

“Vulnerability and Power in Late Antiquity (4th-9th c.)”



*Disempowering John
Chrysostom:
Bodily, Emotional, and
Gender Vulnerability in
the Letters to Women*

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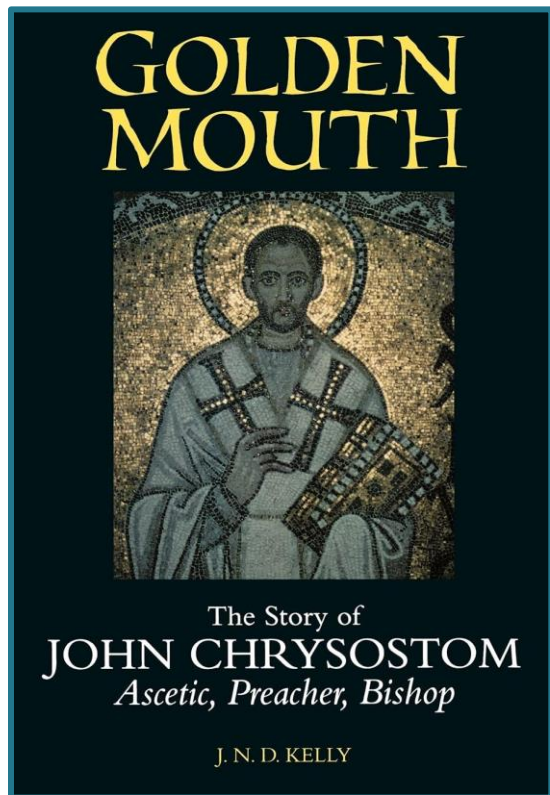
1. Presentation and Overview

What is my research about?

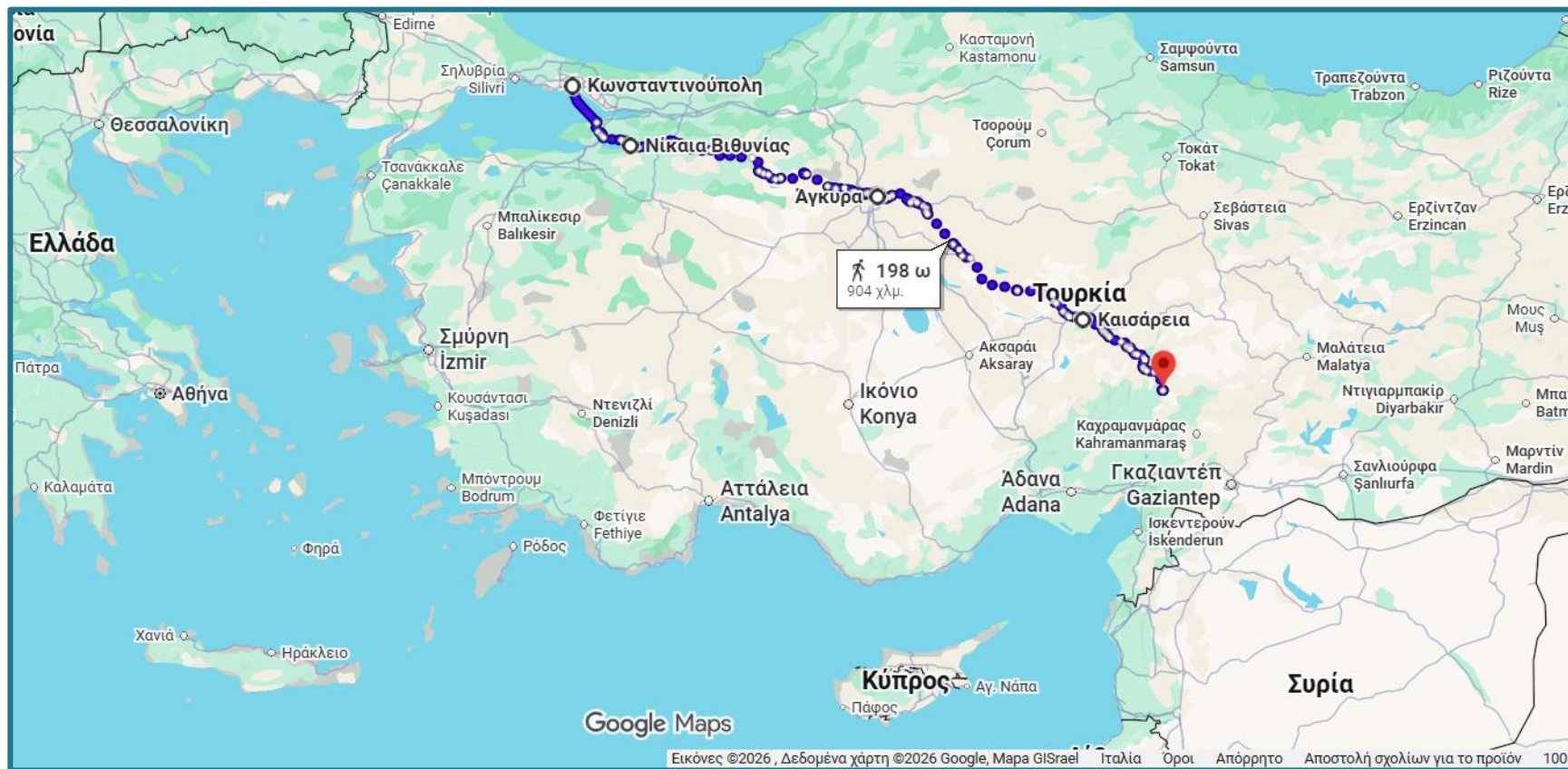
- The exile **epistolary production** of John Chrysostom
- John's bodily, emotional, and gender vulnerability during the exile
- Sources: the exile letters to **female addressees**
 - a) John as a man vulnerable to **bodily** and **emotional** ailments
 - b) Vulnerability/**Masculinity** relationship

2. Historical Contextualization

John Chrysostom



- Antioch, **349/350 CE** – Comana Pontica, **407 CE**
- Ascetic, preacher, and bishop
- 398 CE → **episcopal see** of Constantinople
- Ecclesiastical confidant of the emperor (Arcadius)
- Conflicts with other bishops and court member (for theological and ecclesiastical issues)
- 404–407 CE → **exiled to Cucusus** (Cappadocia/Armenia)

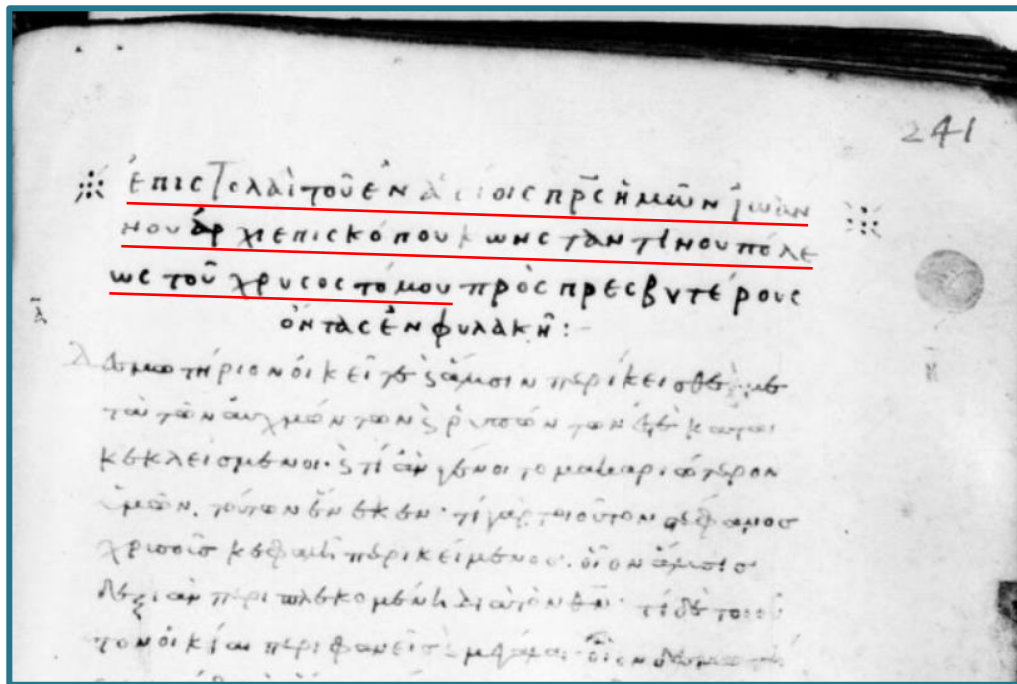


2. Historical Contextualization

John's Exile Letters

- 230+ letters
- To friends and other people who still supported him
- Both clerical and lay addressees
- Around $\frac{1}{5}$ are **women**

Paris, BNF, Coislin 368, f. 241. Source: gallica.bnf.fr



3. Power and Vulnerability in John's Letters

Letter 1 PG (= 7 Mal.), to Olympias

Τοιοῦτον γὰρ τῶν γραμμάτων τούτων τὸ φάρμακον ὥς καὶ εὐθυμίαν σοι ἐμποιῆσαι πολλὴν καὶ ὅψει συνεχῶς ἐπιστέλλοντα. Ἀλλὰ μή μοι γράψης πάλιν ὅτι «Παραμυθίαν ἔχω πολλὴν ἐκ τῶν γραμμάτων σου,» τοῦτο γὰρ οἶδα καὶ γώ.

For the medicine of these letters is such that it also brings you **great joy**, and you will find me writing to you often. But do not write to me again: **"I draw great consolation from your letters,"** for I know that myself, too.

4. Bodily Vulnerability

Forlin Patrucco (1996, 99–100 n. 3)

«**Le lamentele di carattere valetudinario** sono luogo **fra i più comuni nell'epistolografia antica**, componente di rilievo delle buone consuetudini negli scambi epistolari e segnale degli speciali rapporti di amicizia e di confidenza fra i corrispondenti, come si trae per es. dalle lettere di **Frontone**, di **Simmaco** o di **Basilio** di Cesarea. Nelle epistole del **Crisostomo** le descrizioni – spesso assai minute – dei propri disturbi fisici sono alquanto frequenti.»

[«**Valetudinary complaints** are among **the most common themes in ancient epistolography**; they are a key feature of proper etiquette in letter-writing and a sign of the special bonds of friendship between correspondents, as can be seen, for example, in the letters of **Fronto**, **Symmachus**, or **Basil** of Caesarea. In **Chrysostom**'s letters, descriptions – often detailed – of his own physical ailments are quite frequent.»]

4. Bodily Vulnerability

Letter 120 PG, to Theodora

Ἀνηλώθημεν, ἔδαπανήθημεν, μυρίους ἀπεθάνομεν θανάτους... ὑπὸ τῶν **συνεχῶν πυρετῶν** καταβεβλημένοι, ... καὶ **θάλλει** πολιορκούμενος, καὶ ὑπὸ **ἀγρυπνίας** διαφθειρόμενος, καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ἐπιτηδείων ἐρημίας ἀπολλύμενος, καὶ τῆς τῶν προστησομένων ἀπορίας.

I have been exhausted, I have been worn out, I have died a thousand deaths... I have been struck down by **constant fevers**, ... and oppressed by the **heat**, worn out by **insomnia**, and destroyed by the absence of necessities and the lack of help.

4. Bodily Vulnerability

A Group of Letters to Olympias

- **Letter 13** (= 6 Mal.):
 - very high fevers (πυρετοῖς χαλεπωτάτοις)
 - terrible stomach aches (ἐτέραις χαλεπωτάταις ἀρρωστίαις... ταῖς ἀπὸ τοῦ στομάχου)
 - lack of doctors (οὐκ ἰατρῶν ὄντων), bathing-rooms (οὐ βαλανείων), etc.
- **Letter 6** (= 12 Mal.):
 - a storm in the stomach (τοῦ στομάχου τὸν χειμῶνα)
 - chilblains due to the bitter cold (τὴν ἐκ τοῦ κρυμοῦ βλάβην)
 - constant vomiting (ἐμέτων... συνεχῶς)
 - headaches (κεφαλαλγίας)
 - loss of appetite (ἀνορεξίας)
 - insomnia (ἀγρυπνίας)
- **Letter 4** (= 17 Mal.):
 - nausea and stomach aches (εὐεμπτώως ἡμῖν ἔχοντος τοῦ στομάχου πρὸς τοὺς ἐμέτους... κτλ.)

4. Bodily Vulnerability

Elsner, Pietrzak-Franger (2024, 5-6; 10; 2)

- «What **Hunsaker Hawkins** calls a **‘pathography’** is ‘written by the patient or a loved one [and] can be seen as the logical counterpart to the medical history written by the physician or by the medical staff assigned to a particular patient’ [Hunsaker Hawkins (1993, 12)];»
- «[T]he proliferation of autobiographical writing on illness at the end of the twentieth century has meant that much scholarship in the field has focused on the category of the illness narrative or **(auto)pathography**;»
- «[T]he practice of medicine or **the experience of illness** turns into **a pathway to literature**, as is often the case for a doctor or **patient writer**, or when, for that matter, engagement with medicine merely constitutes a side street on the general literary roadmap concerned with the depiction of human life.»

5. Emotional Vulnerability

Letter 185 PG, to Pentadia

Παρακαλῶ... δηλῶσαι ἡμῖν τὰ περὶ τῆς ὑγείας τῆς σῆς, καὶ τῆς εὐθυμίας, καὶ τῆς ἀσφαλείας, καὶ σοῦ καὶ τοῦ οἴκου σου παντός· ἵνα καὶ ἐκ τοσούτου καθήμενοι διαστήματος, καὶ **ἐν οὕτῳ χαλεπωτάτῃ ἐρημίᾳ διατρίβοντες**, πολλὴν ἀπὸ τῶν τοιούτων γραμμάτων καρπώσμεθα τὴν παράκλησιν.

Please let me know how you are doing, whether you are happy and safe (you and your whole family), so that, even though I am so far away and **living in this most grievous loneliness**, I may find much comfort in our correspondence.

- Cf. Conte (2023, 75): «[N]on v'è effettiva traccia nelle lettere dall'esilio del Crisostomo di un riferimento alla possibilità di coltivare in solitudine una quotidianità in comunione con Dio» [*There is no mention in Chrysostom's letters from exile of the possibility of cultivating, in solitude, a daily life in communion with God*].

5. Emotional Vulnerability

Letters Conveying Deep Sadness

- **Letter 33**, to Adolia:
 - John claims to feel quite despondent (οὐκ ἐν μικρᾷ... ἄθυμια)
- **Letter 98**, to Chalkidia:
 - John, again, speaks of his own despondency (ἄθυμιας)

6. Gender Vulnerability

Ancient Masculinity

- De Wet (2014, 227): «Gender in antiquity is a phenomenon that may be understood as a type of **scale**. At the very top one has idealised masculinity and at the very bottom **un-masculinity**.»
- Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 737a28 τὸ γὰρ θῆλυ ὥσπερ ἄρρεν ἐστὶ **πεπηρωμένον** (“for the female is something like a **maimed** male”).
- Cf. Butler (1998, 519): «[G]ender is [...] an identity instituted through **a stylized repetition of acts**.»
 - Gleason (1995, xxii): «In accordance with the way gender roles were constituted in their society, manhood was [...] something always **under construction** and constantly **open to scrutiny**.»

6. Gender Vulnerability

Ancient (Christian) Masculinity

- Burrus (2000, 21): «By the late fourth century, the stance of the suffering **martyr**, whose disciplined body bespoke **an inner virtue**, was being adopted by Christians who not only avoided a state execution but also allied themselves [...] with imperial power.»
- Benjamins (2022, 56): «**“[E]ndurance,” *patientia* or ὑπομονή** [was] an idea that [came] from **athletic training**, and [was] informed in part by its currency in **Stoic ethics** – beginning with 4 Maccabees and continuing with the Christian martyr narratives.»
 - Cf. Elm (1994, 269)
 - Cf. John Chrysostom, *Macc.* 1.3 = PG 50.621.23-25
 - Cf. the figures of Job and Lazarus the beggar, praised, e.g., in Letters 2–4 PG (= 8, 10, 17 Mal.)

6. Gender Vulnerability

Letter 4 (= 17 Mal.), to Olympias

... ἔξεστι μαθεῖν ὅσα κατὰ **τὴν ὁδὸν τὴν μακρὰν** ταύτην **καὶ χαλεπὴν** ὧν τὰ πλείω ἱκανὰ ἦν θάνατον τεκεῖν **ὑπομεμένηκα**, ὅσα μετὰ τὴν ἐνταῦθα ἄφικιν, ὅσα μετὰ τὴν μετανάστασιν τὴν ἀπὸ Κουκουσοῦ, ὅσα μετὰ τὴν ἐν Ἀραβισσῶ διατριβήν.

... you may hear how many things **I endured** during this **long and difficult journey** (most of which were quite life-threatening), how many after arriving here, how many after moving from Cucusus, how many after staying in Arabissus.

6. Gender Vulnerability

Letter 120 PG, to Theodora

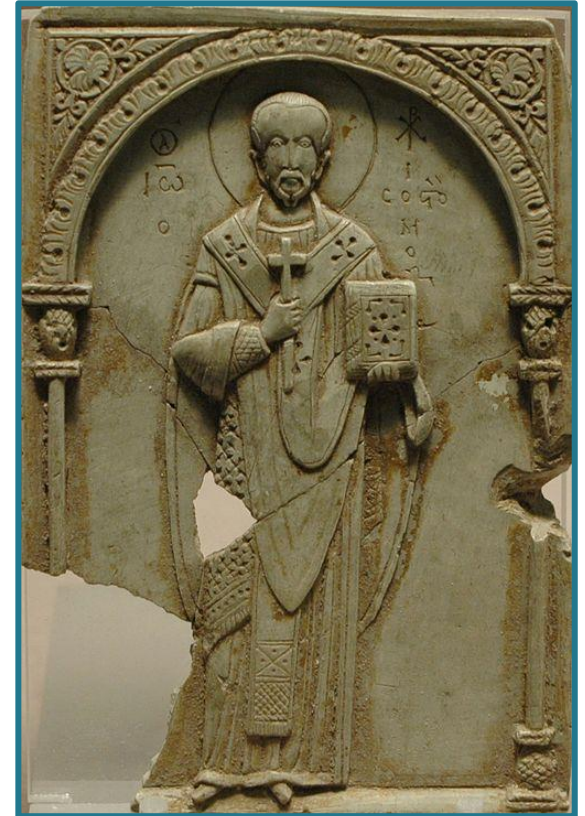
Ἀλλ' ὅμως ἐλθὼν εἰς τὴν Καισάρειαν, **μικρὸν ἀνέψυξα**, ὅτι ὕδατος ἔπιον καθαροῦ, ὅτι ἄρτου οὐκ ὀδωδότης οὐδὲ κατεσκληρότος μετέλαβον, ὅτι οὐκ ἔτι ἐν τοῖς κλάσμασι τῶν πίθων ἐλουόμεν, ἀλλ' εὖρον βαλανεῖον οἷον δήποτε, ὅτι συγκεχώρημαι τέως τῇ κλίνῃ προσηλῶσθαι.

But once I arrived in Caesarea, **I was able to catch my breath a little**, for I drank pure water, for I ate bread that was neither smelly nor stale, for I no longer had to wash myself in broken barrels (but found a bath, any bath, instead), for I could finally pin myself to a real bed.

7. Conclusions

- (Generally) Negative depiction of his exile from John's exile letters to women
- He suffers physically and emotionally
- John's **disempowerment** as a human being
- The fashioning of John's masculinity is susceptible (or **vulnerable**) to his own discourse, and thus quite **precarious**

John Chrysostom. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)



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Thank you for your attention!