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Living by his wit: Tzetzes' Aristophanic variations on the conundrums of a 'professional writer'*

Valeria Flavia Lovato
Centre for Medieval Literature, University of Southern Denmark
lovato@sdu.dk

John Tzetzes' Letter *75 does not simply provide useful information on the scholar's professional status, but is crucial for a deeper understanding of his self-fashioning. By connecting this epistle to the related passages of the* Chiliads*, I show that not only the references to Plato, Simonides and Pythagoras, but also the comic and iambic overtones of this missive contribute to the construction of a multifaceted – and deliberately self-ironizing – authorial persona. Thus, this study engages with recent discussions on the polyphonic nature of Byzantine authorial voices, while also contributing to the renewed interest in the reception of Aristophanes in the Komnenian era.*

Keywords: John Tzetzes; Aristophanes; iambic mode; authorial self-fashioning; Komnenian patronage

> Ἄνθρωπος ἐγγλωττογάστωρ, ἢ μᾶλλον προσφυεστέρως εἰπεῖν νοογάστωρ ἐγώ, καὶ τεχνύδριον καὶ χειρωναξία οἱ λόγοι μου καθεστήκατον καὶ συγγράμματα, οἷσπερ καρποῦμαι τὰ πρὸς ζωήν, οἷσπερ καὶ μόνοις ἐγὼ διατρέφομαι, τὴν μοῦσαν, καθὼς ὁ Πίνδαρος περὶ Σιμωνίδου φησίν, ἀργυρέαν ποιούμενος, καὶ ὥσπερ ὁ Πλάτων ἐκεῖνος τοὺς διαλόγους εἰς Σικελίαν πιπράσκων.

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> I am a man who lives by his tongue (*anthrōpos englōttogastōr*) or, rather, it would be more appropriate to say that I live by my wit (*noogastōr*). Words and treatises are my craft and my trade: it is through them that I harvest the wherewithal to live; it is through them only that I sustain myself, turning my Muse into silver – as Pindar says of Simonides – and following the example of the famous Plato, who sold his dialogues in Sicily.[1]

This extract from *Letter* 75 is well known to modern scholars and it is often quoted as proof that John Tzetzes, one of the most prominent literati of twelfth-century Byzantium, can legitimately be labelled as a 'professional writer'. Indeed, in this missive to his former student John Triphyles, Tzetzes discusses the constraints stemming from his status as a commissioned writer and compares his situation to that of other renowned intellectuals of the past, such as Plato, Simonides and, in the concluding section of the letter, Pythagoras of Samos. While not rejecting the idea that *Letter* 75 may provide useful information about Tzetzes' professional and social status, this paper argues that much more can be gleaned from it, especially as concerns the literary, rhetorical and semantic complexity of its author's self-fashioning strategies.

First, by tracing the connection between this letter and related passages of the *Chiliads,* I will attempt to clarify the meaning of Tzetzes' references to figures like Plato and Simonides, whom, in the passage quoted above, the Byzantine polymath seems to consider as distant predecessors. To do so, it is necessary to situate these two ancient intellectuals in the constellation of characters from the Greek and Roman past that feature throughout Tzetzes' writings and that are systematically employed for the construction of a variegated authorial self. Secondly, by analysing the letter's language and style, and especially its comic and iambic overtones, I will show not only that Tzetzes' self-fashioning strategy is much more nuanced than might appear at first glance, but also that he does not hesitate, in an ironic spirit, to point out the multifacetedness of his authorial persona. To this end, my investigation will focus on the reasons behind his use of Aristophanic borrowings, while also bringing to the fore the multilayered meaning of Tzetzeian neologisms such as *noogastōr*, a word that the polymath coins to describe the ostensible exceptionality of his situation. As I argue, by hinting at the inevitable clash between the two elements forming this compound, Tzetzes unveils, with a touch of self-directed humour, the equilibristic nature of his authorial self, always balancing between proud declarations of independence and the constraints stemming from his unavoidable dealings with his numerous students, clients and patrons.

1 John Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, ed. P. A. M. Leone (Leipzig 1972) 75, 109, 17–110, 3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

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The present study, then, aims to enrich recent discussions on the polyphonic nature of Byzantine authorial voices,[2] but also to contribute to the renewed interest in the reception of Aristophanes in the Komnenian era.[3]

Different faces for one authorial portrait

In the first lines of his letter to Triphyles, Tzetzes starts by presenting himself as an '*anthrōpos englōttogastōr*', a man who lives by his tongue, just as the philosopher Plato and the lyric poet Simonides had done some centuries before. However, immediately after placing himself in the group of the *englōttogastores,* Tzetzes seems to find a better description for his predicament: he would rather be considered an *anthrōpos noogastōr*, an individual who makes a living out of his *nous*, his wit or intellect. Such a shifting attitude does not only characterize the label that Tzetzes adopts to define his professional status, but involves the characters that he employs as paradigms for his personal situation. Indeed, in the opening passage of the letter, Tzetzes seems intent on dignifying his situation by comparing it to that of Plato and Simonides, two illustrious examples of 'mercenary writers'. However, if we read the following sections of the epistle, we will notice that Tzetzes' relationship with, and opinion of, his two ancient colleagues is not as straightforward as the opening lines of the letter might suggest. Tzetzes goes to great lengths to mark his distance from Plato, whom he depicts as a greedy and shameless flatterer.

> οὕτω μὲν ἐκεῖνος ὁ Πλάτων πρὸς τῷ ἀργυρέους τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ διαλόγους ποιεῖσθαι, ὥσπερ ὁ Σιμωνίδης τὴν μοῦσαν, καὶ ὀψαρτυτικὴν ἄκρως ἐξήσκησε καὶ τὴν πρὸς τοὺς τυράννους θωπείαν· ἐξ ὧν ἁπάντων μόλις ἔχειν ἠδύνατο διαρκεστέραν τὴν βιοτήν. ἡμεῖς δὲ ἐπὶ μόνης ταυτησὶ τῆς ἀγκύρας σαλεύομεν ἣν φθάσαντες ἔφημεν ἐν τῷ τοῦ βίου πελάγει, οὐκ ὀψαρτυτικήν, οὐ θωπείαν εἰδότες …[4]

2 On authorial polyphony, see F. Bernard, 'The ethics of authorship: Some tensions in the 11th century', in A. Pizzone (ed.), *The Author in Middle Byzantine Literature: Modes, Functions, and Identities* (Boston 2014) 59–60. For an exemplary analysis of a particularly 'Protean' authorial self, see S. Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos: Rhetoric and Authorship in Byzantium* (Cambridge 2013). On the 'flexibility' of Byzantine authorial voices, see now I. Nilsson, *Writer and Occasion in Twelfth-Century Byzantium: The Authorial Voice of Constantine Manasses* (Cambridge 2021), esp. 12–13.

3 See e.g. P. T. Marciniak, 'Prodromos, Aristophanes and a lustful woman – a Byzantine satire by Theodore Prodromos', *Byzantinoslavica* 73 (2015) 23–34; T. Labuk, 'Aristophanes in the service of Niketas Choniates: Gluttony, drunkenness and politics in the Χρονικὴ διήγησις', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 66 (2016) 127–51, and 'Gluttons, drunkards and lechers. The discourses of food in 12th-century Byzantine literature: Ancient themes and Byzantine innovations', PhD thesis, University of Silesia, 2019; B. van den Berg, 'Playwright, satirist, Atticist: The reception of Aristophanes in twelfth-century Byzantium', in P. T. Marciniak and I. Nilsson (eds), *Satire in the Middle Byzantine Period: The Golden Age of Laughter?* (Leiden 2021) 227–53, who, among other things, discusses Tzetzes' use of the 'historical' Aristophanes as a paradigm for his authorial self-fashioning. On the presence and function of Aristophanic echoes in Tzetzes' works, see also P. Agapitos, 'John Tzetzes and the blemish examiners: A Byzantine teacher on schedography, everyday language and writerly disposition', *Medioevo Greco* 17 (2017) 1–57.

4 Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, 75, 111, 1–8.

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> Thus, the famous Plato, in order to transform his dialogues into silver, as Simonides did with his Muse, skilfully practiced the art of cooking, as well as the art of flattery addressed to tyrants. And through all these activities he earned barely enough to live on. As for me, the only anchor I have in the sea of life is the one I mentioned before, since I am familiar neither with the art of cooking, nor with that of flattery …

The reasons behind such a negative reception of the Athenian philosopher are further clarified in the *Chiliads*, a vast metrical commentary that Tzetzes devoted to his own letters. In this extensive work, almost every learned reference, rhetorical tour de force or witty remark featuring in Tzetzes' epistles is the subject of one or more 'stories' (*historiai*), the title of which often references directly the relevant passage of the missive under scrutiny. The rather unflattering portrait of Plato emerging from *Letter* 75 is the focus of a long series of *historiai*, where the Athenian philosopher is also accused of being a shameless plagiarist. As Tzetzes does not tire to point out, Plato did not scruple to steal the ideas of other intellectuals, which he then used to compose the dialogues that made him famous. Among the victims of Plato's thefts, Tzetzes includes also the Pythagorean Archytas, who had helped – and educated – the Athenian philosopher when the latter had been sold as a slave by his former Sicilian patrons.[5]

While the violence of his polemical outbursts against Plato remains unparalleled, in the *Chiliads* Tzetzes is very careful also to redefine his apparent affinity with the other ancient 'colleague' featuring in the letter to Triphyles, namely the lyric poet Simonides. In another *historia* that Tzeztes explicitly connects to *Letter* 75, the famous poet is presented as a gifted intellectual who wasted his talents by agreeing to cater to the limited – and limiting – requests of his rich patrons.[6]

As we glean from other passages of the *Chiliads* directly connected to *Letter* 75, there seem to be other figures from the Greek and Roman past that are better suited to represent Tzetzes' authorial ideal. In the first lines of a crucial *historia* detailing Tzetzes' dealings with his many students, clients and patrons, the polymath stresses his affinity with two paradigms of incorruptibility and – consequently – utter liberty: Cato the Elder and the Theban general Epameinondas. More specifically, the reader is informed that, just as his Greek and Roman counterparts, and differently from Plato and Simonides, Tzetzes too was *adōrotatos*, 'immune to any kind of gift or donation'.[7] However, only a few lines later, the Byzantine alter ego of Cato feels the need to nuance his position.

5 John Tzetzes, *Historiae,* ed. P. A. M. Leone (Galatina 2007), 10, 988–92. In this same *historia*, Tzetzes adds that Plato plagiarized the works of another Pythagorean, Philolaus (see *Historiae*, 10, 992–1000 and esp. 998–9).

6 Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 8, 807–29. For a more detailed analysis, see V. F. Lovato, 'From Cato to Plato and back again. Friendship and Patronage in John Tzetzes' *Letters* and *Chiliads*', *Classica et Mediaevalia* (forthcoming).

7 Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 11, 13–14 (Ὁ Τζέτζης ἀδωρότατος ἦν παλαιῶν τῷ ζήλῳ, | Ἐπαμεινώνδου, Κάτωνος καὶ τῶν τοιούτων πάντων).

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With a move that both mirrors and reverses the rhetorical strategy we have observed in the epistle to Triphyles, Tzetzes gradually sets his experience as a 'professional intellectual' over against the condition of complete liberty and independence enjoyed by both Cato and Epameinondas. Indeed, if in *Letter* 75 the scholar tries to gradually mark his distance from the mercenary Simonides and the corrupt Plato, in this central passage of the *Chiliads* he appears gradually to bridge the divide with these two predecessors of his. In spite of their respective excesses, their condition bore undeniable resemblances to that of Tzetzes the teacher and commissioned writer. Unlike Cato and Epameinondas, who could afford to be impenetrable to all kinds of gifts, Plato and Simonides made a living out of their writings and therefore could not but accept the donations – and hence the requests – of their sponsors. Despite refusing to stoop as low as Plato the cook, not even Tzetzes was in a position to refuse commissions from his patrons, even when these curbed his much cherished – and much advertised – freedom of thought (*eleuthera gnōmē*).[8]

It is indeed striking that, in a *historia* entirely devoted to discussing his condition as a professional writer, Tzetzes decides to pick a Greek general and a Roman statesman as ideal paradigms for his authorial persona, all the more so because neither the censor nor the general was primarily known for his literary activities. Admittedly, in other passages of Tzetzes' works, Cato is presented as a model teacher and as the author of a didactic historical work directed to his son. However, the focus of these extracts is different from that of the passages analysed so far. Indeed, when he praises Cato's pedagogical methods, the polymath is rather intent on describing his own education at the hands of his father, depicted as a Byzantine Cato who would in turn mould Tzetzes himself into a 'living portrait' of the Roman statesman.[9] Moreover, these texts do not explicitly engage either with Tzetzes' 'financial' needs or with the constraints stemming from his position as a commissioned writer.[10] Instead, both *Letter* 75 and the related *historiai* explicitly address Tzetzes' professional status by contrasting the liberty of Cato and Epameinondas with the dubious – but necessary – commodification of literature by Plato and Simonides.

8 For a more in-depth reading of this text (Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 11, 13–39), see again Lovato, 'From Cato to Plato'.

9 On these passages see A. Pizzone, 'The autobiographical subject in Tzetzes' *Chiliades*: An analysis of its components', in C. Messis, M. Mullett and I. Nilsson (eds), *Storytelling in Byzantium: Narratological Approaches to Byzantine Texts and Images* (Uppsala 2018) 295–9, and V. F. Lovato, 'Hellenizing Cato? A short survey of the concepts of Greekness, Romanity and barbarity in John Tzetzes' work and thought', in K. Stewart and J. M. Wakeley (eds), *Cross-Cultural Exchange in the Byzantine World, c. 300–1500 AD* (Oxford 2016) 145–54. For a different perspective on the reasons behind Tzetzes' identification with Cato, see S. Xenophontos, '"A living portrait of Cato": Self-fashioning and the classical past in John Tzetzes' *Chiliads*', *Estudios bizantinos* 2 (2014) 187–204.

10 In the first books of the *Chiliads*, Cato is not yet presented as a paradigm of incorruptibility. On the contrary, the censor is depicted as a particularly stingy man (see e.g. Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 3, 188–9), a trait that will disappear in Tzetzes' subsequent mentions of Cato. On the possible reasons for this evolution, see Lovato, 'Hellenising Cato', 148–9 with n. 16.

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Why then choose a Greek general and a Roman statesman to represent an ideal condition of intellectual liberty to which Tzetzes clearly aspired but ostensibly could never achieve? I believe that a preliminary answer to this question is provided by the concluding section of the very same *Letter* 75, featuring the story of Pythagoras' piteous demise. Not only does this last episode provide a humorously apologetic explanation for the equilibristic nature of Tzetzes' self-presentation – always inevitably divided between Cato's inflexibility and Plato's mercenariness – but it also builds upon some of the themes featuring in the first lines of the epistle itself. Before analysing these elements into any detail, however, it is worth reading Tzetzes' description of Pythagoras' final days.

It is only in its concluding lines that the reader finally learns about the occasion for Tzetzes' epistle. In one of his last missives, Triphyles must have asked his former teacher to write more often. While clearly pleased by his pupil's affection, Tzetzes explains that he is in no position to comply with his request. Should he abide by Triphyles' wish, he would certainly meet the same terrible fate as Pythagoras of Samos.

> εἰ γοῦν καὶ συγγραμμάτων βουληθείημεν ἄγειν ἐκεχειρίαν, γράφειν δὲ πρὸς μίαν ἐπιστολὴν ἀντιγραφὰς τέσσαρας φορολόγοις ἀνθρώποις, οὐδὲν ἄρα ἐξ ἀσιτίας ἐστὶ τὸ κωλύον καὶ ἡμᾶς τεθνηκέναι κατὰ τὸν Πυθαγόραν (15) ἐκεῖνον τὸν τῆς φιλοσοφίας κατάρξαντα, ὃς τὴν ἐν Κρότωνι πυρπόλησιν πεφευγὼς ἀποδρασκάσας τε εἰς Μετάποντον καὶ τεσσαρακονθήμερον χρόνον κρησφυγετῶν ἐν τῷ τεμένει τῷ τῶν Μουσῶν νῆστις ἐγκαρτερήσας ἀπεκαρτέρησε. πρὸς γοῦν τῶν ἱερῶν λόγων καὶ τῆς παιδείας καὶ (20) τῆς φιλίας, μὴ θελήσῃς ἡμᾶς οὐδὲν ἀδικοῦντας οὕτως ἀθλιωτάτῳ θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἰσαρίθμους στέργε ταῖς σαῖς γραφαῖς τὰς ἐμὰς εἰ λαμβάνεις.[11]

> If I wanted to take some time off from my writing and decided to pen four replies to each and every letter I receive from the tax collectors,[12] nothing would prevent me from dying of starvation, just as happened to Pythagoras, the famous father of philosophy. Having fled a fire that had broken out in Croton, he escaped to Metaponto, where he took refuge in the sacred precinct of the Muses. There, he endured forty days without taking any food until he starved to death. For the sake of the sacred *logoi*, of our shared friendship and education, do not ask a man like me, who never did anything wrong, to die such a wretched death, but be content if I reply with one letter to each one of your own.

11 Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, 75, 111, 12–23.

12 The mention of tax collectors may be intended to add a final touch to Tzetzes' ironic self-presentation as a 'poor' intellectual, always striving to find the money he needed to survive. It might also be read as a humorous allusion to Triphyles' excessive greed: like a tax collector, Tzetzes' correspondent is never satisfied with what he is given and constantly asks for more.

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The over-emphatic nature of Tzetzes' plea to Triphyles, as well as the hyperbolic flavour of his identification with the unfortunate Pythagoras, leave no doubt as to the facetious tone of the scholar's refusal. Writing to a former student with whom he seemingly maintained a close relationship, the polymath can afford to coat his denial with a joking allusion to their shared cultural background. However, as I shall argue, both the humorous tone of the passage and the way in which Pythagoras' story is phrased are part of a broader, and deliberate, rhetorical agenda.

Let us consider the details that Tzetzes chooses to highlight in his retelling of the philosopher's final days. By presenting Pythagoras as the inventor of philosophy, Tzetzes is emphasizing outstanding intellectual talent and implicitly contrasting it to the mediocrity of Plato, who not only did not 'invent' anything, but stole from the Pythagoreans most of the ideas featuring in his much-praised dialogues. However, despite his inferior intellectual attainments, Plato survived, whereas the great Pythagoras died of starvation after fasting for forty days in the sacred precinct of the Muses. Tzetzes' choice of this version of the episode,[13] as well as his emphasis on this last detail, is especially relevant to understand the multi-layered meaning of his comparison with Pythagoras. No intellectual, not even the inventor of philosophy himself, can survive by feeding only on the sacred company of the Muses. As Tzetzes ironically implies in this last part of the letter, no matter how acute one's mind, the belly always reclaims its due. People who live by the products of their own tongue – or, in Tzetzes' case, of their own wit – have no choice: unlike Cato and Epameinondas, they are not in a position to refuse the 'gifts' they are offered. Pythagoras' admirable but self-destructive ascesis cannot but lead to death by starvation. If one wants to escape such a wretched end, there is no other choice but to navigate the grey zone extending between perfect liberty and utter slavery. The 'living portrait of Cato'[14] is well aware of this and, as the episode of Pythagoras shows, he does not hesitate to hint at his equilibristic stance with a touch of apologetic irony, as confirmed by his emphatic identification with the starving philosopher and, possibly, by the wordplay concluding the story of Pythagoras: according to Tzetzes' phrasing of the story, the father of philosophy endured (ἐγκαρτερήσας) for forty days, fasting in the precinct of the Muses, until he just could not endure anymore and…ended up dead (ἀπεκαρτέρησε). Such an implicit contrast between the philosopher's noble asceticism and the unavoidable demands of the appetitive body further enhances the humorous tinge of the whole passage. As I will attempt to show in the following section, this tension is one of the main keys to interpreting the complex web of intra- and intertextual references featuring in the first lines of *Letter* 75. Keeping Tzetzes' interpretation of Pythagoras' fate in mind, I should now like to turn once again to the opening section of the epistle to Triphyles.

13 As attested by *Historiae*, 11, 73–86, Tzetzes was aware of at least three distinct traditions on Pythagoras' death, which, according to Leone's critical apparatus, he gathered from different sources, such as the biographies of Pythagoras penned by Porphyry, Diogenes Laertius and Iamblichus.

14 Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 3, 174.

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The difficult coexistence of *nous* and *gastēr*

Before delving into the analysis of this intriguing text, it is worth reading it once again (see above), focusing especially on the reference to the Aristophanic *englōttogastores* and on the Tzetzeian neologism *noogastōr*. As already noted, Tzetzes initially places himself among the *englōttogastores*, the label that he applies to Plato and Simonides. Yet, immediately afterwards, he seems to find a better definition for his predicament: since he lives by his wit more than his tongue, he would rather be called a *noogastōr*. However, with a rhetorical move we are now familiar with, Tzetzes immediately proceeds to cloud the picture. Once again, after distancing himself from his two ancient predecessors, Tzetzes goes back to stressing his affinity with them: just like Simonides and Plato, he too had no choice but to turn his literary production into silver.

As we know, this fluctuation traverses the whole letter to Triphyles, as well as most of the passages discussed so far. In this section of my analysis, I will further explore the tension between the seemingly contradictory instances that characterize the texts revolving around Tzetzes' social and professional status. More specifically, I will attempt to demonstrate that this tension is subsumed and epitomized by the very term that Tzetzes coins in order to define his condition: the compound *noogastōr*. This neologism was so meaningful to Tzetzes that he decided to devote an entire section of the *Chiliads* to explaining its meaning:

> Ἐγγλωττογάστωρ λέγεται πᾶς ὁ λαλῶν ἐν γλώσσῃ,
> κἀν τῷ λαλεῖν ἐκτρέφων δὲ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γαστέρα,
> ὡς πάντες οἱ διδάσκοντες, ὡς ψάλτριαι καὶ ψάλται,
> θυμελικοὶ καὶ κόλακες καὶ λέγοντες ἀστεῖα
> καὶ ῥήτορες συνήγοροι καὶ ὅσοι δὲ τοιοῦτοι,
> κἂν οἱ πολλοὶ μόνους φασὶν οὕτω τοὺς συνηγόρους.
> Τίνες ἐγγλωττογάστορες, οὕτω μαθὼν ἐγνώκεις,
> καὶ οἱ ἑφερμηνεύοντες τῶν ἐγγλωτογαστόρων.
> Ὁ νοόγαστωρ δέ ἐστι (κατάχρησις δὲ τοῦτο),
> ὃς λογισμῷ συγγράμματα συντάττων, ἐξηγήσεις
> καὶ στίχους καὶ ποιήματα, τρέφει αὐτὸν ἐκ τούτων.
> Ὁ χειρογάστωρ πάλιν δὲ καλεῖται καὶ χειρώναξ.
> Ἔστι δ' ὁ ἐργαζόμενος καὶ τῶν χειρῶν τοῖς ἔργοις
> τρέφειν αὐτὸν δυνάμενος, ὡς πᾶς τις χειρεργάτης.
> Καὶ βιβλογράφον ἅπαντα τούτοις μοι συναρίθμει·
> καὶ χειρογάστορά φαμεν σύμπαντα τὸν τοιοῦτον,
> ὡς ταῖς χερσὶ τρεφόμενον. Χειρώνακτα δὲ πάλιν,
> ὡς τῶν χειρῶν δεσπόζοντα τῶν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ μόνων.[15]

15 Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 10, 759–76.

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> The term *englōttogastōr* applies to anyone who speaks with his tongue
> and by speaking fills his stomach,
> as do all the teachers, male and female singers,
> entertainers, flatterers, jesters,
> public rhetors and other individuals of this kind,
> even if this term is mostly applied to public rhetors only.
> You have thus learned and understood who the *englōttogastores* are
> and that the interpreters also belong to this group.
> Instead, a *noogastōr* – this word is a catachresis –
> is someone who composes treatises, verses and poems
> with his wit and sustains himself with these.
> In turn, a *cheirogastōr* is what we also call a craftsman.
> This is someone who has a trade and is able to sustain himself
> with the work of his hands, just as every manual labourer does.
> You should also include in this group the copyist.
> Indeed, we call *cheirogastōr* every such individual
> who supports himself with his hands. We also call them handicraftsmen,
> since they have mastery of their hands and of these only.

As often with Tzetzes' *Chiliads*, this *historia* is essential to illuminate the content of the related letter. Here, the distinction between *englōttogastores* and *noogastores* that opens the letter to Triphyles is the starting point for the development of a complex social and intellectual hierarchy, at the top of which we find none other than Tzetzes the *noogastōr*. Plato, Simonides and the like belong instead to the much broader (and lower ranking) category of the *englōttogastores*, which embraces an ample list of characters, including public rhetors and teachers, but also musicians, actors and, not surprisingly, flatterers of all kinds.

At first glance, by claiming to be a *noogastōr*, Tzetzes demarcates himself from this flamboyant parade, which, we might add, can be read as a not-so-covert allusion to some of his contemporaries and rivals. Putting teachers and rhetors in the same category as actors and (female) musicians was certainly not intended as a compliment to the first group. The final addition of *kolakes* (flatterers) to the list confirms this reading: the *englōttogastores*, whatever their actual profession, are equated to performers and hypocrites who are at the orders of whoever pays for their services. At the same time, Tzetzes is careful to distance himself from those who live by the work of their hands. Significantly, he places in this group also the copyists, whom he clearly considers an inferior category, since, in his opinion, they use nothing but their hands to complete their task.

To sum up, by contrast with both the *englōttogastores* and the *cheirogastores*, Tzetzes is the only one to employ his wit (*nous*) to make a living. Apparently, not only does this trait distinguish Tzetzes from both groups, but it also marks his superiority, since intellectual faculties cannot but surpass both manual skills and (questionable)

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rhetorical and performative abilities. However, if we take a closer look at the tone and wording of this text, we will realize that Tzetzes' attempt at self-exaltation is much more nuanced than it might appear. Once again, for all his claims to superiority, the Byzantine polymath is well aware of the delicate nature of his predicament, which he does not hesitate to point out through an astute use of language and a touch of self-directed humour.

Let us focus first on the term *englōttogastōr*, which, in the initial lines of *Letter* 75, Tzetzes provisionally applies both to himself and to his two ancient predecessors, Plato and Simonides. This compound comes from an Aristophanic comedy, *The Birds*.[16] In its original context, the term was aimed at disparaging forensic rhetors and sycophants, who are satirically represented as a barbaric tribe with exotic feeding habits. Interestingly, Aristophanes includes in the ranks of 'those who live by their tongue' a famous sophist such as Gorgias, as well as the (for us) more obscure Philippos. The two rhetors are implicitly accused of enriching themselves by parading their unsavoury sophistic skills and, most importantly, by teaching them to other aspirant *englōttogastores*, thus contributing to the growth of this obnoxious tribe.

The felicitous invention of the compound *englōttogastōr* enhances the satirical and humorous tone of the whole Aristophanic passage. In particular, the combination of the terms *gastēr* (belly) and *glōtta* (tongue) appears to be a particularly representative manifestation of the so-called 'poetry of blame',[17] which is in turn strictly connected to what Nancy Worman has labelled as 'iambic mode'.[18] In her seminal study on 'abusive mouths' in Greek classical literature, Worman has argued that the language of blame, emerging most clearly in Homeric epics, archaic iambos and Pindaric odes, is both the source and one of the earliest manifestations of the iambic mode, which resurfaces in different forms throughout archaic and classical Greek literature. This kind of discourse, probably best epitomized by the compositions of Archilochus and Hipponax and subsequently inherited by Aristophanic comedy, aims at criticizing and ridiculing its victims by employing a set of standard themes and rhetorical tools. Amongst these, debasing references to the almost bestial *gastēr* of the polemical target play an essential role, so much so that the motif of the insatiable belly has been singled out as especially representative of the language of blame.[19] What is more, as noted by Worman, the constant association between food and talk in Greek civic life may be the source of another recurring theme of both blame poetry and iambic discourse: the interconnection 'between the mouth (and jaws, *belly*) as an ingester of food and the mouth (and teeth, *tongue*) as an expeller of verbiage'.[20]

16 Aristophanes, *Birds*, 1694–1705.

17 For the contrast between 'poetry of blame' and 'poetry of praise', see G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans. Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (rev. ed. Baltimore 1998) 222–42.

18 N. Worman, *Abusive Mouths in Classical Athens* (Cambridge 2008). For the concept of 'iambic mode' see esp. pp. 8–14.

19 See e.g. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, 229–32.

20 Worman, *Abusive Mouths*, 29 (emphasis mine).

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In light of these considerations, the Aristophanic *englōttogastōr* cannot but strike the reader as a particularly emblematic distillation of comic and iambic motifs, since it not only perfectly combines two words associated with appetite and voraciousness, but also inevitably debases the other activity for which the human tongue is essential, the art of discourse.[21] If we consider that, since antiquity, the ability to talk was deemed to be the main characteristic distinguishing men from animals, we will appreciate even further the strength of the accusation moved against the rapacious rhetoricians belonging to the dubious 'tribe' of the *englōttogastores*. By coupling the *glōtta* with the belly, Aristophanes – and Tzetzes along with him – hints at the fact that, even when apparently used for other goals, the tongue of the greedy sophists does nothing but work to fill their stomach, thus making them more similar to animals than sentient human beings. Tzetzes, who not only wrote extensive commentaries on the Aristophanic comedies, but esteemed Hipponax, was well aware of the compound's caustic and disparaging force. This considered, it is all the more remarkable that, even if for a brief moment, the scholar seems willing to apply this very term also to himself and his professional activity.

As we have seen, however, after provisionally calling himself an *englōttogastōr*, Tzetzes coins a new term that he considers more fitting to represent his own situation, namely *noogastōr*, 'someone who lives by his wit'. If we analyse the structure of this word, we will remark that, despite keeping the second element of the Aristophanic compound (i.e. *-gastōr*, from *gastēr*), the Tzetzean neologism replaces the tongue (*glōtta*) of the voracious rhetors with a more dignified word, *nous* ('wit'), which is presented as Tzetzes' unique source of income. Nevertheless, despite this significant modification, the second element of the Aristophanic compound, *gastēr*, keeps both its place and, we might add, its comic and iambic echoes. The clash between the two halves of the Tzetzean neologism generates new layers of meaning and allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the scholar's self-presentation, whose ironic and polemic undertones should not be underestimated.[22]

By playing on the impossible association between the two incompatible spheres of the mind and the belly, Tzetzes spells out once again the paradoxical nature of his social and professional status, while also voicing his unease at the impossibility to set himself apart completely from the world of the *englōttogastores*. A comparison with other extracts from Tzetzes' writings will clarify my point.

In some passages of his works, it is Tzetzes himself who hints at the difficult coexistence and cooperation between *nous* and *gastēr*. In *Letter* 81, which rejects the objections of some anonymous critics who did not agree with his dating of Galen's

21 On this line of interpretation, see also Worman, *Abusive Mouths*, 84.

22 On the multiple levels of meaning underlying Komnenian references to central authors such as Homer and Aristophanes, see van den Berg, 'Playwright, satirist, Atticist', 240: 'one was not only supposed to know one's Homer, but also one's Aristophanes, to be able to reuse them in intricate ways on the one hand, and to grasp the different layers of meaning of such allusions in rhetorical practice on the other.'

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life, the scholar defends the trustworthiness of his opinions by stating time and again that the latter were not 'shaped by his own stomach'.[23] In his eyes, this is in itself proof enough of their reliability. The immediate implication of such a statement is that, when the driving force of one's mind is their stomach, the quality of their intellectual production is automatically compromised.

We cannot simply interpret Tzetzes' rebuke as a colourful way of asserting that his ideas stem from a more dignified source than those of his adversaries. Rather, the polymath seems to be hinting at a traditional motif that, since antiquity, had been connected to the problematic phenomenon of poetry on commission or, to put it more broadly, of mercenary literature: how can we trust someone who writes to fill his own stomach to tell the truth and not what his 'employer' wants him to say?[24] This seems to be confirmed by a related passage of the *Chiliads*, where Tzetzes aims at further disparaging the unnamed critics who did not accept his chronology of Galen's life.[25] To do so, Tzetzes employs the very same strategy we have just encountered in *Letter* 81, but this time he turns it against his enemies: in his opinion, the accusations of these individuals do not even deserve a hearing, since all they say comes directly 'from their belly'.

What is more, when pointing out the incompatibility between a subtle intellect and the needs of the stomach, Tzetzes might also be hinting at a rather widespread saying, probably of comic or iambic origin,[26] which was well-known, among others, to Gregory of Nazianzus, who quotes it twice in his *Carmina Moralia*.[27] According to this precept, 'a fat belly does not generate an acute mind' (παχεῖα γαστὴρ λεπτὸν οὐ τίκτει νόον). Tzetzes seems to be rephrasing this very concept when, in the already cited *Letter* 81, he defines himself as an *ischnogastōr anthrōpos* ('a man with a lean belly'), who cares for the truth much more than he cares for gold. Once again, we are confronted with the incompatibility between material recompenses and truthfulness. Those whose ideas are not shaped by their mind, but only by the desire to fill their stomach, are automatically suspicious and untrustworthy. If so, however, what should we make of Tzetzes the *noogastōr*, who seems to both embody and resolve the

23 Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, 81, 121, 9–13; 22–26.

24 On the suspicions aroused by poets and storytellers who sing only to fill their belly, see Worman, *Abusive Mouths*, 30. On the problematic representation of the financial relationship between poet and patron in Pindar (and Simonides), see now R. Rawles, *Simonides the Poet: Intertextuality and Reception* (Cambridge 2018) 133–54.

25 Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 12, 11–14 (see esp. line 11, where Tzetzes explicitly refutes τοὺς ἐκ γαστρὸς ληροῦντας).

26 See T. Kock (ed.), *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta*, III (Leipzig 1888) 613 (*Fragmenta Comica Adespota* 1234). According to R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds), *Poetae Comici Graeci*, VIII (Berlin 1995) 514, this fragment is more likely to be of iambic origin: see their reference to E. Diehl (ed.), *Anthologia Lyrica Graeca*, III (Leipzig 1964) 75 (*Fragmenta Iambica Adespota* 16).

27 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina Moralia*, ed. J.-P. Migne [*Patrologiae cursus completus (series Graeca)* 37] (Paris 1862) 723, 2 and 918, 35.

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impossible coexistence of *nous* and *gastēr*, of mercenary writing and disinterested search for the truth? And how to reconcile him with the *ischnogastōr anthrōpos* of *Letter* 81?

Before trying to solve this apparent contradiction, it is worth focusing for a while on the first component of the term *noogastōr* and on its use by Tzetzes. If we think back to the lines of the *historia* devoted to explaining the meaning of this compound, we might recall that the polymath is careful to point out that this neologism is nothing but a catachresis. But why does Tzetzes insist on this detail and how should we interpret it?

To understand this reference, it is necessary to refer to a passage from the seventh book of the *Chiliads*, where the trope of catachresis is explicitly associated with both the concept of *nous* and the expression *leptos noos* that we have just encountered. More specifically, in this long and intricate *historia*, the polymath considers the nature of human and divine intellect, distinguishing between *nous*, *logismos*, *dianoia* and *epinoia*. While the full complexity of this passage cannot be discussed here, it is worth pointing out that the scholar clearly considers the *nous* as a divine faculty, which in no circumstance can be legitimately attributed to human beings.[28] When we talk about human *nous*, Tzetzes explains, we employ this term in an inappropriate context and inevitably strain its meaning, thus employing the rhetorical trope of catachresis.[29]

With this in mind, we can now go back to Tzetzes' self-presentation as a *noogastōr* in the tenth book of the *Chiliads*. The hint at the previous discussion of the divine nature of *nous*, as well as the presentation of the compound as a catachresis, enriches the meaning of this whole passage, by inviting the audience to decipher the sophisticated game of literary allusions and intratextual references hiding behind the creation of this neologism. Indeed, the careful reader of the *Chiliads* will know that no one, not even Tzetzes, truly deserves the title of *noogastōr*, since the *nous* is a divine prerogative only. What is more, not only do these considerations further complicate the interpretation of the Tzetzean neologism, they contribute to sharpening the contrast

28 A fragment of the *Corpus Hermeticum* seems to epitomize Tzetzes' distinction between divine *nous* and human *logismos* (see A.-J. Festugière (ed. and transl.), *Corpus Hermeticum*, III (Paris 1954) XI, 15, 1: ὁ νοῦς ἐν τῷ θεῷ, ὁ λογισμὸς ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ; I owe this reference to one of the anonymous referees). However, when discussing this topic, Tzetzes explicitly refers to other authors, such as Iamblichus and Porphyry (*Historiae* 7, 487, 532 and 568), Parmenides (7, 513), Xenophanes (*ibidem*), Empedocles (7, 514) and Plato (7, 534). In his critical apparatus, Leone is able to trace the source of the references only in the case of the latter two: see Empedocles, F 134, 4–5 Diels-Krantz and Plato, *Timaeus* 51e. As concerns Xenophanes, Leone refers the reader to T 112 Gentili-Prato, which however stems from this very passage of the *Chiliads* (but see T 77 Gentili-Prato about Xenophanes' definition of God as νοῦς and φρόνησις). As for Parmenides, the concept of *nous* features e.g. in F 4 and F 16 Diels-Krantz, but it is difficult to establish any direct link with the *Chiliads*. Finally, regarding Iamblichus and Porphyry, one could refer e.g. to Porphyry's *Ad Marcellam* 11, 13, 19 and 25 Pötscher (for the idea that only the *nous* of the *sophos* can appropriately venerate and follow God's prescriptions) and Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis* (see e.g. III, 16–18 des Places for the angels and prophets' ability to share in the divine *nous*).

29 Tzetzes, *Historiae*, 7, 484–95 (and esp. 489–93: Αἱ θεῖαι φύσεις πάντα γὰρ νοοῦσι, πλὴν ἀμέσως, | οὐ πολυπραγμονήσασαι ἐν λογισμοῦ παλαίστρᾳ, | καθὼς ἡμεῖς οἱ ἄνθρωποι ὄντες ἐκ τῶν ὑλαίων, | καὶ λογισμοῦ δεόμενοι κρίσεως εἰς τὸ γνῶναι, | κἂν τὸ λογίζεσθαί φαμεν νοεῖν ἐν καταχρήσει).

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between the two elements of which this term is composed: the tension opposing the base instincts of the belly and the divine nature of the *nous* could not be more strident.[30]

A single voice for multiple authorial melodies

It is with a final reflection on the Tzetzean *noogastōr* – and on its interplay with the Aristophanic *englōttogastōr* – that I conclude my analysis and present some general remarks on the texts and themes explored so far.

Let us start by considering more closely the activities that Tzetzes attributes to the *noogastōr* and by comparing them to the multifarious pursuits of the *englōttogastores*. As we have remarked, the latter all seem to be involved in a performative act of sorts. From the teachers to the singers and from the public rhetors to the flatterers, all *englōttogastores* appear to be playing a role or to be participating in some kind of show. Indeed, the way in which Tzetzes lists and mixes these rather different professional and social figures is reminiscent of a sort of carnivalesque parade, where each participant is required to play his part for the entertainment of the observers. Among the spectators of these manifold performances, we are tempted to count also Tzetzes the *noogastōr*, who appears to be watching this colourful show from a superior and isolated place. His occupations do not seem to involve any kind of theatrics, since, as he himself states in this and other passages of his works, his only concern is writing.

To be sure, isolation and loneliness are recurrent elements in Tzetzes' self-presentation, often employed to underline the difference (and superiority) of his position to that of his contemporaries and rivals.[31] In the *historia* on *englōttogastores* and *noogastores*, however, the distinction is not as clear-cut as it might appear. For one, it is striking that Tzetzes, who was himself a teacher, and quite a successful one at that, does not include this activity amongst the occupations of the *noogastōr*. Instead, *all* teachers (πάντες οἱ διδάσκοντες) are irrevocably placed in the colourful group of the *englōttogastores*, together with other, far less reputable, kinds of performer. Certainly,

30 The difficult coexistence between mind and belly is exemplified once again by the figure of Pythagoras. In another passage from the *historia* quoted in the previous footnote, Tzetzes remarks that, in a remote past, there might have existed a limited group of extraordinary individuals who partook of the divine *nous* (*Historiae*, 7, 532–41). Significantly, the first name in the list is that of Pythagoras, the ascetic intellectual who not only died of starvation, but followed a rigid alimentary regimen throughout his life. Elsewhere, Tzetzes recounts that the philosopher was rejected by all the communities he entered in contact with, thus confirming that an uncompromising man like Pythagoras was bound to be an outcast in any system where intellectuals have no choice but to rely on patronage. The sole exception is represented by Phalaris, whom Tzetzes depicts as the ideal patron, ready to support whoever was endowed with intellectual talents, irrespective of their opinions (see e.g. *Historiae*, 12, 446–58). Only in such a perfect – and hardly replicable – environment could someone like Pythagoras (and Tzetzes) truly find their position and reject the limitations stemming from 'mercenary' writing.

31 See M. J. Luzzatto, *Tzetzes lettore di Tucidide. Note autografe sul Codice Heidelberg Palatino Greco 252* (Bari 1999) 53–5 and Pizzone, 'The autobiographical subject', 299–301.

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what we might define as Tzetzes' 'didactic production' is exceptional and almost unparalleled in Komnenian times, if we exclude other extraordinary figures such as Eustathios of Thessalonike. To be sure, Tzetzes was very proud of his exegetical writings, which, as he himself states time and again, not only complemented the work of his contemporaries and predecessors, but also introduced significant innovations. In other words, Tzetzes cannot be considered – and clearly did not consider himself – as just one amongst the many teachers populating the Byzantine capital. Nevertheless, the quality and originality of his production did not exempt him from actually working as a *grammatikos* or from dealing with the dreary necessities faced by the majority of his colleagues. As attested by the prefaces of his 'didactic' works and by his own epistolary collection, Tzetzes had to constantly and painstakingly advertise his teaching skills in order to attract new clients, who would guarantee him the necessary income to survive.[32] Therefore, in spite of what he apparently maintains in the short *historia* we have analysed above, Tzetzes was not completely foreign to the mercenary and performative nature of the world of the *englōttogastores*.[33] And indeed, at the very beginning of the letter to Triphyles, Tzetzes himself seems to suggest just as much: as noted, at first the polymath places himself in the large group of 'those who live by their tongue', a statement that he rectifies only afterwards.

We have observed a similar fluctuation also in Tzetzes' treatment of Plato and Simonides: despite some significant differences, the philosopher and the poet are depicted first and foremost as mercenary writers who can intermittently be seen both as forerunners of the author and as negative foils for his uncompromising authorial ethos. A comparable tension between Tzetzes' acceptance of his status as commissioned writer and his claim to authorial (and personal) freedom characterizes his shifting relationship with inflexible figures such as Epameinondas and Cato.

32 On Tzetzes' advertising of his teaching skills, see e.g. the conclusion of the *Carmina Iliaca*, where the polymath addresses his readers as 'sons of fortunate parents', whom he clearly hopes to attract as new clients (see John Tzetzes, *Carmina Iliaca*, ed. P. A. M. Leone (Catania 1995) 3, 753–60). Notably, Tzetzes' attitude towards his teaching activities is marked by the same fluctuation that characterizes his self-presentation as a 'professional intellectual'. Whereas in some texts he likes to pose as a disinterested teacher (see e.g. *Historiae*, 11, 24–25), in other instances he offers specific details on the remunerations he received in exchange for his lessons (see e.g. *Epistulae* 22 and 50), while often complaining about his unruly students (see e.g. *Epistulae* 79, 117, 18–118, 3). For a more detailed discussion, see Lovato, 'From Cato to Plato'.

33 M. Grünbart remarks that Tzetzes never managed to become a successful public orator, probably also because of his lung condition; see M. Grünbart, 'Byzantinisches Gelehrtenelend – oder: Wie meistert man seinen Alltag?', in L. M. Hoffmann and A. Monchizadeh (eds), *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie. Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur* (Mainz 2005) 420. This, however, does not imply that the polymath never tried to pursue this kind of 'career'. Indeed, as remarked by Grünbart himself, we know that Tzetzes composed at least a speech addressed to Patriarch John IX Agapetos, as well as a consolation directed to an anonymous recipient. See also Tzetzes, *Epistulae*, 89, 129, 15–21, discussed by Grünbart, where the scholar asks Andronikos and Theodoros Kamateros to be admitted to a *koinos syllogos* where he would have liked to present his new iambic compositions publicly.

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Indeed, the Byzantine counterpart of the Roman censor is well aware that, especially when it comes to his professional activities, he cannot live up to the standards of his uncompromising alter ego. After all, unlike Cato and Epameinondas, who never had to make a living from their intellect, Tzetzes the professional writer could not afford to be completely *adōrotatos*. As ironically pointed out by the sad story of Pythagoras, whoever tries to feed only on the sacred company of the Muses will eventually end up dead. His deep admiration for the father of philosophy is not enough to push Tzetzes to follow his example: trying to find an impossible balance between the complete but unattainable liberty of the incorruptible Cato and the moral (and literal) slavery of Plato the flatterer, Tzetzes deliberately builds an elusive authorial self, always shifting from one role to the other, in a constant and inventive dialogue with his ancient sources *and* with his own writings.

It is along these lines, I believe, that we should interpret the neologism *noogastōr* that Tzetzes uses to define his seemingly unique professional and social status. The contrast between the two words making up the compound, along with its comic and iambic undertones, perfectly epitomizes the precarious nature of such a position, as well as its inevitable tension with some crucial components of the scholar's idealized self-fashioning. On the one hand, Tzetzes is ready to take up the mask required by the circumstances, even if this means following in the footsteps of more or less unsavoury characters of the past. On the other, the polymath always showcases his lucid awareness of the precariousness of his situation and tries to preserve his *eleuthera gnōmē*, even if only through a subtle use of irony.[34]

Therefore, when we asked how it was possible to reconcile Tzetzes the *noogastōr* with the *ischnogastōr anthrōpos* of *Letter* 81, we were probably asking the wrong question. As I hope to have shown, Tzetzes can be at the same time *nous* and *gastēr*, *ischnogastōr* and *noogastōr*, a successor of Plato and the living portrait of Cato, a free intellectual and a mercenary writer. Most importantly, not only is Tzetzes well aware of this conflict, he does not hesitate to spell it out in his works. Through the creation of the neologism *noogastōr*, and by admitting to his affinity with the *englōttogastores*, it is Tzetzes himself who hints, with a touch of self-directed humour, at this unavoidable clash between contrasting but equally irresistible forces. This coexistence of opposites, along with its witty exploitation by the author, is a major component of Tzetzes' self-fashioning strategy, which not only ironically alludes to the precarious position of the 'professional intellectual', but dares the reader to engage with the

34 Tzetzes' equilibristic stance is reminiscent of the position of Timarion, the protagonist of the homonymous dialogue, who can probably be considered as the mouthpiece of the 'author'. As remarked by Labuk, 'Gluttons, drunkards and lechers', 71–6, the 'philosophically-minded' Timarion, despite following a Socratic ideal and rejecting all kinds of sophistry, is eventually forced to renounce his ethical and literary principles to cater to the requests of his interlocutor. According to the intriguing interpretation proposed by Labuk, this interlocutor is none other than the literary equivalent of the typical (tyrannical) patron, who, having no interest in the 'philosophical truth' pursued by Timarion, eventually forces the latter to abandon his ideals to the advantage of empty – but remunerative – rhetorical display.

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sophisticated literary game underlying the weaving of an ever-shifting – but always recognizable – authorial voice.

Valeria Flavia Lovato is a Swiss National Science Foundation postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Medieval Literature (SDU), with a project on Isaac Comnenus Porphyrogenitus. Her research also encompasses the reception of Homeric epics in Byzantium and in Renaissance Europe, a topic on which she has published extensively. Her current book projects include an edited volume on Isaac Comnenus and a monograph investigating the interplay between classicizing learning and self-fashioning in John Tzetzes and Eustathios of Thessalonike.

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