

St. John Chrysostom on Social Parasites

Paul M. Blowers

Greco-Roman comic playwrights and their audiences loved the stock character of the social parasite, a figure on the one hand lampooned for his relentless sponging, flattery,¹ and ingratiating antics, but on the other hand endearing for his sheer bravado in cheating all the conventions of friendship, patronage, and the protocols of class hierarchy in ancient society. While originally the name “*parasite*” was applied to the assistants and dinner companions of priests in Greek temples, the label took on wholly different nuances in the theater.²

Foreshadowed in some of the beggars in Homeric poetry, the parasite first shows up in earnest as a comical character in the Sicilian dramatist Epicharmus (late sixth and early fifth century BCE), who is often considered the pioneer of ancient comedy relating to good manners and table etiquette. In his comic play entitled *Hope or Wealth* the parasite appears onstage as the quintessential freeloader, and speaks up for himself:

I sup with any one who likes, if he
Has only the good sense to invite me;
And with each man who makes a marriage feast,
Whether I'm invited or not, and there I am witty;
There I make others laugh, and there I praise
The host, who gives the feast. And if by chance
Any one dares to say a word against the host,
I arm myself for contest, and overwhelm him.

¹ The character of the parasite often overlaps with that of the “flatterer” (*kolax*), also a stock figure in Greco-Roman comedy. See Athenaeus of Naucratis, *Deipnosophistae*, VI.261F-262A (LCL 224: 176-8).

² On this transition of meaning, see Athenaeus' long discussion of parasites and flatterers, with abundant textual quotations, in the *Deipnosophistae* VI.234C-262A (LCL 224: 53-178).

Then, eating much and drinking plentifully, I leave
The house. No slave-boy doth attend me;
But I do pick my way with stumbling steps,
Both dark and desolate; and if sometimes
I do the watchmen meet, I swear to them
By all the gods that I have done no wrong;
But they still set on me. At last, well beaten,
I reach my home, and go to sleep on the ground,
And for a while forget my blows and bruises,
While the strong wine retains its sway and lulls me.³

Unwelcome, and yet deftly getting a foot in the door, eating and drinking his life away, a classic sycophant, the parasite also inevitably betrays his underlying poverty and inequality.⁴ Indeed, one of his especially useful satirical functions, in his marginal position, is to epitomize the thin line between social inclusion and exclusion,⁵ a position likely in effective drama to stir a range of audience emotions, from contempt, to blithe or humored approval, to tragic pity. In today's theatrical jargon, the parasite would be an ideal candidate for so-called black comedy.

Given this versatility, it is little wonder that the entertaining persona of the parasite has endured for centuries,⁶ assuming faces not only in the Greek comedies of Eupolis, Alexis, Antiphanes, Menander, and the later Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence,⁷ but again in the early modern

³ Epicharmus, *Hope or Wealth*, ap. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* VI.235F-236B (LCL 224: 62). The translation here is that of Charles Duke Yonge in *The Deipnosophists, or Banquet of the Learned of Athenaeus*, Bohn's Classical Library (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), 1: 372 (slightly altered).

⁴ John Wilkins, *The Boastful Chef: The Discourse of Food in Ancient Greek Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 321.

⁵ For a full study of this dramatic function of the parasite, see Elizabeth Tylawsky, *Saturio's Inheritance: The Greek Ancestry of the Roman Comic Parasite* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

⁶ See Myriam Roman and Anne Tomiche, eds., *Figures du parasite* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2001).

⁷ On the evolution of the parasite as dramatic type in Greek and Roman comedy, see Hans-Günther Nesselrath, art. "Parasite," in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, eds., *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 10: 522-3; J.C.B. Lowe, "Plautus' Parasites and the Atellanina," in Gregor Vogt-Spira ed., *Studien zur vorliterarischen Periode im frühen Rom* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1989), 161-169; J. O. Lofberg, "The Sycophant-Parasite," *Classical Philology* 15 (1920):

and modern periods with the likes of Shakespeare's Falstaff, Molière's *Tartuffe* (1664), Hugo's Thénardier in *Les Misérables* (1862), and much more recently surfacing in the role of Jerry Baskin (Nick Nolte) in the 1986 motion picture *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*. There are no overt references to parasites in the New Testament and earliest Christian literature, though a case has recently been made that Paul has in mind to caricature his Corinthian opponents as parasites in 2 Corinthians 11:20, where he chides the faithful for putting up with those who prey on them.⁸ It has also been argued that the Apostle is taking on the role of a benevolent flatterer in 1 Corinthians in claiming to become all things to all people (1 Cor 9:19-23).⁹ But the parasite reappears much later in patristic homiletic literature, most notably in the late fourth century in John Chrysostom in the East, and a half-century after him, Valerian of Cimiez (Gaul) in the West. In this essay I want to propose that Chrysostom stages the parasite quasi-theatrically in some of his homilies not simply as a familiar stereotype in the real and fictional dinner parties of the wealthy, but as exactly the kind of marginal figure in society who can test a Christian audience's response to poverty and suffering, exploiting once more, like the ancient dramatists, the fine line between revulsion and compassion.

To St. John's preaching I shall return momentarily. But it is important, first, to examine what might have been some of Chrysostom's premier sources in exploiting the portrait of the parasite; and second, to try to establish how the profile of the parasite might have been received more specifically within John's own social and cultural foreground in Late Antiquity. Generally speaking, we can safely assume that any student enjoying the level of classical education obtained by Chrysostom would have been thoroughly familiar with the parasite as a literary and dramatic type. John rarely cites the Greek poets and when he does it

61-72; P.G.McC. Brown, "Menander, Fragments 745 and 746 K-T, Menander's *Kolax*, and Parasites and Flatterers in Greek Comedy," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 92 (1992): 98-107.

⁸ See Larry Welborn, "Paul's Caricature of His Chief Rival as a Pompous Parasite in 2 Corinthians 11.20," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (2009): 39-56.

⁹ See Clarence Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychology*, Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 81 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 15-52.

is usually with contempt, not appreciation. There is only one fleeting (and anonymous) quotation from the comedy writer Menander, with no reference to parasites.¹⁰ It is certainly likely, however, that John would have had some familiarity with Lucian of Samosata's bold satire entitled *The Parasite*, a work whose sardonic protagonist, the parasite Simon, skillfully mounts an argument that sponging is an art (*technê parasitikê*) superior to rhetoric and philosophy.¹¹ We can imagine, too, that Chrysostom would have known Plutarch's renowned treatise, from his *Moralia*, on *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*,¹² a text that had significant influence on pagan and early Christian view of friendship¹³—although Plutarch's target is more the subtle and sophisticated sycophant than the bawdy trickster who is the usual butt of John's criticism.¹⁴ Chrysostom's most likely direct source for the figure of the parasite, however, was his own former teacher, the esteemed rhetorician Libanius of Antioch. Among his *Declamations*, stylized monologues composed for practice-runs by students of rhetoric, are two placed in the mouth of a professional parasite.¹⁵

They are raucously funny and memorable. In the first of them, for example, the parasite delivers up a bombastic lamentation on having lost the opportunity to glut himself at a feast because of an accident involving the horse he had stolen from a hippodrome to ride to his

¹⁰ A quotation from Menander's *Epitrepontes* appears in *Hom. in Matt.* 80.4 (PG 58: 729), identified by P.R. Coleman-Norton, "St. Chrysostom's Use of the Greek Poets," *Classical Philology* 27 (1932):216.

¹¹ Full text of *De Parasito* in LCL 130: 236-316. See also the important critical analysis by Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, *Lukians Parasitendialog: Untersuchungen und Kommentar* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1985).

¹² *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*, in *Plutarchi Moralia*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, ed. W. R. Paton, Johannes Wegehaupt, Max Pohlenz, and Hans Gärtner, *Bibliotheca scriptorum graecorum et romanorum teubneriana* (Stuttgart and Leipzig: Teubner, 1993), 97-149.

¹³ See Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Plutarch to Prince Philopappus on How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," in John T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech: Studies on Friendship in the New Testament World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 61-79; also David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 98-103.

¹⁴ For Plutarch's warnings against the subtle flatterers, see *Quomodo adulator* 4-6, 50D-52A (ed. Paton et al., *Plutarchi Moralia*, 1: 100-103).

¹⁵ *Declamationes* 28 and 29, ed. Richard Foerster, *Libanii Opera* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1911), 6: 573-610. There is an excellent annotated translation of *Declamation* 28 by D. A. Russell, *Libanius: Imaginary Speeches* (London: Duckworth, 1996), 130-4. Russell notes (p. 10), however, that the Libanian authorship of *Declamation* 29 is not absolutely verified.

host's home. "I have held out against starvation," he boasts, "just long enough to be able to tell you what I have suffered, and then end my life."¹⁶ He proceeds, then, in melodramatic detail to lay the blame on himself for the chain of oversights that led him to miss a good meal.

'And so I shall depart from the human scene, for my sufferings are beyond human limits. Some are troubled by the loss of money, some have been led to death by the loss of children: these things do not trouble me so much because I have not been so keen on them in the first place; to me the greatest disaster is to be done out of a feast and a meal which is being set up in someone else's house.'¹⁷

The amusement of such a declamation, just like the farcical presentations of parasites in comedic plays, should nevertheless not distract us from the very serious, targeted role they were capable of representing in late ancient society. Let us return to the marginal status of the parasite. Already in Greek and Roman comedy, he provides comic relief precisely because he parodies Mediterranean cultures in which food is in great supply for some and in very short supply for others. He could appear as a poor wretch unable to conceal his desperation, or as an astute professional who could hold his own socially as long as the payoff was fine cuisine. As Cynthia Damon has further demonstrated in her insightful monograph *The Mask of the Parasite*, the parasite in Roman culture symbolized a particular "pathology" in the relation between a patron and one of lesser means looking to that patron for sustenance or other benefits. "The parasite," Damon notes, "is in fact a conveniently compact personified form of something quite abstract, of a complicated nexus of social irritants including flattery, favoritism, and dependency."¹⁸ The parasite, in a word, epitomizes and satirizes a whole range of possible abuses of the Roman patronage system.

¹⁶ *Declam.* 28 (ed. Foerster, *Libani Opera* 6: 574), trans. Russell, 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 17 (ed. Foerster, *Libani Opera* 6: 582-3), trans. Russell, 133.

¹⁸ *The Mask of the Parasite: A Pathology of Roman Patronage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7. See also her "Greek Parasites and Roman Patronage," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97 (1995): 181-95.

At last we come to John Chrysostom's homiletical perspective on social parasites in his own time. This is not the place to rehearse in detail the socio-economic dynamics underlying John's audiences in Antioch and Constantinople. From what we can reconstruct, they were diversified, and there is ample evidence of the presence not only of the very wealthy, but of persons in the broad economic middle, and many whom Wendy Mayer, in her extensive studies of Chrysostom's audiences, calls the "relative poor," people with limited means but not destitute, who perceived themselves to be poor by comparison with even slightly better off fellow Christians.¹⁹ The foreground of John's preaching was a culture of rivalry and envy, of the constant comparing of lots and the acute consciousness of having and having not.²⁰ If Peter Brown and Richard Finn are correct in their respective assessments, it was a society in which many faced the live prospect of downward mobility.²¹ The fear of at least temporary destitution was real, and a regular reminder of the threat of economic disability was the desperately poor who, in some instances at least, placed themselves strategically at the doors of churches.²²

In such a culture, the parasite effectively served to parody the lavish life—and especially the dinner habits—of the wealthy, people who could afford to have parasites at their tables as the evening entertainment. Chrysostom explicitly repudiates the mutual exploitation of "the more affluent [who] pick out those persons whose laziness has made them victims of hunger, and maintain them as parasites and dogs feeding at the table; they stuff their shameless bellies with the leftovers of these

¹⁹ Pauline Allen, Bronwen Neil, and Wendy Mayer, *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Realities* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlaganstalt, forthcoming), 92-4; also Wendy Mayer, "John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience," in Mary Cunningham and Pauline Allen, eds., *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 123, with citations; and see also Aideen Hartney, *John Chrysostom and the Transformation of the City* (London: Duckworth, 2004), 151-70.

²⁰ See my essay "Pity, Empathy, and the Tragic Spectacle of Human Suffering: Exploring the Emotional Culture of Compassion in Late Ancient Christianity," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18:1 (2010): 10 - 16.

²¹ See his *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 49-50; also Richard Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice* (313-450) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18-26.

²² Mayer, "John Chrysostom: Extraordinary Preacher, Ordinary Audience," 124-5.

iniquitous banquets and exploit their hosts at will.”²³ A generation or so after Chrysostom, the Gallican bishop Valerian of Cimiez similarly censures affluent Christians who, in the name of friendship, invited parasites to their banquets in order to abuse them for entertainment, making a mockery of them by teasing them with sumptuous food and drink.²⁴ Like John, Valerian’s primarily indicts the rich hosts, but he is also concerned with the welfare of the parasites themselves, acknowledging that they are unfortunate victims of poverty acting out of desperation to get what they can from society’s more privileged:

While this man is eating, his beard gets pulled; while that one is drinking, his chair is pulled out from under him. This fellow eats from wood easily split, that one drinks from a glass, which is easily broken. So great is the urge to laugh! . . . How great, do you think, are the miseries to which these deeds add up?²⁵

As we move more specifically into Chrysostom’s portrait of parasites in his homilies, we must hold in mind the two most basic responses to the character of the parasite inherited within Greco-Roman literary and theatrical culture, revulsion and compassion. From one angle the parasite was an egregious exploiter and self-serving toady. But adjust the profile slightly and he was a victim of the system, a pawn in the deviant designs of the rich to enhance their public repute and widen their circle of friends. Two of John’s homilies are especially apropos here, *Homily 1 on Colossians*, in which he clearly castigates parasites and Christians’ association with them, and *Homily 48 on Matthew*, in which he instead broaches the possibility of reaching out to parasites in benevolence and mercy. I will look at these two texts side by side before commenting on how their seemingly disparate responses to parasites might be reconciled.

²³ *Panegyricum in Babylam martyrem et contra Julianum et gentes* (PG 50: 544-545). Translations of quoted texts of John Chrysostom in this essay are my own.

²⁴ Valerian of Cimiez, *Hom.* 10 (PL 52: 722D-725A).

²⁵ *Ibid.* 10.2 (PG 52: 723C-D); trans. George Gantz, *Saint Valerian: Homilies*, Fathers of the Church 17 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 366.

In the first, *Homily 1 on Colossians*, where he is encouraging bonds of spiritual friendship within the community of the church, John confronts his audience with images of two optional tables, or feasts, which the Christian might prospectively attend. The one is an extravagant spread in the presence of the wealthy and powerful, with all the fineries and costly meats and wines. It is a table of mere appearance and of earthly honor.²⁶ It can be imagined also as a thoroughgoing Herodian banquet (cf. Matt 14:6-11), a “theater of Satan” (*theatron satanikon*).²⁷ It is a table of demons (cf. 1 Cor. 10:21), a disgraceful feast of unbridled envy with the “evil eye” all around, the whole affair being shot through with personal and social rivalries.²⁸ But among its most prominent features is the presence of parasites presumably of all varieties—social climbers, hangers-on, flatterers and sycophants, fools and lewd comics—all trying to ingratiate themselves to the host and thus to be fed well.²⁹ The second table, however, is a table set in the company of the poor, the infirm, the alienated, with Christ seated prominently among those with whom he most closely identifies. It is a modest feast, absent of fineries or exquisite foods; but it is also a table of true honor, true freedom, immune from the evil eye of envy and parasitism, and marked by *philanthropia* and by a profoundly spiritual and perduring friendship.³⁰

John’s description of both tables, the one of shame and the other of honor, is couched in a consideration of the nature of true Christian friendship, against the larger backdrop of imminent eschatological judgment. As in certain pagan philosophical discussions, where parasites and flatterers are targeted as sham companions,³¹ and where, in the words of one historian, authentic friendship is “a breathing

²⁶ *Hom. in Col.* 1.4-5 (PG 62: 304-307).

²⁷ *Hom. in Matt.* 48.3, 5 (PG 58: 490, 493).

²⁸ *Hom. in Col.* 1.5-6 (PG 62: 306-308).

²⁹ *Hom. in Col.* 1.4, 6 (PG 62: 305, 308); *Hom. in Matt.* 48.6 (PG 58: 494-495). Cf. also *Hom. in 1 Cor.* 29.5 (PG 61: 247); *ibid.* 34.6 (PG 61: 296); *Hom. in Eutropium eunuchum et patricium* 1.1 (PG 52: 391).

³⁰ *Hom. in Col.* 1.4-6 (PG 62: 304-308).

³¹ As mentioned above (see n. 12), one of the standard pagan texts in Chrysostom’s time would still have been Plutarch’s *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* (*Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*).

space in a society permeated by a concern about status distinctions,³² Chrysostom assails the utter vanity and superficiality of parasitic friendships, and like Valerian later on, sees an abusive aspect in them as well. In *Homily 48 on Matthew*, he writes:

For how, tell me, will you escape reproach and blame, while your parasite is stuffing himself, as is the dog that stands by you, while Christ appears to not be even as worthy as them? When the parasite receives so much fare for bringing laughter, while Christ gets not the least bit thereof for the Kingdom of Heaven? And while the parasite, on saying something charming, goes away filled, while this man (Christ), who has taught us things that, if we had not learned them, we would have been no better than the dogs, is counted unworthy of even the same treatment as the parasite? ...Cast out the parasites, and make Christ recline for a meal with you. If he partakes of your salt, and of your table, he will be gentle in judging you... And consider, when you are conversing with him, the parasites: What kind of actions do they have to show for? What do they do to profit your household? What do they possibly do to make your meal pleasant? How can their being beaten with sticks and their lewd talk be pleasant? What could be more disgusting than when you strike one who has been created in God's image, and from your insolence to him take enjoyment for yourself, turning your house into a theater, and filling your banquet with stage-players—you who are well-born and free mimicking actors who have shaved their heads for the stage?³³

In these banquet scenarios, in much the same manner as in his *Homilies on the Rich Man and Lazarus*,³⁴ Chrysostom intentionally and artfully plays up the theatricality of the situation. The profile of the

³² Engberg-Pedersen, "Plutarch to Prince Philopappus on How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend," 77.

³³ *Hom in Matt.* 48.6 (PG 58: 494). On the abuses of the pagan theater infecting Christian behavior and etiquette, see also *Hom. in Matt.* 37.6-7 (PG 57: 426-427).

³⁴ See Francine Cardman, "Poverty and Wealth as Theater: John Chrysostom's Homilies on Lazarus and the Rich Man," in Susan Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 159-75.

parasite includes not just sponging, sycophancy, and sham friendship, but committing all these sins with the virtuosity of an actor, which for patristic writers was well-established as a profession of ill repute. To be in the company of parasites and their patrons, then, is to be caught up in a large-scale stage production that stands in outrageous contrast with the modesty and sobriety of a banquet with Christ in the company of the poor and the diseased.

Further into his *Homily 48 on Matthew*, however, after employing the image of a Herodian banquet to heap scorn on the spectacle of parasitism, John surprises us with a very different angle on parasites and on Christians' response to them. In effect he blurs his images of the two dining tables, with parasites now qualifying among the poor and the humble, for the focus turns abruptly from the buffoonery and entertaining antics of parasites to their desperate state as victims of poverty who need to be provided food like any other of the poor.

Let feeding him be for purposes of loving-kindness (*philanthrôpia*), not cruelty; let it be for mercy (*eleos*), not insolence. Because he is poor, feed him; because Christ [in him] is fed, feed him. Do not feed him for introducing satanic sayings and disgracing his life. Do not see him outwardly laughing, but examine his conscience, and you will see him speaking ten thousand curses on himself, and groaning, and mourning.³⁵

What is more, Chrysostom recommends going the extra mile with them:

So then let you meal companions be men that are poor and free, not perjurers nor mimes. And if you wish to barter with them for their food, bid them, if they see anything done wrongly, to reproach, to give counsel, to assist in taking care of your household and in governing your servants. Do you have children? Let these [former parasites] also be fathers to them;

³⁵ *Hom. in Matt.* 48.7 (PG 58: 495).

let them share your discipline with you, thus profiting you in ways that are cherished by God. Engage them in a spiritual profiteering. If you see one of them needing your patronage, help him, and command him to minister. Through these [former parasites] pursue strangers; through these clothe the naked; through these send to prison and relieve others' suffering.³⁶

St. John does not stop here. Through this redemptive bartering with parasites, he proposes the possibility of actually liberating them from their shame into authentic friendship (*philia*), so that “they again will dwell with you in confidence and appropriate freedom, and your house, instead of a theater, will become for you a church, and the devil will be forced to flee, and Christ will enter in, as will a chorus of angels.”³⁷ They are to be commended to the study of Scripture, to becoming ministers in the household, and thereby becoming the equals of angels.³⁸ “Set them free as well as your own self, and remove the name of parasite, and call them companions at your meals; and take away the label of flatterers, and apply to them the title of friends. This is why God created friendships: not for the detriment of the befriended and the friend, but for their welfare and benefit.”³⁹

Chrysostom's proposal of friendship with parasites is, in its societal context, and within the larger scope of his own moral preaching, quite daring. As several late ancient Christian writers indicate (including Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Paulinus of Nola), the faithful could legitimately embrace friendship with the desperately poor and diseased, since, in the spiritual protocol of almsgiving, the destitute could return such friendship by bestowing earthly or heavenly blessings on their benefactors.⁴⁰ But the friendship of parasites came with all the baggage of the culture of entertainment and debauchery with which they remained linked. Chrysostom barely tenders his scenario of redemptive

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. (PG 58: 495-496).

³⁹ Ibid. (PG 58: 496).

⁴⁰ On this point, see Richard Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire*, 184-7.

friendship with parasites before counseling extreme caution, since such would carry every potential of their renegeing or lapsing.⁴¹ He finishes his homily with a stiff warning:

These friends are more grievous than any hostility. For if we so desire, our enemies can even benefit us, but friends like these must invariably damage us. Do not keep friends who give instruction in how to inflict harm. Do not keep friends who are enamored with your table rather than with your friendship. For all friends like these, if you cancel the luxurious living, renege on your friendship. But those who associate with you for virtue's sake remain with you constantly, bearing with every inequality of fortune. The race of parasites, moreover, is often given to seeking revenge, and bringing bad things on your reputation. On that point, I have known many respectable persons who have acquired bad reputations, some being accused of sorcery, others of adultery, still others of corrupting youths.⁴²

Why this virtually dialectical approach to benevolence toward parasites on Chrysostom's part? One could certainly make the case that, as a sage Christian moralist, John is carefully weighing the high cost of discipleship and negotiating his audience between the opportunities and the perils of relationships with exactly those persons thought to be incapable of escaping the throes of pagan culture. But I would like to come round again to the Greco-Roman literary and theatrical culture that underlies John's image of the parasite, and to substantiate my claim that he is skillfully playing on the classic audience reactions to parasites: from revulsion, to humored approval, to compassion. As I noted earlier, the figure of the parasite exploited the fine line between social inclusion and exclusion. He is the supremely marginal figure, since he has no secure status with the wealthy, but with his supreme survival skills alienates himself from the destitute poor as well.

⁴¹ *Hom. in Matt.* 48.7 (PG 58: 496).

⁴² *Ibid.*

Yet the parasite, as a dramatic persona, also exploited the fine line between comedy and tragedy, a line that Aristotle himself had originally recognized (*Poetica* 1453A), and of which ancient comic and tragic poets were also aware. Audiences gravitated to the spectacle of transgression, the reversal of norms, and social outrages, which could be found in comedy and tragedy alike.⁴³ In a very different context, as Blake Leyerle has shown in her monograph on Chrysostom's treatment of spiritual marriages, John himself juxtaposes the ostensible comedy of young virgins stupidly entering into such marriages with the utter tragedy of the disastrous consequences both for their victims and for the whole church.⁴⁴ The only redemptive outcome is for such virgins to become virtual tragic heroes and to withdraw from spiritual marriages, which are tantamount to prostitution, and thereby undo the havoc they have wreaked in the Christian community.⁴⁵

In the same manner, I would suggest that, in his forty-eighth *Homily on Matthew* at least, Chrysostom is seeking to steal the parasite from his native comic stage and recast him with a tragic script, as a hero of sorts striving to overcome his miserable circumstances in poverty and to find a new role, redeemed to a new dignity and honesty, in the theater of Christian virtue. It is a tragedy that comes with all the suspense of the parasite's potential or even likely relapse into his old ways, his redemption possibly turning out to be his undoing. But it is also a tragedy where Chrysostom's audience could very well feel itself being moved from revulsion to compassion.

Chrysostom, and the Cappadocian Fathers before him, had already cast the destitute poor and diseased as new tragic players on

⁴³ On this fine line between tragedy and comedy, see Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 143-4; also Dirk Westerkamp, "Laughter, Catharsis, and the Patristic Conception of the Embodied Logos," in John Michael Krois et al., eds., *Embodiment in Cognition and Culture* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), 229-40.

⁴⁴ Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 145-260, with citations from John's treatises *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* and *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant*.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

the church's stage.⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa calls them "poets of that new, ill-fated tragedy (*dystuchous tragôidias*), not using others' tragic circumstances to induce emotions but filling the stage with their own misfortunes."⁴⁷ In a separate essay I have argued that the Cappadocians, Chrysostom, and other bishops of Late Antiquity were in their own ways reinventing classical tragic pity in order to elicit from their audiences the depth of emotion conducive to benevolent action toward the desperately needy.⁴⁸ But the key to tragic pity is the fragile balance between *distance* from the suffering other (i.e. the subject's recognition of not being in remotely the same circumstance as the sufferer) and *likeness or proximity* to that sufferer (i.e. the possibility of sharing the same misfortune, the feeling of "there but for the grace of God am I"). The distance is necessary lest the audience be overcome with fear of a tragedy too close for comfort. The likeness or proximity, however, motivates the sympathetic negotiation of that distance, the identification with the other who languishes. When a writer like Gregory Nazianzen depicts in graphic terms the deformity of the diseased or the utter miseries of the destitute,⁴⁹ he takes the rhetorical risk of his audience recoiling with fear at their abject state, effectively abandoning their compassion.

But in pointing his audience toward social parasites, making them, as it were, the heroes in his own black comedy, John Chrysostom was taking on all the greater a challenge. At least the desperately diseased and indigent appeared clearly to be victims of circumstance and worthy of Christian mercy. Parasites were a whole other story. Their reputation preceded them. Even if grounded in poverty, their "tragedy"

⁴⁶ See Michael De Vinne, "The Advocacy of Empty Bellies: Episcopal Representation of the Poor in the Late Roman Empire" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1995), 8-9, 15, 18-19, 52, 58-62.

⁴⁷ *De beneficentia* (= *De pauperibus amandis* 2) (GNO 9.1:116-117); also Cardman, "Poverty and Wealth as Theater: John Chrysostom's Homilies on Lazarus and the Rich Man," 159-75. For a full analysis of the Cappadocians' treatment of the spectacle of the desperately poor and diseased, see Susan Holman, *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), esp. 96-7, 135-82.

⁴⁸ See Blowers, "Pity, Empathy, and the Tragic Spectacle of Human Suffering," 16 – 22.

⁴⁹ *Oratio* 14.9-14 (PG 35: 868B-876B).

was by no means self-evident, and thus rhetorically (and dramatically) a very hard sell. In the end, however, this makes John's homiletic effort all the more admirable and compelling. He elevates one of the most marginal—and inflammatory—characters in the Greco-Roman cultural heritage as a potential candidate for Christian compassion and for gracious rehabilitation within the context of the church.

In comparison with the enormous achievements of Byzantine philanthropy extending back to the foundational work of Basil of Caesarea, Chrysostom's brief, benevolent outreach to social parasites, with all its tentativeness, may seem like a small victory, but it was a moral victory nonetheless. His rhetorical appeal, of course, was not just about the parasites themselves, but about the retraining of the Christian conscience with respect to the moral dregs of society. Yet it *was* also about the parasites, for they, like others who spectacularly epitomized the residual scandals of Roman culture, could, if admitted to the church's table and granted the chance to thrive there as friends, give unique and powerful testimony to the remaking of society in the crucible of Christian ecclesial life.