

The Politics and Practices of Commentary in Komnenian Byzantium

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When scholars talk about commentaries of ancient texts in Byzantium, they are usually referring to a variety of works that explain texts from pagan antiquity, where ‘pagan’ implies that they traditionally belong to Classical Studies.¹ Indeed, in at least one instance in antiquity, the plural οἱ ἀρχαῖοι (‘the ancients’) does indicate the old Athenian prose writers.² However, if the adjective ἀρχαῖος is understood as ‘very old’ or ‘chronologically very far removed’, rather than ‘antique/ancient’ in an archaeological sense, a substantial amount of commentary written in the Komnenian era could be included, because excluding such material would leave the large painting of twelfth-century literature with substantial patches of grey scattered among some brightly coloured sections.³ Thus, in this chapter I shall briefly attempt to fill in these grey patches and draw a fuller picture in which some of the works discussed in other chapters of the present volume will find their place. Obviously, I will not be able to refer to all texts that might fit under the notional category of commentary but, by making a few indicative choices, it will be possible to present more broadly the politics and practices of commentary in Komnenian Byzantium.⁴

I shall begin my discussion with school education, because it is in this context where commentary is most often to be found. Numerous manuscripts

¹ See, for example, Dickey (2007); for a more nuanced approach, see, however, Dickey (2017), Bourbouhakis (2017).

² Demetrius, *On Style* 67.4 ed. Chiron.

³ For a recent example of the exclusionary approach, see Pontani (2015: 366–94) in his presentation of classical scholarship in the Komnenian era; though rich in good remarks and useful as a guide, the overview restricts itself to the study of pagan authors, giving a rather imbalanced picture of Komnenian commentary production as a whole and, therefore, of twelfth-century culture in its historical context.

⁴ For reasons of brevity no references will be made to general bibliography on Komnenian history or the lives and works of individual authors. For the historical framework one might profitably read Magdalino (1993), Angold (1996), Magdalino (2008). The handbooks of Hunger (1978), Beck (1959) and (1971) are still useful reference works for literature, along with the relevant entries in the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*.

of the late eleventh to the thirteenth centuries preserve scholia on Hellenic authors, mostly poets, but also prose writers. Among the poets, the respective triads of the three tragedians and of Aristophanes loom large. This immense and complex material, though exhaustively studied by classical scholarship, has not been examined more carefully from the point of view of what it might tell us about Komnenian literary culture. One example might suffice to show what I mean. Codex B of Aeschylus is a manuscript consisting of Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 31.3 and one part of Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 86.3 (fols. 210r–231v), written by Manuel Spheneas in 1287.⁵ Into this manuscript, the scribe inserts, among the older scholia, a scholion on verses 155–6 of the *Persians*. It is the point where the chorus, having seen the old Queen enter the stage, address her in catalectic trochaic tetrameters, while the scholion reads as follows:⁶

ὦ βαθυζώνων ἄνασσα Περσίδων ὑπερτάτη,
μητρὴ ἢ Ξέρξου γεραία, χαίρε, Δαρείου γύναι.

ση(μείωσαι) ὡς λέγουσί τινες ὡς ἐκ τούτων τῶν πολιτικῶν στίχων
ἐπεκράτησεν ἡ συνήθεια τοῦ διὰ πολιτικῶν στίχων ποιεῖν τὰ βασιλέων
προσφωνήματα.

Oh, highest queen of the deep-girded Persian women,
you old mother of Xerxes, hail, wife of Darius.

Note: As some people say, it is because of these city verses that the custom has prevailed to compose the addresses to emperors in city verse.

This reading results from the coincidence that, once the two Aeschylean verses are declaimed with medieval pronunciation, they sound like accentuating fifteen-syllable *politikoi stichoi* ('city verses').⁷ The remarkable point here is that the scholion (probably from the twelfth century) comments on a practice readily found at the Komnenian court such as the *prosfonemata* ('laudatory addresses') of Theodore Prodromos written for the circus factions of the city show.⁸ It should be noted that this scholion is the only mention we have of this practice beyond the surviving texts themselves. Thus, this snippet of commentary opens up for us a window onto what I would call Komnenian literary modernity, a phenomenon

⁵ See Turyn (1972, vol. 1: 55–7) on the codicological history of the manuscript's two parts.

⁶ Edited and commented on by Jeffreys and Smith (1991).

⁷ The term *politikos stichos* is conventionally rendered as 'political verse' in English, but this is misleading since the term has nothing to do with politics but with the *polis*, i.e. Constantinople. I therefore prefer 'city verse' as a more appropriate translation.

⁸ For some of these performative poems of Prodromos, see Hörandner (1974: 201–9, 214–17, 253–9, 261–2), nos. IV, V, XI, XII.

strongly related to linguistic and generic experimentation.⁹ ‘Modernity’ and ‘experimentation’ have been semantically loaded terms since the Enlightenment and have exercised a particular force in defining cultural production in the visual arts, music and literature from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s. For the purposes of this chapter I shall use, on the one hand, ‘modernity’ to describe a specific stance of authors towards their own education and the notion of authority inculcated in school. This stance presupposes an implicit or even explicit distancing from authoritative *mimesis* and the accentuation of a writer’s own creativity.¹⁰ On the other hand, ‘experimentation’ will be used to characterize various authorial practices employing all kinds of tools in crafting works that appear ‘novel’, that is, as textual products defying categorization according to accepted school norms.¹¹ It should be made clear that Byzantine ‘novelty’ (καινότης) is not to be identified with Romantic ‘originality’, a concept unknown to most pre-modern cultures.¹²

But let us return to the twelfth-century interest in the use of city verse, which is reflected in another commentary. The manuscript Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, gr. F 101 supra (thirteenth century) transmits the text of the *Iliad* with a facing prose paraphrase and a commentary after each book. On fols. 11v–13v there survives a fragment of a unique metrical paraphrase of *Iliad* 3.71–186 (the opening of the famous *teichoskopia* scene between Helen and the elders of Troy), composed in city verses.¹³ What immediately catches our ear is the pronounced similarity of this paraphrase to the versification style of John Tzetzes, such as his use of new compound words and the rhetoricity developed around the verse’s bipartite rhythmical structure.¹⁴ The use of *politikos stichos* in Komnenian

⁹ For some observations, see Nilsson (2014) on the novels, Pizzone (2017b: 340–9) on Eustathios and Agapitos (2003: 12–15) on generic experimentation in funerary discourse.

¹⁰ For representative examples of this use of experimentation, see Agapitos (1998b) and (2000), Papaioannou (2013) and (2017), Nilsson (2021: 1–13).

¹¹ On this point, see, indicatively, Agapitos (2003), (2015b), (2015c), Roilos (2005), Pizzone (2017b).

¹² For a discussion of ‘originality’ in Byzantium, see Littlewood (1995), which includes a broad spectrum of methodologically and conceptually very different contributions. See also Agapitos (2002: 190–214) for a comparison of Byzantine to Japanese literature concerning the very notions of novelty, imitation and aesthetic experience.

¹³ Edited by Vassis (1991b).

¹⁴ See, for example, the novel compound words 3.121 λευκάγκαλος (‘having a white embrace’), 3.127 Τρωσιππότης (‘Trojan knight’) or 3.152 γλυκοφωνολαλέω (‘addressing someone with a sweet voice’). As examples of novel versification, see 3.125 ἐν οἴκῳ ταύτην εὔρηκε μέγαν δ’ ἰστὸν ἰστούργει or 3.155 ἡσύχως προσηγόρευον, ἀλλήλους προσελάλουν. For a comparable passage from Tzetzes, see the long epilogue to his own compact version of the *Theogony* (along with a genealogy of the heroes in the Trojan War) composed in city verses; for a preliminary edition and translation, see Agapitos (2017a: 36–48).

schools is known theoretically, but it remains under-studied, while the sociocultural reasons for its use are still a debated issue.¹⁵

An important figure, who made use of city verse combined with ‘everyday language’, is Theodore Prodromos.¹⁶ In two of his surviving *schede* (σχέδη) – exercises for practising grammar and spelling – he uses a mixture of a learned and a vernacular idiom, which could have been seen as idiosyncratic, were it not for the survival of a dictionary composed in the second half of the twelfth century by an anonymous teacher, preserved in the manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 400 (AD 1343/4).¹⁷ The dictionary was specifically written to support the teaching of schedography;¹⁸ it is composed in *politikos stichos* and includes a high number of lemmata with explanations in the vernacular, or vernacular lemmata explained in the learned idiom. A number of these lemmata coincide with the everyday language Prodromos used in his *schede* and also in his vernacular poems, known as the *Ptochoprodromika*.¹⁹ Thus, the exegesis of schedography became a commentary on the use of ancient authors and the vernacular idiom within Komnenian modernism, given that, before the twelfth century, everyday language did not appear in the school curriculum nor was it used for purposes of literary experimentation. In my opinion, it is from within this innovative school context that Prodromos composed his vernacular poems. Particularly intriguing are two diptych compositions addressed to emperors John II (ca. 1139) and Manuel I (ca. 1150–5), namely, *Carm. Hist.* xxiv + *Ptochopr.* 1²⁰ and *Carm. Hist.* lxxi + *Carm. Maiuri*.²¹ Here the poet uses the learned idiom in the first poem of the diptych and then a vernacular idiom in the second poem, while he manifestly raises the level of humorous discourse in the diptych’s second part. Prodromos, of course, wrote various commentaries among many other treatises offered to some of his patrons, such as the *sebastokratorissa* Irene. He also systematically created an image of himself as the poet/teacher who is in need of constant financial support.²² The image of the ‘begging’ scholar is a recurrent theme in Komnenian culture, found behind various and

¹⁵ For a different, somewhat restrictive, approach from the one presented here, see Jeffreys (2009).

¹⁶ Agapitos (2015b) with the relevant bibliography. ¹⁷ On this dictionary, see Agapitos (2015a).

¹⁸ On schedography as a very particular type of grammatical drill of Byzantine invention, see Agapitos (2014), Nousia (2016: 49–92).

¹⁹ Critical edition with German translation by Eideneier (1991).

²⁰ Hörandner (1974: 330–3), Eideneier (1991: 99–107).

²¹ Hörandner (1974: 516–19), Maiuri (1914–19: 398–400).

²² See Zagklas (2014: 66–72), Agapitos (2015b: 2–3).

sometimes quite diverging strategies of social networking. One aspect of these sociocultural politics is the polemics of school commentary and the competitiveness prevalent among teachers of different social ranks that it expresses.²³

One of the most prolific battlegrounds of commentary was the Homeric *Iliad*, a major school text since antiquity. As mentioned above, from the eleventh century, the *Iliad* was accompanied by prose paraphrases.²⁴ Parallel to the surviving ancient scholia, as found, for example, in the margins of the famous tenth-century Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, gr. 454 (codex A of the *Iliad*), many manuscripts with scholia survive from the eleventh century onwards, like the Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auctarium T.2.7 or the Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Conventi Soppressi 139. However, a change takes place in the twelfth century, as a number of new texts show. One such text is the gigantic commentary of the *Iliad* John Tzetzes undertook to write in around 1135–8, though he never went beyond the first book.²⁵ This early work of Tzetzes, in conjunction with his hexametrical *Carmina Iliaca* (a kind of school synopsis of the whole story of the Trojan War),²⁶ shows him aspiring to carve out a major niche in the capital's competitive school environment. Already, the *Iliad* commentary displays two characteristic literary and philological devices of Tzetzes: (a) the polemical prologue, where critique, sometimes quite acerbic, is exercised against his real or imagined opponents, and (b) mostly autobiographic scholia that accompany the main body of the commentary. Thus, the previously anonymous scholia are presented now as a fully developed exegetical work, where the author figures largely in and around the text as editor and commentator of himself.²⁷ That academic teachers will launch polemics against each other is, too, well known from reading scholarly historiography. However, the carrying out of such verbal combat in the twelfth century was part of a very specific sociopolitical framework that allowed teachers to rise socially and potentially acquire important political status. For example, take the critique of Tzetzes in the preface to the *Iliad* commentary and in a separate

²³ Beyond the pioneering study of Garzya (1973), see Agapitos (2017a: 5–7) with full bibliography. On the competitive environment of twelfth-century Constantinople and rivalries concerning the interpretation of school texts, see also the contributions by Pizzone, Tomadaki and Lovato in this volume.

²⁴ See Vassis (1991a: 16–28). ²⁵ Critical edition by Papatomopoulos (2007).

²⁶ Critical edition by Leone (1995).

²⁷ See Pizzone (2020). On Tzetzes' self-representation as exegete and grammarian, see also van den Berg (2020).

marginal scholion against a student of his, who was writing down what Tzetzes presented in class and was thinking of selling the notes as his scholia, thus forcing Tzetzes to publish his own commentary.²⁸ This anxious polemical stance of the ‘middle-class’ teacher can be compared to the detached approach of another prologue, the *Preface to Homer*, composed by no less a high-standing aristocrat and learned man than the *sebastokrator* Isaac Komnenos, third son of emperor Alexios I (1081–1118) and brother of John II (1118–43), where no critique is exercised against any predecessor.²⁹ Around 1160, another high-standing teacher, Eustathios of Thessalonike, began working on a commentary of the *Iliad*. Eustathios also, even if discreetly, criticized his predecessors and Tzetzes in particular, as is shown clearly in a telling passage from the preface to the *Parekbolai on the Iliad* about the structure of his commentary in comparison to that of Tzetzes.³⁰ It is, therefore, important to keep in mind that commentaries need to be read within their sociocultural and sometimes even political contexts, as Tzetzes’ scholia on Aristophanes and Lycophron amply demonstrate.³¹ Not all commentators reached the level of authorial experimentation of Tzetzes, who created the ultimate commentary to his own letter collection – the vast *Histories* in city verse, which he accompanied again with prose auto-exegetic scholia.³²

One particular type of commentary that I would like to touch upon here is biblical exegesis.³³ By the late eleventh century, a number of grand-scale commentaries of the Psalms and of the New Testament were produced – mostly in the form of *catenae*, collected from material of the early Byzantine period. Two of the most prominent and widely used authors were Theophylact of Ohrid and Niketas of Herakleia. These *catenae* commentaries rarely offer actual interpretations by their compilers. However, around the middle of the twelfth century a new genre emerged, which combined rhetorical homiletics, interpretive exegesis and commentary. The authors of these texts – for example, Leon Balianites, John

²⁸ Tzetzes, *Preface to the Exegesis on the Iliad* 8.1–13 and scholion ad 8.3; Papatomopoulos (2007: 8 and 423).

²⁹ The text has been edited by Kindstrand (1979); on this neglected Komnenian prince, see Linardou (2016).

³⁰ Eustathios, *Commentary on the Iliad* 2.42–6 = 1.3.28–33 ed. van der Valk; more broadly for Eustathios’ critique of Tzetzes, see Holwerda (1960b), Cullhed (2014: 21*–4*).

³¹ For Aristophanes, see Massa Positano (1960), Holwerda (1960a), Koster (1962), Pizzone in this volume; for Lycophron, see Scheer (1958). For a sociocultural reading of these commentaries, see Agapitos (2017a: 27–35); for a political reading, see Agapitos (forthcoming).

³² The text edited by Leone (2007); on the *Histories*, see Pizzone (2017a).

³³ On the *Christos Paschon* as a commentary on the gospel narrative, see Mullett in this volume.

Kastamonites and Constantine Stilbes – use the term *didaskalia* ('teaching') to characterize their works.³⁴ We find them transmitted side by side with other oratorical texts in collections like the Madrid, Real Biblioteca de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Y-II-10 (late twelfth–early thirteenth century) or the Oxford, Bodleian Library, Baroccianus 131 (ca. 1250–70). The *didaskalia* can either be an exegetical analysis of a specific Psalm verse based on the commentary of Niketas of Herakleia, or it can pick up a broader theme of a Psalm or passage from the New Testament using the *catenae* of Theophylact, but reshaping the material in a completely different and quite innovative way.³⁵ Most interestingly, a number of these *didaskaliai* were delivered at the occasion when the speaker had just been given a particular teaching post (e.g. *didaskalos* of the Gospels), delivering his oration in front of the patriarch and a select audience of colleagues and advanced pupils.³⁶ Thus, we can see how the commentary of a text becomes, within a specific school context, the starting point for literary experimentation.

Let me very briefly present two examples of this Komnenian literary modernity, which are very different in their subject but quite similar in their approach to integrating commentary into an overflowing narrative. The first example is Eustathios' second oration in praise of patriarch Michael III *ho tou Anchialou* (1170–8), delivered on the Saturday of Lazarus, probably in March 1173.³⁷ Eustathios organizes his praise of the patriarch around various themes, such as education and teaching, philosophy and theology, rhetoric and schedography, harmony between emperor and patriarch. All of this is placed within a commentary-like narrative, taking as its point of departure the description of the high priest's garments as prescribed by God to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 28). In a highly individualist anagogical exegesis of this crucial Exodus passage, Eustathios creates a symbolical image of the patriarch that has been created out of the material of biblical commentary with the support of rhetoric and its complex devices. The labyrinthine narrative, structured by massive digressions, interlacing imagery and the continuous

³⁴ Many of these texts are still unedited; for basic information, see Katsaros (1988: 213–42) on Kastamonites and Loukaki (2000) on Balianites. A critical edition of Balianites' *didaskaliai* is under preparation by Giannouli (2011).

³⁵ I owe this information to my colleague Antonia Giannouli, who gave a talk on this very subject in Nicosia in June 2013; I am grateful to her for giving me a copy of her unpublished talk and allowing me to present her findings.

³⁶ See Loukaki (2005).

³⁷ On the date of delivery, see Loukaki (2007). The text is now edited by Wirth (2000: 100–40); for some aspects of interpretation, see Pizzone (2017b).

presence of the ‘Roman’ emperor as counterpart to the ‘biblical’ patriarch, makes the text of this oration one of the most complex of Eustathios’ set pieces which he, as *maistor ton rhetoron* (‘senior teacher of rhetoricians’), composed in Constantinople before his appointment to the see of Thessalonike in ca. 1175.³⁸

The second example comes from Prodromos’ novel *Rhodanthe and Dosikles* (hereafter: *R&D*), written around 1135, some forty years before Eustathios’ oration.³⁹ Prodromos dedicated his novel to caesar Nikephoros Bryennios (d. 1138), husband of princess Anna Komnene.⁴⁰ Among many works of a didactic character, Prodromos compiled a commentary on Book 2 of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*.⁴¹ In Book 3 of *R&D*, Prodromos depicts a drunken young sailor who falls asleep and, while dreaming, performs gestures that imply he is drinking in his dream. Dosikles, the hero of the novel and narrator in this scene, explains what the cause and effect of dreams are, presenting a succinct Aristotelian analysis.⁴² In the same book, Dosikles, in an absolutely critical situation, mistakenly believes that his beloved Rodanthe was dreaming, and goes on to expound how dreams are deceiving creations of the mind, again within an Aristotelian framework.⁴³ Here, the commentary has taken over the novelistic dialogue, creating a narrative exegesis with a subversive and humorous tone. There is, of course, a difference between Prodromos and Eustathios. The former uses his Aristotelian commentary in this fictional work in a playful mode, while the latter employs the biblical commentary in a serious and clearly political discourse.⁴⁴ In my opinion, this element of seriousness marks a change within Komnenian literary modernism, a point to which I shall return.

The two dreams in Prodromos’ novel and their Aristotelian background bring us to the teaching of philosophy and the philosophical commentary in the twelfth century.⁴⁵ Besides Prodromos’ commentary, there survives a

³⁸ On Eustathios’ narrative techniques in another of his speeches, see Agapitos (1998b).

³⁹ Critical edition by Marcovich (1992) but with numerous problems, on which see Agapitos (1993); Italian translation by Conca (1994: 63–303), English translation by Jeffreys (2012: 19–156).

⁴⁰ See Agapitos (2000). ⁴¹ Edited by Cacouros (1992).

⁴² *R&D* 3.1–42; Marcovich (1992: 36–8), Jeffreys (2012: 51–2). On the use of Aristotle by Prodromos in *R&D*, see MacAlister (1990: 208–12). On the connection between the novels and the interpretation of Aristotle, see also Trizio in this volume.

⁴³ *R&D* 3.294–318; Marcovich (1992: 47), Jeffreys (2012: 59). On dreams and fictionality in *R&D*, see Agapitos (2012: 279–81).

⁴⁴ Prodromos did use Aristotelian material seriously, for example, in the laudatory oration he addressed to Patriarch John IX Agapetos (1111–34), but there the Aristotelian references serve to support the project of the patriarch to have manuscripts copied for the benefit of teachers and pupils; see Manaphes (1974: 239–40).

⁴⁵ See the survey by Trizio (2017) and his chapter in the present volume.

commentary on *Posterior Analytics* 2 by Eustratios of Nicaea and a series of commentaries on a substantial part of the Aristotelian corpus by Michael of Ephesus. It has been suggested that the latter scholar, together with a few others, belonged to a circle around Anna Komnene, as George Tornikes seems to suggest in his funeral oration for the purple-born princess.⁴⁶ Michele Trizio has cautioned us that ‘circle’ might be too strong a term to use considering the available evidence.⁴⁷ But that some kind of interaction in Aristotelian matters existed between these scholars and Anna Komnene cannot be doubted. In fact, it is Prodrornos in his novel who furnishes us with an indirect reference to the study of philosophy and the production of commentaries around Anna. At the very end of *Rhodanthe and Dosikles*, the father of the hero’s friend praises, in a funny way, his old nurse, who was solving philosophical problems following the precepts of natural philosophy, but suffered a loss of her eyesight because, according to the speaker, she was reading too many treatises on philosophy of nature.⁴⁸ This grotesque story (probably declaimed at the literary salon of Irene Doukaina or of her daughter Anna in the presence of the latter’s husband), finds its serious counterpart in what Tornikes had to say about Michael of Ephesus, who complained that he had lost his eyesight because of labouring ceaselessly on his Aristotelian commentaries upon Anna’s command.⁴⁹ But what these two stories tell us is that commentary, philosophy and literature went hand in hand in the Komnenian era, even if the potential dangers for such pursuits were not negligible, as the trial of Eustratios of Nicaea in 1116/17 demonstrates. It is exactly this interest in innovative philosophical thinking that, following the trial of John Italos early in the reign of Alexios, became a centrepiece of critique raised by learned men trained in philosophy but ultimately serving theology. One such example, where the philosophical commentary becomes the target of theological critique, is the treatise by Nicholas of Methone against Proklos’ *Elements of Theology*,⁵⁰ written around 1160. Nicholas is probably responding to the growing interest in Proklos that had started a hundred years earlier with Psellos and culminated in the four treatises of the *sebastokrator* Isaac

⁴⁶ George Tornikes, *Funeral Oration for Anna Komnene* 283.4–9 ed. Darrouzès.

⁴⁷ See the exhaustive discussion in Trizio (2016: 22–72).

⁴⁸ *Re&D* 9.423–30; Marcovich (1992: 161), Jeffreys (2012: 154).

⁴⁹ George Tornikes, *Funeral Oration for Anna Komnene* 283.9–12 ed. Darrouzès; on this scene, see Agapitos (2006: 145–7).

⁵⁰ Critical edition by Angelou (1984).

Komnenos,⁵¹ this being, in my opinion, yet another expression of modernism in the first half of the twelfth century. In fact, we find an open attack against this kind of philosophy. It was formulated by the newly appointed ‘consul of philosophers’ (*hypatos ton philosophon*) who, in his inaugural lecture of 1167 addressed to emperor Manuel, clearly expressed the official stance against experimentation in the field of philosophy. This is another aspect of the change in Komnenian modernism to which I referred above. We should note that the said professor of philosophy was no other than the later patriarch Michael III and patron of Eustathios.⁵²

It would be plausible to suggest that, during the *longue durée* of the Komnenian era, intellectual experimentation reaches a climax in the 1150s. From the 1160s onwards, textual production focuses much more strongly on theological and legal writing (note, for example, the grand commentaries on the church canons by Alexios Aristenos, John Zonaras and Theodore Balsamon),⁵³ while the number of writers who are clerics rises noticeably. The Komnenian political elite – by which I understand both state and church officials – was, from the time of Alexios onwards, manifestly concerned with controlling in various ways the innovations that seemed to pose a threat to political, social and intellectual stability.⁵⁴ A type of text that resurfaced in this context is the collection of material that aimed to defend orthodoxy from heresy by attacking the latter through the authority of patristic texts and the decisions of the ecumenical councils. The first of these collections is Euthymios Zigabenos’ *Armour of Dogma* (Δογματική Πανοπλία), offered to emperor Alexios in ca. 1110.⁵⁵ In the original presentation copy, which has been preserved (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, gr. 666), we can see how the text and its various paratextual material is visually laid out on the pages, accompanied by some splendid illustrations, in order to present the emperor as a

⁵¹ Three treatises on providence, edited by Isaac (1978: 153–223) and (1979: 99–169), and a treatise on the substance of evil, edited by Rizzo (1971).

⁵² Michael’s oration was edited and discussed by Browning (1977); recently Polemis (2011) has proposed a date for the delivery of the speech shortly after 1151.

⁵³ See Troianos (2017: 289–96) with references to editions and further bibliography.

⁵⁴ See Agapitos (1998a) for the debate concerning the Feast of the Three Hierarchs and the trial of John Italos. One further case of some importance is the trial of Leo of Chalcedon concerning the worship of God through icons; as Lamberz (2003) has proven, the codex London, British Library, Harley 5665, which is the oldest textual witness to the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, was copied in 1093/4 to provide the material for the synod of 1094/5, where Leo was finally acquitted.

⁵⁵ Edited in Migne (1865).

champion of orthodoxy.⁵⁶ The *Armour of Dogma* is a vast antiheretical collection culled from older florilegia and various patristic texts, organized around general subjects and followed by refutations of various heresies.

As time passed by and new issues of dissent arose, partly stemming from imperial policy, another such collection was produced between 1172 and 1174 by the *sebastos* and city prefect Andronikos Kamateros, a learned man and sometime patron of John Tzetzes. The *Sacred Armoury* (ἱερὰ Ὀπλοθήκη), dedicated to emperor Manuel, focuses specifically on the theological debates between Constantinople and the Latins and the Armenians respectively.⁵⁷ In contrast to Zigabenos' collection, Kamateros' *Sacred Armoury* displays a very sophisticated and highly rhetorical structure. The main text is framed by a series of paratextual material: a laudatory poem (ἐπίγραμμα τῆς βίβλου) by George Skylitzes – protégé of Kamateros; a summary description (κεφαλαιώδης προτίτλωσις) of the book's contents by the author; general preface (προοίμιον) and a final epilogue (ἐπίλογος) addressed to the emperor. Furthermore, in its first part, the text purports to offer the minutes of a theological debate (διάλεξις) between the emperor and the papal legates on the procession of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by a florilegium of patristic texts on the same topic. The author guides the readers through the excerpted passages by means of a commentary addressed to them and titled 'examination' (ἐπιστάσις). Moreover, the florilegium is separately framed by an address (προδικαλία) of the author to those who support the Latin position and, at its end, by a second address (προσφώνημα) to the emperor, followed by a set of arguments (συλλογισμοί) on the procession of the Holy Spirit excerpted from the oration on this subject written some sixty years earlier by no other than Eustratios of Nicaea. Kamateros' *Sacred Armoury*, whose structure is, in my opinion, inspired by the *Histories* of Tzetzes,⁵⁸ represents a telling example of late Komnenian modernism in its intellectually restrictive but artistically expansive version, thus making manifest the political role played by commentary in the twelfth century. How a changed political and sociocultural context could influence this perspective can be seen in Niketas Choniates' *Dogmatic*

⁵⁶ The manuscript is readily available at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.666 (accessed 31 August 2018).

⁵⁷ Bucossi (2014) has presented a critical edition of the work's first part, i.e. the debates with Latins.

⁵⁸ For example, the substantial paratextual material framing the bulk of a compartmentalized text, the 'main' text broken up into different and quasi-independent units of unequal length, the didactic character of the information provided, strong presence of an authorial voice and generic hybridity and mixture.

Armour (Πανοπλία Δογματική),⁵⁹ a substantial heresiological florilegium explicitly referring back to Zigabenos' collection.⁶⁰ The ex-politician and historian composed his work at the bitter time of his Nicaean exile (1206–17), as he clearly states in his preface.⁶¹ The addressee of the *Dogmatic Armour* is an unnamed friend, while the compilation lacks any commentary by the author or any paratextual material placing its 'message' in a political or ecclesiastical context.

The heresiological florilegium, used in part as a political weapon, leads us to another group of florilegia-like texts which belong to the broad category of admonitory literature. Such texts collect gnomic statements from various sources and put them into use within a narrative frame that treats various topics under an overarching theme. One such text is the *Dialexis* ('dialogue') by Philip Monotropos, composed in 1097. Written with a monastic audience in mind, the *Dialexis* (often referred to as *Dioptra*, 'mirror') presents a dialogue between the body and the soul in four books, composed in city verse.⁶² It is a huge textual mosaic with clearly marked prose extracts from other sources and often collages of excerpts, accompanied by a rudimentary exegesis. This specific type of admonitory commentary finds a clearly political expression in three works, concentrated in different ways around the person of emperor Alexios. The first of these works is the poem *Alexiad-Komneniad Muses* (Μοῦσαι Ἀλεξιάδες Κομνηνιάδες), supposedly addressed by Alexios on his deathbed to his son John (15 August 1118);⁶³ the second is the *Spaneas*, an admonitory poem in 'vernacular' city verses, spoken by an aristocratic father to his son and written in the first half of the twelfth century;⁶⁴ the third is the prose *Life of Cyril Phileotes* by Nicholas Kataskepenos (ca. 1140–50).⁶⁵ All three texts display the type of florilegium-like gnomic structure that we find in Monotropos' *Dialexis*. In the *Muses*, an emperor-father advises his emperor-to-be son; in the *Spaneas*, an aristocratic father advises his son by using an eleventh-century florilegium of political conduct (the so-called *Excerpta Parisina*); and in two quite

⁵⁹ For a study of the work's manuscript transmission, along with an edition of the prefatory material, see van Dieten (1970).

⁶⁰ Van Dieten (1970: 58.25). ⁶¹ Van Dieten (1970: 57.16–19).

⁶² Partial edition by Lavriotes (1920); for an analysis of the work, see Afentoulidou (2007).

⁶³ Edited by Maas (1913); for an analysis of the poem, see Mullett (2012).

⁶⁴ For an edition of the oldest version (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Palatinus gr. 367), see Lambros (1917–20); for the identification of the poem's direct gnomic sources, see Danezis (1987: 27–90).

⁶⁵ Critical edition and French translation by Sargologos (1964); for an analysis of the work, see Mullett (2004).

impressive scenes of the *Life of Cyril*, the saint advises emperor Alexios, who visits the former in his hermitage in 1095 and 1105, about how to conduct himself and what to do against the incursions of the Seljuq Turks.⁶⁶ Thus, the ancient – Hellenic and Christian – gnomologic material is used as a narrative commentary of admonition with clear political aims and literary ambitions, though coming from different directions: an imperial background (support for and legitimation of John's rule against the claims of his sister Anna), a distinct aristocratic background trying to safeguard its own space of power within Komnenian rule and, finally, the powerful monastic circles also attempting to safeguard their substantial intellectual and economic wealth against imperial encroachment.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the school context where I began and offer a few remarks about another type of commentary that appears with full force in the Komnenian era and maintains its momentum well into the fourteenth century. This is the commentary to a larger or smaller group of canons, a hymnographic genre of the eighth century that became a major form of poetic and musical composition in liturgy in the second half of the ninth century. Gregory Pardos, a prominent school teacher who wrote treatises on Greek syntax and dialects and later became metropolitan of Corinth, composed in the 1130s a basic linguistic commentary on twenty-three canons by or attributed to John of Damascus and Kosmas of Jerusalem. Sometime thereafter, Theodore Prodromos also wrote a commentary on the same twenty-three canons, but with theological and literary comments, criticizing his predecessor for his basic and restricted approach. At the same time, John Zonaras (the well-known historian and canonist) wrote a commentary on the Resurrection Canons of John of Damascus.⁶⁷ Finally, Eustathios wrote his vast and immensely learned commentary (ἐξήγησις) on the Iambic Pentecostal Canon, attributed to John of Damascus but ascribed by Eustathios to an otherwise unknown John Arklas.⁶⁸ Eustathios composed his commentary in Thessalonike between ca. 1187 and 1195, at the end of his long life. In his last work, the learned former professor of rhetoric and commentator of the Homeric poems (*Parekbolai*) combined textual criticism, philological analysis, literary interpretation and allegorical exegesis. Just as with Tzetzes and his *Iliad* commentary, Eustathios discreetly criticizes Gregory Pardos

⁶⁶ *Life of Cyril Philotes* 47 and 51; Sargologos (1964: 225–35 and 243–4); on the three works within the broader context of Komnenian literary production, see Agapitos (2017b: 99–101).

⁶⁷ On these three commentators, see Giannouli (2007: 17–19).

⁶⁸ For a critical edition and a substantial introduction, see Cesaretti and Ronchey (2014). On Eustathios as scholar and writer, see the essays in Pontani, Katsaros and Sarris (2017).

on a few points.⁶⁹ However, in contrast to the *Parekbolai*, Eustathios allows himself a greater freedom of interpretation of the actual text in the *Exegesis*, offering us, if I am not mistaken, the first fully focused literary commentary of a Byzantine text by a Byzantine scholar. In a very special way, Eustathios' *Exegesis* of the Iambic Pentecostal Canon represents the synthesis of ancient and medieval Greek philology in Byzantium. What is quite noteworthy, moreover, is that, towards the end of the thirteenth century, a wealthy person in Constantinople, possibly connected to a school situated within a monastery, had a parchment book of 274 folia copied out, with two scribes working together.⁷⁰ The codex Alexandria, Patriarchal Library 62 is one of the two main witnesses for the text of Eustathios' *Exegesis*. It is worthwhile to take a look at the contents of this finely executed volume. The book includes the canon commentaries of Zonaras, Pardos and Prodromos. Furthermore, it includes towards its end a series of homiletic and rhetorical set pieces and, surprisingly to us, substantial parts of Tzetzes' *Allegories of the Iliad*, various minor lexical and grammatical works and the largest fragment of Tzetzes' lost chronological work. Thus, the complete commentary tradition of the twelfth century is reflected in this manuscript, showing us how a teacher in early Palaiologan Constantinople viewed all of this material as one entity and not separated in different thematic (pagan vs. Christian) or generic categories (commentary vs. homily or oration, narrative explanation vs. paraphrasis). Furthermore, the manuscript preserves texts that cover the whole spectrum of Komnenian literary modernity and experimentation from its intellectually innovative phase to its politically restrictive development.

If we are, therefore, to understand the processes of commenting on 'ancient' texts in Komnenian Byzantium as the politics and practices of commentary in its broadest sense (a sense that is imperative for a new history of Byzantine literature), we must look at this thorny yet stimulating subject of research through a Byzantine point of view. It is only then that we shall be able to grasp sociocultural, ideological and aesthetic functions of Byzantine textual production as a dynamic phenomenon belonging to a wider medieval world and not just as an important appendix to Classical Studies.

⁶⁹ Cesaretti and Ronchey (2014: 172*–84*).

⁷⁰ For a full codicological description and reconstruction of the manuscript's history, see Cesaretti and Ronchey (2014: 201*–9*); for the presence of Eustathios' *Exegesis* at the Monastery of St John the Forerunner at Petra in Constantinople, see Ronchey (2017).

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