Athos (1992: 80–82).

⁴ Grosdidier 1980.

⁵ The periodisation according to Cunningham 2008.

⁶ Hennig 1963; Wellesz 1962: 204.

to the first ode (the so-called *heirmos*)⁷ or loose allusions to the content of the canticles or authors of books of the Bible, from which they originate.⁸

The canons were sung-meditative in character, uncomplicated in structure, and usually the author spoke in the first person, which gave the utterance the character of soliloquy⁹ and, in the reality of monastic liturgy, was the author's identification with the congregation. As Mary B. Cunningham underlines:

Kanons stress above all the encounter between Christians and their God, which is illustrated throughout the old and new dispensations and is expressed in liturgical prayer. Indeed, the nature of the kanon, with its thematic emphasis on typology and allegory, distances it from the more literal, narrative style of many kontakia and festal sermons.¹⁰

Kontakia and canons originated in different liturgical traditions: kontakia in the cathedral tradition, canons in the monastic tradition,¹¹ and this origin has to do with their structure. Cathedral services must have been characterised by greater splendour, with the participation of the people in addition to the clergy, which is linked to a different type of transmission – the kontakia had a very varied structure, ranging from authorial statements, speaking on behalf of the community, to the introduction of the figure of the event referred to. The canons, on the other hand, addressed to the community of monks, were part of their liturgy of the hours and thus had the character of a more individual chant. As we shall see in the analyses below, Kassia's *Tetraodion*, formally a canon, shares many features also with kontakions, especially those by Romanos Melodos.

The history of the text itself and its attribution is quite complicated. In today's form of the Lenten book, the *Triodion*, the canon for Holy Saturday contains the combined *heirmoi* or first stanzas of each

⁷ See *Great Canon* by Andrew of Crete.

⁸ See canon *On the Resurrection* by John of Damascus.

⁹ Cunningham 2008: 257.

¹⁰ Cunningham 2008: 258.

¹¹ Louth 2005: 197; Cunningham 2008: 252.

ode from the work of Kassia with the poem by Mark, bishop of Hydra (10th c.),¹² an acrostic is added ('Today I praise Holy Saturday'), which is absent from Kassia's original work. This problem, according to Antonia Tripolitis, is explained as early as the 12th century by Theodore Prodromos:

the Church felt that a hymn for a major religious holiday could not be attributed to a woman. Therefore, the canon was attributed to a male hymnographer, Cosmas (c. 685–750), Bishop of Maiouma in Phoenicia. Early in the tenth century, at the command of the Emperor Leo IV, the Wise (886–912), Bishop of Hydrou, Italy composed five additional odes to the canon. He also completely altered the original odes and retained only the 'heirmoi' of each ode ad the melody. The canon exists in its altered form in the *Triodion*.¹³

The actual number of the odes in Kassia's canon already draws attention to its difference from its predecessors: it is the *Tetraodion for Holy Saturday*, i.e. a four-song canon and thus much shortened from the original genre template of nine or eight odes to four ones, each of them with three stanzas (90 lines in total); moreover, its internal structure seems more complicated in terms of the relationship between subject and audience or the characters "appearing" in it. Since there are four odes, it is important to consider which canticles of the nine here are the model stanzas to which the poet refers in her songs and how dependent they are on them in content.

The first of the canticles sung during the *Orthros* liturgy comes from the Book of Exodus, and is a praise song of Moses after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15:1–19); the motif of plunging rider and horse into the sea appears here. This is exactly the theme that Kassia uses

¹² Paprocki 2003: 129–133. Ilse Rochow discusses the issue of manuscript tradition, authorship, and interpolation of Mark of Hydra's text in detail (1967: 37–39).

¹³ Tripolitis 1992: 8–82. I don't know, if the feminist view is true, because in Orthodox Church the liturgy takes precedence and literary considerations or questions of authorship are subordinated to it – many of Romanos' kontakia are preserved in the liturgy as incorporated into other works, without reference to his authorship. In the same way, the poem on Mary of Egypt was later incorporated into the *Great Canon* of Andrew of Crete.

in the first Ode, when she writes about the ‘children saved from the pursuit’ – the metaphor of the tyrant being covered by the sea wave is juxtaposed with the literalism of Christ’s burial, the covering with the earth by the descendants of these survivors:

Κύματι θαλάσσης	He who once
τὸν κρύψαντα πάλαι	Hid the pursuing tyrant
διώκτην τύραννον	In the waves of the sea,
ὑπὸ γῆν ἔκρυψαν	Was hidden beneath the earth
τῶν σεσωμένων οἱ παιδες	By the children of those he had saved.
(v. 1–5) ¹⁴	

The community that appears in the canon as the collective subject speaking at this point are the ‘maidens’ (αἱ νεάνιδες, v. 6); they are encouraged to sing songs of praise: ἐνδόξως γὰρ δεδόξασται (‘for he is gloriously glorified’, v. 8). The last words of this stanza are a paraphrase of the biblical phrase from the song of Moses: ‘I will praise him’.¹⁵

The second stanza of the first Ode introduces a theme closely related to the feast for which the canon is written: Holy Saturday is, in tradition, Christ’s descent into hell, so here we have an apostrophe to Hades,¹⁶ who, like the ancient god or Old Testament Leviathan, has kidnapped or swallowed the souls of the righteous. Now he will have to return them – the rather peculiar expression even appears here: καταπιὼν γὰρ ἐμέσεις (‘thou shalt vomit’,¹⁷ v. 13). Hades will be knocked down by the Lord, who ‘is glorified’ (καθελεῖ σε Κύριος/ ὅτι δεδόξασται, v. 15–16). This expression is a repetition of a verse from the first stanza, somewhat along the lines of a refrain, but it is only recurred once in the

¹⁴ Quotations and translations by Antonia Tripolitis according to the edition: Tripolitis 1992.

¹⁵ English translations of Bible come from website: <https://www.biblegateway.com>.

¹⁶ ‘Hell’ in the English translation. The motif of Christ’s descent into Hell in early Christian literature and Kassia’s dependence on these sources is discussed by Kosta Simić (2011: 22–24).

¹⁷ It is my translation, because A. Tripolitis’ one is, in my opinion, too gentle: ‘For you will be sick devouring’.

whole canon, by virtue of being a paraphrase of the words from Moses' canticle, so it is only right to appear here.

The third stanza is the most personal prayer in the canon – it contains an apostrophe to Jesus, and presents *expressis verbis* the theme of the day:

Ἴησοῦ Θεέ μου	Christ, my God,
ὑμνῶ σου τὰ πάθη	I sing in praise of Your Passion
(...)	(...)
Τὴν ταφὴν δοξάζω σου	I glorify your burial
ὑμνῶ σου καὶ τὴν ἔγερσιν.	And I offer praise to your raising.
(v. 17-18, 23-24)	

And this is, after all, the main theme of the work. It is presented by means of a hymnic formula of praise (ύμνῳ – δοξάζω) and an exposition of the object of praise, which are the days preceding and following Holy Saturday, the day of the death, burial of Jesus Christ and the day of his Resurrection.

The next Ode is numbered “three” in the manuscripts and editions (Γ'), so in keeping with the tradition that the second ode, as connected to the song from the Deuteronomy (32:1–43), is sung only in penitential canons, it has been omitted here. Thus, the third Ode refers to the Prayer of Hannah from the 1 Samuel (2:1–10) and develops the motif of suspension and hanging: The Lord hung the pillars of the earth, and the Lord hung on the cross. As in the previous Ode the link was ‘covering’ – with the wave (Moses) and the earth (Jesus’ tormentors), so here we have a link in the form of ‘suspension’, equally contrasted as there – the good of God and the evil actions of men. In addition, words from hymn of Hannah are woven into the conclusion of this stanza: she prays with the words ‘There is no one holy like the Lord’ (1 Samuel 2:2) and these words are paraphrased by all creation looking at the Saviour hanging on the Cross¹⁸.

Σὲ τὸν ἐπὶ ὑδάτων

When the creation observed you

¹⁸ Niki Tsironis emphasises the cosmic dimension of Christ's mission, as contained in these verses (2003: 144).

κρεμάσαντα πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν ἀσχέτως
ἡ κτίσις κατιδοῦσα

έν τῷ κρανίῳ κρεμάμενον

(v. 25–28)

Hanging on Golgotha,
Who without hindrance hung
the whole earth
Upon the waters

The second stanza of this Ode is like the second stanza of the first Ode – it develops the theme of the dead residing in hell and contrasts them with the death of Christ free from it. Christ's appearance under the earth and His words to the dead are the theme of the third stanza. It is He who crumbles the barriers and awakens the dead to life, Himself free from death, and lodged in its shadow. There is an image of irresolvable bonds, of people chained by them, to whom the Lord Jesus Himself speaks – He frees them from these bonds, tells them to come out of them:

οἱ ἐν δεσμοῖς ἐξέλθετε,
οἱ ἐν τῷ σκότει λύεσθε.

(v. 42–43)

Those in bondage burst forth,
Those in darkness be free.

The dramaturgy of these scenes has several dimensions: we see here the dramaturgy of the events described, not only in terms of the genre structure of the work, but also in terms of the events played out: the actions of God are contrasted with the actions of human beings, in addition related, as it were, generationally, to those people referred to in the Old Testament and towards whom God acted – created, saved – and who have now condemned him to death and buried him. The immortal God found himself in the world of the dead, laid in the grave, but found himself there to free the people from their bonds and darkness. A number of these oppositions concern the moral, eschatological and historical plane.

In genre terms, Ode three, like Ode one, contains elements of drama along with didascalies interspersed with comments from the author and phrases to the Lord, Saviour and King: ή κτίσις ... κρανγάζουσα, ὁ Κύριος ἐβόα ('the creation ... cried out, the Lord shouted', v. 27, 31; 41).

The fourth Ode is not only linked to Habakkuk's song by a theme, but also by the introduction of him as speaking character. Amazement and crying out of Habakkuk refers to the first words of his song: 'I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord' (Habakkuk 3:2), but they can be read in a new context – the Old Testament prophet encounters Christ, not only foresees Him, but hears His homily, which is a very interesting literary and religious device. The content of this entire Ode alludes to God's epiphany from the canticle and the epiphany is as if it were real, it takes place in hell. God's greatness, majesty, power depicted in the canticle are contrasted with His kenosis (self-emptying).¹⁹ The second and third stanza of this Ode is again an image of Christ residing under the earth, Christ bringing light to the dead, like the God of Habakkuk's song, whose 'splendor was like the sunrise' (Habakkuk 3:4):

τὸ φῶς τὸ τῆς θεότητος	Shone the light
ἔλαμψας θνητοῖς	Of his divinity to mortals
(v. 56–57)	

The fifth Ode is linked to the canticle of Isaiah, known as the 'eschatological psalm' (Isaiah 26:3–10), and so in its subject matter it seems very appropriate for expressing the theme of Holy Saturday. It speaks of the dead who will live, of their bodies that will rise, and of universal joy. These words are quoted almost verbatim by Kassia, recalling the prophet Isaiah, furthermore setting the atmosphere of his song by mentioning the night vigil: 'Isaiah, as he watched by night'. These words allude to one of the verses of the canticle: 'My soul yearns for you in the night' (Isaiah 26:9). This may also be a reference to the morning time, when the canon was sung in the monastery (the Greek term for the morning service is *Orthros*, Kassia here uses the verb ὄρθριζω to express the action of the prophet, v. 70). The second stanza recalls again Christ's descent into hell and the resurrection of Adam (ἀνέστησας/ τὸν προπάτορα, v. 78–79), bringing peace and joy – the feast of the resurrection is near. The third stanza of this ode, the conclusion of the canon, contains the antithesis: mortal and life, bonds and

¹⁹ Compare Simić 2011: 25–26.

dissolution, the darkness associated with Isaiah's prophecy and Christ's words:

Τοῖς ἐν τῷ ἄδη συνοικῶν	You who breathed life into mortals
οἱ τὴν ζωὴν τοῖς βροτοῖς ἀναβλύσας	Lived with those in hell
τοῖς ἐν σκότει ἔλεγες ἐξέλθετε	To those in darkness you told to come out
καὶ τοῖς ἐν δεσμοῖς ἀπολύθητε	And to those in bonds to be released,
εἰς ὄλεσιν τοῦ ἔχθροῦ	To the destruction of the enemy;
καὶ εἰς ἀνάστασιν τῶν προτεθνηκότων	And when you called those who had died before
ἐλήλυθα πρὸς ζωὴν	To rise up
ἀνακαλούμενος.	I came to life.

(v. 83–90)

The canticles were masterfully linked to the content of the canon for the feast of Holy Saturday, the theme of which is the descent into hell. One can see how the principle of linking to the canticles was applied: on the one hand, it obliged the authors with certain restrictions; on the other, it gave them the opportunity to use the biblical texts in creative ways. Kassia, especially from the 4th and 5th canticles, chooses words and images that perfectly fit the theme of Christ's descent into the world of the dead, while at the same time linking the present event of salvation history to the time of the prophets and heroes of the Old Testament, and thus to the time of waiting for the Messiah. Time here has a universal dimension, or rather, in so far as it can be expressed, "there is no time, time does not exist": Habakkuk and Isaiah, the Old Testament prophets see Christ's descent into the underworld, participate in it, and, given the liturgy and its timelessness or being beyond time, each participant also re-experiences the event, updates it in himself during the celebration in the temple.

An actualisation in the liturgy, therefore, has a dimension like that provided by the theatre: each participant in the performance experiences the events in a timeless way, the stage transports the audience

to the era in which the drama takes place and allows them to identify with the characters there. Actualisation and identification in theatre are almost the same as in the liturgy: reliving once again the same events of salvation history has a sacred and historical dimension (recollection of the feast), a personal (prayer) and a cathartic or repentance (*metanoia*) dimension. The parallels between liturgy and theatre have always existed, there have always been parallels between these realities; in Kassia's canon, these dimensions are further interpenetrated thanks to the structure of the text, thanks to the dialogues introduced, which are interspersed with authorial commentaries and collective or individual statements.

In research on Byzantine canons, their dramatic dimension has been noted,²⁰ for example Richard René, studying the Great Canon by Andrew of Crete, unexpectedly describes the structure of this work that is, after all, penitential in nature, as comedic:

Eastern theological anthropology may be understood as a comedy in the Shakespearean sense, beginning with the chaos of the fallen world, moving through an ascetic struggle, and ending with the restoration of life in union with God. The Great Canon presents this comedic structure by highlighting the lamentable, fallen situation of its human “protagonist-antagonist” within the strophes of each ode, while the *irmoi*, the hymns that introduce each ode, offer a vision of the flourishing state that we have lost, and to which we will be restored through the incarnation of Christ.²¹

In the sense in which Richard René writes about the ‘comedic structure’, one could also see such a concept in the Kassia's canon: the leading of souls out of the abyss, the defeat of death and conquer of ‘the all-deceitful enemy’ (νενικημένος ὁ πανδόλιος ἐχθρός, v. 60–62) is the restoration of the original order and harmony, the resurrection, after all, is the good ending. This happy end, which in Kassia's canon inspires hope and encourages transformation certainly has a cathartic dimension, but in calling the canon a “comedy” one should nevertheless bear in mind that only to a narrow extent does the work realise the principles

²⁰ Schork 1966.

²¹ René 2020: 46.

of this theatrical genre. The problem presented, the realisation of the theme and the layers of language, however, are far from a typically light, funny and amusing play.

Mary Cunningham, on the other hand, writing about the influence of Romanos Melodos on canon authors, uses the phrase “soliloquy” when referring to the latters. She fails, however, to note the dramatic charge that I believe is present in the Kassia’s *Tetraodion*, where there is not just internal self-monologue, but there are many kinds of speaking subjects, such as ‘we’, ‘me’ and *dramatis personae*.

The expression ‘we’ appears in the begin of the work:

ἀλλ’ ἡμεῖς ὡς αἱ νεάνιδες But let us, as the maidens,
τῷ Κυριῷ ᾧσωμεν Sing unto the Lord
(v. 7–8)

Eva Catafygotiu Topping gives these words as a motto for her article on Byzantine women hymnographers, i.e. νεάνιδες refers in general to female poets in Byzantium, nun composers.²² In the context of the canon, this can be read precisely as a female convent celebrating and singing this very song in praise of the Lord. ‘We’ in this case is a liturgical, collective subject, used frequently in the opening stanzas of ecclesiastical hymns, for example in the *Prooimia* of Romanos Melodos. In the case of the first Ode of Kassia, on the other hand, an allusion to the scene in Exodus, when, after the Song of Moses, the Prophetess Miriam intones a song to the women accompanying her, cannot be ruled out. This would be yet another neat combination of *heirmos* and biblical canticle.

The pronoun and verb used in the first person singular (‘I’, ‘me’) may indicate that a poet is being revealed here, or – to use again terminology reserved for comedic analysis – some kind of parabasis? The first person in the canons is not unusual, but here it is only the one-time use of it that draws attention; apart from the following quotation, it does not appear once again. Again, I would compare this to the kontakia of Romanos, which used the first person sparingly but made its presence felt, especially at the beginning of the kontakion. Finally, the

²² Catafygotiu Topping 1982–1983: 98.

‘me’ as an individual subject can also have a liturgical dimension, as can the ‘we’ – any participant in the service can identify with the person saying these words: Ἰησοῦ Θεέ μου /ύμνῳ .../δοξάζω.

The addressees, or persons directly spoken to by the narrator in the second person, are Jesus Christ: μακρόθυμε σωτήρ, εὐεργέτα (‘O long-suffering Savior’, ‘O, benefactor’, v. 33, 76) and Hades: ἄφρον γηραλέες/ ἀκόρεστε ἄδη (‘Senseless, old,/ Insatiable... Hell’, v. 9–10). Habakkuk, Isaiah and the Enemy appear as performing figures, as if they were *dramatis personae*:

Habakkuk

σὺ δυναστῶν διέκοψας
Κράτος, ἀγαθέ,
όμιλῶν τοῖς ἐν ἄδῃ
ώς παντοδύναμος,
(v. 49–52)

“You have cut short the strength
Of the powerful, O benevolent one,
Preaching to those I hell
As almighty.”

Isaiah

ἀναστήσονται οἱ νεκροὶ
καὶ ἐγερθήσονται οἱ ἐν τοῖς
μνημείοις
καὶ πάντες οἱ ἐν τῇ γῇ
ἀγαλλιάσονται.
(v. 71–74)

“The dead shall arise
And they are in the tomb shall
be raised,
And all those on the earth,
Shall rejoice exceedingly.”

Enemy

τὸ κράτος μου βοῶ
κατεπόθη καὶ πᾶσα
ἡ δυναστεία μου.
(v. 64–66)

[he] cries out: “My power,
And all my rule
Has been swallowed up.”

In addition, the whole of creation, which gazes in amazement at the Creator hanging on the cross, and the multitude of the dead beneath the

earth, waiting for salvation – all they are persons speaking out in the “drama”.

Conclusions

The above presentation shows how dialogically varied this canon, which after all is not a dramatic genre, is too. The Old Testament characters come alive here, not only fragments of their canticles are sung, but they appear as if “in person”, calling out, talking, commenting. The conquered enemy moans over his downfall, Christ himself appears in the underworld, calling the souls found there to come out, revealing the purpose of his descent into hell. We have two levels of dialogue here, direct addresses to Hades and Jesus, i.e. dialogue from a metatextual position; and internal dialogue, i.e. the conversations of the characters appearing in the canon, and these include Jesus’ utterance to the dead, the Enemy’s cry of terror and the words of the prophets, Habakkuk and Isaiah to Christ. This multi-level literary reality, which simultaneously features author / narrator - collective - biblical characters (or saints), is intended to add variety to the liturgy, to multiply its experience, and the only genre that has combined similar forms of expression is the kontakion. And it is the kontakion, not the canons of Andrew of Crete or John of Damascus, that is the explicit source of the Kassia canon.

Kassia’s canon notwithstanding, in terms of dramatic structure it is much more like the kontakia of Romanos than, for example, the penitential *Great Canon* of Andrew of Crete, which is dialogue with one’s own soul – soliloquy. The dramatic structure of Kassia’s canon is reminiscent of the dramatic structure of the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist. Like Romanos, Kassia introduces several levels of expression with persons/heroes talking with one another: there is a narrator who narrates what is happening and introduces *didascalia* (of the type ‘The Lord called out’), perhaps identical to the author, but independently there is also first-person speech; there is a liturgical collective: “we” (‘the maidens’) and an individual prayer subject: ‘I’ (‘I sing’); there are characters in the drama – silent, such as Hades and the Dead, and speaking, such as the Creation, the Lord, Habakuk, the Enemy, Isaiah.

Kassia's canon refers more to Romanos and his kontakia, i.e. liturgical poetry that is part of the cathedral tradition, which in turn was intended to have a much greater role as didactic poetry, hence the author's efforts to engage the audience. In Kassia's work this dialogicity is very evident, but is the purpose also didactic? The work, however, remains part of the monastic services, where the community was well prepared to understand and experience them. As can be seen from the analyses, the distinction between canon and kontakion is not sharp, and in different types of services, a similar literary form could have been used. One could even say that Kassia in her *Tetraodion* reactivates the kontakion genre to some extent.

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