Only Skin-Deep: Beauty and Ugliness between Good and Evil

Next to beauty, ugliness appears to be even more conspicuous
Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, tr. H. Magoulias,
*O City of Byzantium, Annals of Nicetas Choniates.*

A discussion of the ideal of beauty and its dictates in imagery and text alike from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries highlights the ways in which physical beauty in Byzantium was perceived and defined in this period. Yet the blond and curly-haired, bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked ideal of beauty that represents the image of the ‘beautiful body’ in Byzantium also necessitates a consideration of its alternative: the unsightly, ugly or deformed body. As beauty and ugliness coexist in Byzantine imagery and writing, a close look into the latter can also inform our understanding of the former: insights into perceptions and attitudes towards ‘the ugly’ may also be evocative about the Byzantine understanding of ‘the beautiful’.

In the story of *Velthandros and Chrysandza*, the hero is called upon to judge a beauty show held in the Castle of Love and charged to bestow a golden rod upon the fairest maiden of all. He is thus faced with a contest of beauties, from which the perfection of Chrysandza will emerge triumphant, after defeating the imperfect beauty of all other contestants. In doing so, the story sets the blond-haired, gleaming-eyed, white-skinned beauty of the heroine against the flawed bodies of her rivals, which are dismissed in a manner that sets excellence against physical fault and ultimately beauty against ugliness. This juxtaposition, however, of beauty and ugliness poses a broader question. If ugliness, like beauty, is written on the body, what can it tell us about the bearer and what does it reveal about itself as a quality on its own right?
The varied face of ugliness

As Velthandros proceeds to dismiss the thirty-nine comely maids that make up Chrysandza’s competition, he addresses a number of candidates in turn and explains his decision by naming the physical fault that ruins their beauty and makes them ugly (aschimizei). He identifies, in other words, the ugly part that damns the otherwise beautiful whole, thus providing his audience with a list of undesirable physical features that make a body ugly. Blurry eyes, large, excessively flesheated and poorly shaped lips, dark skin, brows that join in the middle of the forehead, a slumping posture, excessive weight or crooked teeth deny each candidate in turn the golden rod, bestowing fault (psogos) upon their otherwise fine appearance. In its elaborate detail, Velthandros’s speech is evocative of attitudes towards ugliness in Byzantium. As with beauty, ugliness too is made up of features, and a single ugly characteristic can evidently mar the beauty of the whole. More importantly, perhaps, Velthandros’s account also indicates that to the standard, repetitive ideal of beauty, ugliness proposes varied alternatives. Whereas ideal teeth look simply like a row of pearls, Velthandros describes how ugly ones protrude and recede at will, some sticking out, others coming still forward. Imperfect eyes, similarly, can be either hot and blurry or watery and appearing as if at risk of drowning.2 Whereas the beautiful body in Byzantium is easily summed up by the dictates of the ideal and made up of standard, often repeated, beautiful features from blond hair and white skin to gleaming eyes, the ugly body seems defined mostly by its diversity.

In the story of Rodanthe and Dosiklis, a debate, which takes place as the hero and his friend Kratandros, captured by the barbarous pirate king Bryaxis, are about to die by the sword, makes a similar point. Bryaxis proposes to sacrifice Dosiklis and Kratandros as thank offerings to the gods and justifies his position in the face of opposition by noting that the gods, who find beauty pleasing and despise what is ugly, are only satisfied when receiving the best of offerings. So, ‘should one offer them a lame or a blind man, a shaky and snotty old man, with a hunched back and no teeth, a bald man, a hairy, pasty figure who reeks from afar or rather beautiful youths, on the peak of their youth?’3 To the ideal, if stereotyped, blond, white-skinned and rosy-cheeked beauty of Dosiklis, Bryaxis juxtaposes a varied image of ugliness: the old; the balding; the hairy; the smelly; the generally revolting ‘other’. Whether in the twelfth or the fourteenth century, the face of ugliness presents the potential for endless elaboration.