

# Theodore Prodromos' *Bion Prasis*: A Reappraisal

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THEODORE PRODROMOS' *Bion Prasis* (Sale of Political and Poetical Lives) could safely be placed on the top-ten list of most undervalued Byzantine texts. To the best of my knowledge this work has never been closely studied and has earned only passing remarks in handbooks of Byzantine literature.<sup>1</sup> It has always been classified as an imitation of Lucian's *Bion prasis*. From a purely formal point of view this is true; Prodromos' text does bear a resemblance to Lucian's work. However, the twelfth-century oeuvre is not a simple imitation, but rather a sequel in the most modern sense of the term. The present paper has a rather modest aim: a general survey of a work which so far has been almost entirely ignored.

The text is preserved in two manuscripts, *Vat.gr.* 305 and *Vat.Ottobon.gr.* 466. The latter, as Giuditta Podestà showed, is the seventeenth-century apograph of the former, a thirteenth-century manuscript.<sup>2</sup> The text has been published only once, at

<sup>1</sup> So for instance K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur*<sup>2</sup> (Munich 1897) 756; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner* II (Munich 1978) 154. English transl. and some discussion: M. J. Kyriakis, "Trial and Tribulations of a Man of Letters in Twelfth Century Constantinople. Theodoros Prodromos and his Adversities," *Δίπτυχα Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν καὶ Μεταβυζαντινῶν Μελετῶν* 4 (1986/7) 58–93. The text was very recently edited by Tommaso Migliorini, *Gli scritti satirici in greco letterario di Teodoro Prodromo: Introduzione, edizione, traduzione e commenti* (diss. Pisa 2010, unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> G. Podestà, "Le satire lucianesche di Teodoro Prodromo," *Aevum* 19 (1945) 240–241. A very thorough description of the older manuscript can be

the beginning of the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> and was not reprinted by Migne in *PG* 133 which contains other texts from *Vat.gr.* 305.

The plot is fairly simple. Zeus and Hermes<sup>4</sup> auction the following celebrities of the ancient world: Homer, Hippocrates, Euripides, Aristophanes, Pomponius, and Demosthenes. Each *bios* is presented by Hermes, but the length varies greatly—thus Homer and Demosthenes are discussed quite extensively while Euripides and Aristophanes are identified by Hermes, according to a well-established tradition, simply as ὁ Τραγικός and ὁ Κωμικός.<sup>5</sup> Each person for sale is introduced and either he or Hermes explains what is his expertise and how he can be useful to the buyer. Traditionally this piece is described as ‘satire’, though I see this rather as a conventional description—it would be difficult, in my view, to say exactly what this text satirizes. According to the *ODB* (III 1846) satire is a “critical treatment in verse or prose, often by way of exaggeration or caricature, of

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found in I. Mercati et P. Franchi de' Cavalieri, *Codices Vaticani graeci* I (Rome 1923) 444.

<sup>3</sup> F. J. G. La Porte-du Theil, “Vente à l’encan de différentes professions. Dialogue par Théodore Prodrome,” *Notices et extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale et autres bibliothèques* 8.2 (1810) 128–150 (cited hereafter as *Bion Prasis* and page number).

<sup>4</sup> Hermes acquired in twelfth-century Byzantium the status of a symbol of literary creativity (P. Roilos, *Amphoterglossia: A Poetics of the Twelfth-Century Medieval Greek Novel* [Washington 2005] 52–53), and is an embodiment of *logos* in *Bion Prasis* (e.g. p.144).

<sup>5</sup> *Bion Prasis* p.141. Manuel II Palaiologos calls Aristophanes ὁ Κωμικός in his letters to Demetrius Kydones (*Ep.* 19.22 Dennis). Similarly, lines from his plays in *Mazaris' Journey to Hades*, the fifteenth-century satire, are identified by the phrase “according to the Comedian”: *Mazaris' Journey to Hades: or Interviews with Dead Men about Certain Officials of the Imperial Court* (Dept. of Classics, SUNY Buffalo 1975) 4, 8, 68. In *Bion prasis* (p.141) Aristophanes is described as γελοιαστήν ... καὶ παίκτην. In the twelfth century these terms could signify also a mime or a jester, see. P. Marciniak, “How to Entertain the Byzantines? Some Remarks on Mimes and Jesters in Byzantium,” in E. Birge Vitz and A. Ozturkmen (eds.), *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in the Eastern Mediterranean* (Turnhout forthcoming).

the foibles of individuals, institutions, or society as a whole.”<sup>6</sup> This is precisely what the *Bion praxis* is not. I propose instead to call it simply a ‘comic dialogue’, which locates it in the tradition of Lucian’s writings.

The longest treatment of the *Sale of Lives* is in Christopher Robinson’s study of the influence of Lucian. His approach, however, was hindered by his commitment to showing Prodro-mos’ dependence on Lucian. In the end this must have influenced his final judgement:

The main difference between Prodro-mos and his model is merely that one type, the philosopher, is replaced by a series of types. Yet it is hardly a real series, for the elements of burlesque are much the same in each case. The same type is repeated, with different labels. As for contemporary allusions, in the strictest sense there are none, though some general reference to Byzantine law, and perhaps to medicine, may be found. Prodro-mos has produced an ingenious jeu d’esprit in which the moral basis necessary for true satire is barely discernible. The fault of the piece is, perhaps, that it apes its model too closely to seem an independent work of art.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Such a definition is widely accepted for different time periods. But it still can be debated “whether satire is a literary genre sui generis, a *Zwischen-gattung*, or just a turn of mind; under what circumstances it is comic or serious; what relations it entertains with such traditional genres as the novel, poetry, or the theater”: J. Weisgerber, “Satire and Irony as Means of Communication,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 10 (1973) 158.

<sup>7</sup> C. Robinson, *Lucian and his Influence in Europe* (London 1979) 69–73, here 72. Robinson’s is also one of very few works which try to paint the general panorama of Lucian’s influence on Byzantine literature. Cf. N. G. Wilson, “Some Observations on the Fortunes of Lucian,” in *Filologia, Papirologia, Storia dei testi. Giornate di studio in onore di Antonio Carlini* (Pisa 2008) 53–61. On the attitude of the Church Fathers towards Lucian see B. Baldwin, “The Church Fathers and Lucian,” in *Roman and Byzantine Papers* (Amsterdam 1989) 349–353. Baldwin briefly discusses also later authors, e.g. Arethas. Lucian’s influence on Byzantine literature deserves more attention than it has received. To the best of my knowledge some of the texts clearly inspired by (‘modeled on’ does not seem correct) Lucian have never been properly studied, for instance Manuel Philes’ poetic paraphrase of Lucian’s *ekphrasis*

Robinson's verdict is harsh and does not do justice to Prodromos' piece. He duly notes that the characters being auctioned are Homer, Euripides, Aristophanes, Hippocrates, Pomponius, and Demosthenes. Yet he fails to notice that these are either the 'canonical' classical authors whose texts form the Byzantine *curriculum studiorum* (Homer, Euripides, Aristophanes) or those regarded as paragons of their respective disciplines (Hippocrates, Demosthenes).<sup>8</sup> What adds to the humour is that the potential buyers are described by Hermes as ἄγροικοί (common/country fellows, perhaps thus implying their lack of education, which explains why they have no idea about these figures who were well known to any educated Byzantine) and ἐπιεικῶς σκαπανεῖς (mere diggers).<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to what Robinson seems to suggest, Prodromos' text does not slavishly ape Lucian's model, or any other classical text—its relations with ancient models are far more complicated. Ingela Nilsson has shown how Gerard Genette's concept of transtextuality can be used to contribute to our understanding of how Byzantine imitation worked.<sup>10</sup> Intertextual categories as described by Genette include five possible relations between the new and old texts: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, and hypertextuality.<sup>11</sup> In a

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on Aetion's painting of the wedding of Alexander and Roxane: E. Miller, *Manuelis Philae Carmina* II (Paris 1857) 336–337; cf. E. Braounou-Pietsch, *Beseelte Bilder. Epigramme des Manuel Philes auf bildliche Darstellungen* (Vienna 2010) 36 n.24.

<sup>8</sup> For a good general survey on classics in the twelfth century see A. Kaldellis, "Classical Scholarship in Twelfth-Century Byzantium," in C. Barber and D. T. Jenkins (eds.), *Medieval Greek Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics* (Leiden/Boston 2009) 1–43.

<sup>9</sup> In another twelfth-century text, *Dramation* by Michael Haplucheir, one of the protagonists is also 'Ignoramus' (ἄγροικος): R. Romano, *La satira bizantina* (Torino 1999) 414–427.

<sup>10</sup> I. Nilsson, "The Same Story, but Another. A Reappraisal of Literary Imitation in Byzantium," in *Imitatio-Aemulatio-Variatio. Akten des internat. wissenschaftl. Symposions zur byzantinischen Sprache und Literatur* (Vienna 2010) 202.

<sup>11</sup> Nilsson, in *Imitatio-Aemulatio-Variatio* 202: "Intertextuality denotes relations

way, an entire text which shows (half jokingly) how the ancient text can be appropriated and used can be seen as a metatextual commentary on the literary tradition as such.

Paratextuality in Prodrimos' piece is visible in two places. The first is obvious: by employing the same title, the Byzantine author refers to his model, Lucian's work. The second however, establishes also a special kind of relation that the Byzantine text has with its ancient predecessor. Lucian's *Bion praxis* starts with Zeus' announcement which begins the sale (1):<sup>12</sup>

σὺ μὲν διατίθει τὰ βάθρα καὶ παρασκεύαζε τὸν τόπον τοῖς ἀφικνουμένοις, σὺ δὲ στήσον ἐξῆς παραγαγῶν τοὺς βίους, ἀλλὰ κοσμήσας πρότερον, ὡς εὐπρόσωποι φανοῦνται καὶ ὅτι πλείστους ἐπάξονται· σὺ δέ, ὦ Ἑρμῆ, κήρυττε καὶ συγκάλει.

Now get those benches straight there, and make the place fit to be seen. Bring up the lots, one of you, and put them in line. Give them a rub up first, though; we must have them looking their best, to attract bidders. Hermes, you can declare the sale-room open, and a welcome to all comers.

Lucian's text ends with Hermes declaring that the sale will continue the next day "when we shall be offering some lots suitable for plain men, artisans, and shopkeepers" (27). Prodrimos takes over from here and his work is effectively this second day of the sale, promised by Hermes.<sup>13</sup> Zeus says at the beginning

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created by quotations and allusions. *Paratextuality* denotes relations established with title or prefaces ... *Metatextuality* refers to relations established by means of commentary or criticism ... *Architextuality* denotes relations created by genre or type of discourse ... Finally, we have *hypertextuality*, the crucial relationship that unites a hypertext with its underlying hypotext."

<sup>12</sup> Text of Harmon, transl. Fowler.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps we have a similar joke (and at the same time an erudite allusion) in *Timarion* which is also influenced by Lucian. The three judges of the Underworld in the Byzantine satire are Ajax, Minos, and the Emperor Theophilus. One wonders why Rhadamanthys was fired from his job? But for a careful reader of Lucian it was, as I suppose, quite obvious: in the *True History* Rhadamanthys was a governor of the Island of the Blessed so he could not at the same time be a judge in the Underworld.

(p.129):<sup>14</sup>

τὸν μὲν τόπον, ὃ Ἑρμῆ, καὶ τὰ βάρη, καὶ τὴν λοιπὴν τοῦ πωλήτρου διασκευὴν χθὲς εὖ ποιοῦντες τετεύχαμεν, καὶ οὐκ ἂν δευτέρως ἡμῖν δεήσει παρασκευῆς. ναὶ μέντοι οὐδὲ τῷ κήρυκί σοι πολλὰ βοᾶν πρὸς ἀνάγκης ἔσεται, καλέσοντι τοὺς ὀνησομένους. ἀπέχρησε γὰρ αὐτοῖς τὸ χθιζὸν ἐπάγγελμα ἀντὶ τοῦ κηρύγματος. καὶ ἤδη συνίασιν ὅτι πολλοί. λοιπὸν, δεῖ τοῦτο, καὶ οὖς ἀποκηρύττομεν βίους ἀνειπεῖν τοῖς ἀγορασταῖς. οἱ μὲν γὰρ πρὸς τὴν χθὲς ἀφειωρακότες ἐπαγγελίαν, ἀγοραίους ὀνήσασθαι βίους συνελήλυθασι, ὡς ἔκ τε τοῦ ζώσματος, καὶ τῶν σανδάλων, καὶ τῆς ἀσβόλης, καὶ τοῦ αὐχμοῦ τεκμήρασθαι ἔπεισιν· ἡμῖν δὲ ποιητικοὶ καὶ πολιτικοὶ τὸ ἀποκηρυχθησόμενον.

Well, Hermes, we arranged the place and the benches and the rest of the auction-room furniture nicely yesterday, and there won't be any need to prepare it again. Indeed, there won't be much need for a proclamation from you, summoning prospective buyers. For yesterday's announcement was enough for them, in place of a proclamation. Many of them are already gathered here. But there is the point that you ought to run over what lives we have on offer for the buyers. For, those who saw yesterday's announcement have come to buy workers' lives, as is clearly proven by the loincloths, sandals, soot and squalor. But we shall be auctioning literary and political figures.

Thus, Prodromos has clearly established his piece as a continuation of Lucian's work and, at the same time, modified the satirist's concept for his own purposes. Prodromos uses the same genre as Lucian, a dialogue, constructing what we can call an architextual relation that leaves little doubt that the primary (but not the sole) hypotext or model was Lucian's piece. What might have been especially appealing for Prodromos is the dramatic potential of this kind of text. Though calling *Bion prasis* a *Lesedrama* seems perhaps a bold step, it must be noted that Herbert Hunger classified a less complex dialogue, *Apodemus Philia* by Prodromos, as such.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, I

<sup>14</sup> Transl. Robinson, *Lucian and his Influence* 69–70.

<sup>15</sup> Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur* 145. It was also described as

would assume that the Byzantine twist comes with the fact that, as I believe, this text was written with the intention to be performed aloud.<sup>16</sup> I would suggest one potential audience for it. There is a possibility that Prodrornos was a teacher—as can be inferred, for instance, from Niketas Eugenianos' *Monodia in Theodorum Prodrorum*.<sup>17</sup> It is conceivable that the work was written for his advanced students who were able to recognize quotations (in various places changed by Prodrornos) and allusions as well as appreciate the jokes connected with their education. There is another text, whose authorship is also ascribed by some to Prodrornos, which is a humorous didactic piece, *Schede tou Myos*. As John-Theophanes Papademetriou noted: “there is no reason why a school exercise cannot be a satirical work of literary merit.”<sup>18</sup> Such a text could have been intended as funny but it could also serve as a didactic text.

*Bion praxis* dwells on the ever-present Byzantine idea of *ὠφέλεια*, usefulness, in this case the usefulness of ancient liter-

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“dialogue dramatique” by du Theil, *PG* 133.1072D.

<sup>16</sup> I follow here a suggestion of Margaret Mullett which seems today even more probable than when it was written: “The most uncompromisingly literary works, it is now accepted, were written for performance in the *theatra* of Constantinople. This viewpoint has been greatly facilitated by the work of social anthropologists and psychologists (as well as oral historians and the students of folk poetry); using this theoretical perspective it begins to look as if Byzantinists should identify as exceptional those texts which were *not* written for performance”: “Writing in Early Mediaeval Byzantium,” in R. McKitterick (ed.), *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe* (Cambridge 1990) 159–160.

<sup>17</sup> See M. J. Kyriakis, “Of Professors and Disciples in Twelfth Century Byzantium,” *Byzantion* 43 (1973) 110.

<sup>18</sup> J.-Th. Papademetriou, “Τὰ Σχέδη τοῦ Μυός: New Sources and Text,” in *Classical Studies presented to Ben Edwin Perry* (Urbana 1969) 214. Prodrornos' authorship was questioned by Konstantin Horna, *Analekten zur byzantinischen Literatur* (Vienna 1905) 12: “Im Parisinus ist zwar Theodoros Prodrornos als Verfasser gennant, aber in dem besseren und älteren Vaticanus ist das Stück autorlos.”

ature.<sup>19</sup> The ancient dramas had an utterly utilitarian function: they were used as lexical repositories.<sup>20</sup> The reason for reading ancient literature is clear in the advice given by a twelfth-century *protoasekretis*, Christophoros Zotros, to his son:<sup>21</sup>

οὐκ αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ ἀναγινώσκειν μετέρχεταιί τις τέκνον μοι φίλιτατον, ἀλλ' ἔνεκά του, τοὺς λόγους τῶν πάλαι σοφῶν διεξέρχεται· καὶ ὁμιλεῖν τεθνεῶσιν οὐκ ἀπαναίνεται· τί δὲ τοῦτο ἐστί; τὸ, τὸν νοῦν μὲν πρὸς νοημάτων τόκον εὐθηκτον σχεῖν· τὴν δὲ γλῶτταν, πρὸς τὴν τῶν νοουμένων ἔκφρασιν, εὖ-στροφον·

No one, my dearest son, approaches reading for its own sake, but there is a reason we study the words of the ancient wise ones and do not reject speaking to dead people. What is the reason? On the one hand, to have one's mind sharp for generating thoughts, on the other to have one's language well-wrought for the expression of thoughts.

Furthermore, the idea that some texts, which we describe as literary, and whose authors were eminent poets, could have been written for didactic purposes was not something strange to the Byzantines, as can be inferred from an epigram ascribed (but without convincing arguments) to Leo the Philosopher:<sup>22</sup>

Ἵμῆρος αὐτοῦ γυμνάσαι γνῶσιν θέλων  
τῶν βατράχων ἔπλασε καὶ μυῶν μύθων  
ἔνθεν παρορμῶν πρὸς μίμησιν τοὺς νέους.

<sup>19</sup> G. Cavallo, *Lire à Byzance* (Paris 2006) 19.

<sup>20</sup> R. Webb, "A Slavish Art? Language and Grammar in Late Byzantine Education and Society," *Dialogos: Hellenic Studies Review* 1 (1994) 90; for late Byzantium see N. Gaul, "Moschopoulos, Lopadiotes, Phrankopoulos (?), Magistros, Staphidakes: Prosopographisches und Methodologisches zur Lexikographie des frühen 14. Jahrhunderts," in E. Trapp and S. Schönauer (eds.), *Lexicologica Byzantina* (Bonn 2008) 163.

<sup>21</sup> C. M. Mazzucchi, "Ambrosianus C 222 inf. (*Graecus* 886): Il codice e il suo autore," *Aevum* 78 (2004) 417.

<sup>22</sup> H. Wölke, *Untersuchungen zur Batrachomyomachie* (Meisenheim am Glan 1978) 34–35.



Homer, when he wanted to practice his skills, created a tale of frogs and mice, thus encouraging the young to imitate.

Another work by Prodrornos, *Katomyomachia*, may well have been written with students of ancient literature in mind: that is why Prodrornos paraphrases the *Iliad*, and uses Aeschylus' *Persians*, a drama read in the schools, as a primary hypotext in the second part, in addition to a plethora of quotations from other texts that formed part of the Byzantine *curriculum studiorum*. In his letter-preface to the readers, Aristoboulos Apostolios, the first modern editor of the *Katomyomachia*, wrote that he hopes this text will prove useful to the young students who are eager to learn.<sup>23</sup> Such a classification of Prodrornos' work might not be an invention of a post-Byzantine scholar: *Katomyomachia* can be found in the sixteenth-century *Paris.gr.suppl.* 1247, which, according to some scholars, could be a copy of an older manuscript containing texts taught in schools, such as the tragedians, Aristophanes, and Homer.

*Bion Prasis* is a very specific example of the use of intertextuality. The persons for sale speak by using, quite often, quotations from their own works. Homer, asked by the potential buyer about his origins (πόθεν ἔφους; καὶ τί σοι τὸ γένος; καὶ τίς ἡ πατρίς;), first refuses to answer a question asked by somebody who is ἀρραψώδητος, unacquainted with rhapsody,<sup>24</sup> and then shows him the proper way of asking, using a quotation from the *Odyssey* (1.170). When he finally answers, he uses not one of his texts but the famous epigram from the *Greek Anthology* (16.298), modifying two words so that it could be used in the first person (p.134):

ἑπτὰ πόλεις μάρνανθ' ἱερὴν διὰ ρίζαν ἐμεῖο,  
Σμύρνα, Χίος, Κολοφών, Ἰθάκη, Πύλος, Ἄργος, Ἀθῆνη.

Seven cities compete about my holy origin: Smyrna, Chios, Colophon, Ithaca, Pylos, Argos, Athens.

<sup>23</sup> H. Hunger, *Der byzantinische Katz-Mäuse-Krieg. Theodore Prodrornos, Katomyomachia* (Graz 1968) 74–77.

<sup>24</sup> See *Lexikon zur byzantinischen Gräzilität* s.v. (“Der Rhapsodie unkundig”).

Similarly, in presenting Demosthenes Hermes uses lines from *De corona*.<sup>25</sup> The intertextual game reaches its peak during the auction of Euripides and Aristophanes, who converse with the buyers, almost exclusively, via verses from their own plays. Aristophanes curses (pp.141–142), using quotations from *Plutus* (1–5, 267, 21) and *Frogs* (479), both of which were widely read in Byzantium and belonged to the so-called Triad. Though the aim is quite different, the discussion of the playwrights with the buyers brings to mind the famous agon between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Euripidean utterances (pp. 142–143) are taken from the plays which belonged to the Euripidean Triad—*Hecuba* (1056 etc.) and *Orestes* (1–3).<sup>26</sup> Such a school choice, so to speak, strengthens the impression that this text had indeed either didactic purposes or was meant for students.

In a way, Prodromos' entire piece represents intertextuality in its most peculiar form, a cento, where lines and phrases taken from one work are used to make a completely new one. And this is yet another type of cento than what is represented by the Homeric centos of the Empress Eudokia (where the author from whom the text is borrowed is well known),<sup>27</sup> the *Christos Paschon*<sup>28</sup> (similarly composed from lines taken from various texts but without acknowledging the sources), and the letters of the monk Iakovos (in prose).<sup>29</sup> Centonic composition

<sup>25</sup> P.148: Hermes quotes almost verbatim from *De corona* 87, 88, etc.

<sup>26</sup> Du Theil (p.143) ascribes two lines to *Electra* (994) and *IT* ("736" = 737). However, in the case of *Electra* the similarity seems so remote that it could be purely incidental. As for *IT* it would be even more difficult to advocate du Theil's case.

<sup>27</sup> For a analysis of the centos from a modern point of view see M. D. Usher, *Homeric Stitchings. The Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia* (Lanham 1998).

<sup>28</sup> See N. Vakonakis, *Das griechische Drama auf dem Weg nach Byzanz. Der euripideische Cento Christos Paschon* (Tübingen 2011).

<sup>29</sup> E. Jeffreys, "Mimesis in an Ecclesiastical Context. The Case of Iakovos Monachos," in *Imitatio-Aemulatio-Variatio* 153–164.

seems to have been an important tool in the twelfth-century writers' arsenal, whose importance and exact significance have not yet been examined well.

The recycling of ancient motifs was not limited to the use of lines taken from a given author but could take more sophisticated forms. When at the beginning of the text Hermes says that he has no idea how to make an announcement to the ἄγροικοι, Zeus encourages him to do the same as he does when they meet with foreign gods—Anubis, Bendis,<sup>30</sup> and the Rhodian Colossus.<sup>31</sup> Prodrornos clearly alludes here to *Juppiter Tragoedus* (8) where the same gods (Anubis and Bendis) are mentioned.<sup>32</sup>

All in all, *Bion praxis*, to use Genette's terminology once again, is an example of transposition—a 'serious parody', i.e. the transformation of a text. As Thomas Schmitz has stated: "As a matter of fact, a high percentage of classical literature can be described as belonging to this category because imitation and surpassing predecessors played such an important role for

<sup>30</sup> The manuscript has τὸν Βένδιν which is either a scribe's mistake (Bendis being a goddess) or Prodrornos' error. The latter is perhaps less plausible since whenever Bendis appears in Byzantine sources (the lexicons of Hesychius, Photios, etc.) she is described as female.

<sup>31</sup> *Bion Praxis* p.129: Οἶδας, ὃ Ἀργειφόντα, τί ποτε ποιεῖν ἐπετρέπης πρὸς τοὺς ἄγροικότερους θεῶν, ὀπηνίκα συνεκκλησιάζειν ἡμῖν ἀνάγκη ἐκείνους, οἷον τὸν Ἄνουβιν, καὶ τὸν Βένδιν καὶ τὸν Ῥόδιον Κολοσσόν.

<sup>32</sup> Such games between the author and his audience seem to have been very much welcome to the Byzantines, as can be inferred from a (later) testimony, Nikephoros Choumnos: οὖν οἷς δὲ μὴ τοῦτ' ἀνάγκη, ἔμοιγε δοκεῖ βέλτιον αὐθις τὸ μεταποιεῖν καὶ ἐξαλλάττειν, καὶ ὡς ὑπεμφαίνειν ὅθεν ἐκπορίζη ... ὠραίζει γὰρ δὴ καὶ τοῦτο καὶ καλλύνει τὸν λόγον, καὶ τοῖς ἀκροαταῖς εὐθὺς ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἡδονὴν ὅτι πλείστην ἐμποιεῖ καὶ τοίνυν ἀκούοντες γνησίως ἅμα καὶ ἀγαπητικῶς προσφύονται τῷ λόγῳ, "So, although there is no need, again the change and alteration seems to me more beautiful, partly in order to indicate where it comes from, partly in order to conceal it ... This adorns and beautifies the speech and gives the listeners a great joy when they find [the quotation]. And therefore, the listeners genuinely and with great love confirm the speech" (J. F. Boissonade, *Anecdota graeca* III [Paris 1831] 363–364).

ancient authors."<sup>33</sup> This holds true also for Byzantine authors.

*Bion praxis* might have been conceived as a didactic/school text, which at the same time was meant to be truly humorous. Only recently have scholars started to analyse what is laughable in Byzantine texts,<sup>34</sup> and they have not always managed to reach similar results. For instance, Iordanis Grigoriadis' conclusions on humour and irony in Zonaras' *Epitome* might seem at times questionable.<sup>35</sup> This too, however, may well point to the fact that how we decipher the humorous message in a text depends heavily on our own sense of humour, since we project our own expectations onto the works from the past. Similarly, Roderich Reinsch and Iakov Liubarskii on whether Anna Komnene displayed some humorous and ironical elements in her work: according to Liubarskii her text is "one-dimensional" and the author herself "devoid of a sense of humour";<sup>36</sup> a different conclusion has been reached by Reinsch.<sup>37</sup>

The question, however, is whether a text that is mostly a

<sup>33</sup> T. A. Schmitz, *Modern Literary Theory and Ancient Texts. An Introduction* (Oxford 2007) 82.

<sup>34</sup> Equally recently the very idea of a Byzantine sense of humour became a topic of serious research; see for instance L. Garland, "'His bald head shone like a full moon...': An Appreciation of the Byzantine Sense of Humour as Reflected in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Historical Sources," *Parergon* N.S. 8 (1990) 1–31, where mostly slapstick humour is described.

<sup>35</sup> I. Grigoriadis, *Linguistic and Literary Studies in the Epitome Historion of John Zonaras* (Thessaloniki 1998) 133–147 ("Some Elements of Irony and Humour in Zonaras' Epitome").

<sup>36</sup> J. Ljubarskij, "How Should a Byzantine Text Be Read?" in E. Jeffreys (ed.), *Rhetoric in Byzantium* (Aldershot 2003) 125: "If we found such wording in Anna Komnene's *Alexiad*, we would have no doubt: the author is absolutely serious and totally devoid of a sense of humour. The numerous citations from Homer and Bible are used by Anna in a direct way in order to elevate and praise her characters. Anna was a great writer but the text of her *Alexiad* is as it were one-dimensional in contrast to Niketas' *History*."

<sup>37</sup> D. R. Reinsch, "Χιούμορ και ειρωνεία στο Βυζάντιο του 12ου αιώνα. Η περίπτωση της Άννας Κομνηνής," unpublished lecture. I would like to thank Prof. Reinsch for showing me his text.

patchwork, made up of quotations from ancient texts, can be funny? My answer is Yes, for Prodrornos adapts and changes the fragments that he took over in order to give them a new meaning. The laughable in the Prodromic text is constructed in many different ways. The ancient authors are usually described maliciously by the potential buyers: Euripides is called “the lamenting one” (and his new job will be to help his owner to bewail his daughter who died untimely),<sup>38</sup> Hippocrates is the sad Ionian who does in fact speak the Ionic dialect, to the amazement of the buyer, and what makes Aristophanes funny is that he curses so much that the irritated buyer turns to Euripides. The dialogue between Aristophanes and the buyer provides an excellent example of how a humorous scene can be constructed using quotations from an ancient work (pp.141–142):

*Hermes:* It is time for others to step down. You two, the Comedian and the Tragedian, come down here. You first, the Comedian. But throw away laughter, your jokes, harshness, and stubbornness. For what serious man would buy a mime as his slave, a joker, a downright rag of the marketplace?

*Aristophanes:* What an unhappy fate, great gods, to be the slave of a fool! A servant may give the best of advice, but if his master does not follow it, the poor slave must inevitably have his share in the disaster.<sup>39</sup>

*Buyer:* And yet you have still not had your share in any of my disasters.

*Aristophanes:* But let me take part in them! From your appearance I just thought that you were a difficult man. And I dare say, by

<sup>38</sup> P.142, κάλλιον γὰρ οἶμαι, τοῦ κλάοντος ἐκπύθεσθαι τούτου. To some extent this corresponds to Psellos’ description of Euripides, “Many a time his apt dramaturgy drove the Athenians to tears”: A. R. Dyck, *Michael Psellos. The Essays on Euripides and George of Pisidia and on Heliodorus and Achilles Tatius* (Vienna 1986) 44–45.

<sup>39</sup> *Plut.* 1–6; transl. Eugene O’Neill, Jr., *The Complete Greek Drama II* (New York 1938). I have purposely used existing translations wherever possible in order to show the centonic nature of the fragment.

heaven, that you're minus your foreskin too!<sup>40</sup>

*Buyer*: But will you be saying such nonsense while taking part in them?

*Aristophanes*: Yes, for you cannot beat me because of my sacred chaplet (*Plut.* 21).

*Buyer*: I'll hang up a halter so that you'll learn not be a runaway slave drunkenly slandering his master.

*Aristophanes*: I shat myself from fear, I shat myself!<sup>41</sup>

*Buyer*: Oh, get lost, you miserable wretch! I think it will be better to interview this moaner over here.

Aristophanes is not much of a help unless one really wants to offend somebody—and this is exactly what the authors of some texts (e.g. the *Comedy of (S)Katablattas*<sup>42</sup> and *Mazaris' Journey to Hades*) did when they derided various people by employing motifs and quotations from Aristophanic comedies. Moreover, I am inclined to think that Aristophanes behaves like a typical Byzantine mime—that is why he is described as a γελοιαστής and παίκτης.

I have chosen one more passage, this time not a centonic one, to illustrate how Prodromos succeeded in making his piece funny. One of the lives sold by Zeus belongs to a Roman lawyer, Pomponius. This is Sextus Pomponius, a legal scholar and lawyer of the second century (the *Digest* preserved fragments of his *Encheridion*).<sup>43</sup> Pomponius speaks Latin, at least at

<sup>40</sup> *Plut.* 269; transl. A. Sommerstein, who notes: “The suggestion is, rather, that Wealth is suffering from adhesion of the foreskin, whose Greek medical name *lipodermia* ... indicates that it was thought of as tantamount to lack of a functioning foreskin”: *Aristophanes Wealth* (Warminster 2001) 153. In Byzantine times it may actually mean ‘circumcised’ and, since circumcision was practiced by the Jews and Muslims, perhaps this is why it is meant here as offensive.

<sup>41</sup> Though not an exact quotation, the line owes much to *Frogs* 479, where Dionysos says “I made a mess. Call the god.”

<sup>42</sup> P. Canivet and N. Oikonomides, “Jean Argyropoulos. La comédie de Katablattas. Invective byzantine du XV<sup>e</sup> s.,” *Δίπτυχα* 3 (1982–1983) 88, list the citations from Aristophanes.

<sup>43</sup> H. Taylor, *Science of Jurisprudence* (New York 1908) 106; bibliography in

the beginning (Hermes explains to the buyer that Pomponius is “not uneducated in Attic Muses” and uses Latin for the sake of brevity).<sup>44</sup> The use of Latin by a person of Roman origin was an obvious choice, but it is worth remembering that Latin terminology was preserved in Byzantine legal texts, and law studies were the discipline where individuals with a working knowledge of Latin could be found (Pomponius himself enumerates various Latin words such as *consensus*, *procuratores*, etc.).<sup>45</sup> Hermes was needed as an interpreter between the lawyer and a buyer, which was undoubtedly true of most of ancient Greeks

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T. Giaro, “Pomponius,” *Der Neue Pauly* 10 (2001) 125. See the exhaustive list of Pomponius’ contributions to the *Digest* in Mommsen and Krueger, *Corpus Iuris Civilis* I 943–945. He is also quoted in the *Basilica*, e.g. 2.1.2 and 15. See also C. Sanfilippo, “Di una singolare sopravvivenza di Pomponio in un’ opera letteraria dell’età bizantina,” *Annali del Seminario Giuridico dell’Università di Catania* N.S. 6–7 (1951–1953) 99–110. Prodromos’ choice is somewhat surprising because Pomponius is not the most famous of the Roman legal authors. But perhaps it did not matter so much whom he chose—Pomponius is here just an embodiment of Roman law.

<sup>44</sup> In all fairness it must be said that Robinson, *Lucian and his Influence* 71, noted as follows: Pomponius “shows an inclination to speak in transliterated Latin, which the buyer either mistakes for Greek or fails to understand altogether. This opens the way for a little mild satire on the language of the legal system, as close to contemporary reference as the piece ever gets.” I am aware of only one other Byzantine literary text from the period in which Latin is used: the ‘linguistic’ poem by John Tzetzes preserved at the end of his *Theogony*, cf. H. Hunger, “Zum Epilog der Theogonie des Johannes Tzetzes,” *BZ* 46 (1953) 302–307, transl. A. P. Kazhdan and A. J. Wharton, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley 1985) 259–260. On the text see G. Moravcsik, “Barbarische Sprachreste in der Theogonie des Johannes Tzetzes,” *Byzantinisch-neugriechische Jahrbücher* 7 (1928/9) 356–357; G. Dagron, “Formes et fonctions du pluralisme linguistique à Byzance (IX<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècle),” *Trav.Mém* 12 (1994) 239–240.

<sup>45</sup> L. Burgmann, “Ἀέξεις ῥωμαϊκάι. Lateinische Wörter in byzantinischen Rechtstexten,” in W. Hörandner and E. Trapp (eds.), *Lexicographica Byzantina* (Vienna 1991) 61–79. See also A. Markopoulos, “Roman Antiquarianism: Aspects of the Roman Past in the Middle Byzantine Period (9<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> Centuries),” in *Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (London 2006) 295–297.

and equally true for the Byzantines in the twelfth century.<sup>46</sup>  
*Bion Prasis* 144–145:

ΑΓΟΡΑΣΤΗΣ: Καὶ τί σε, ὦ Ῥωμαῖε, εἰδέναι φαίημεν;

ΠΟΜΠΩΝΙΟΣ: Λέγε.

ΑΓΟΡΑΣΤΗΣ: Ἄλλ' ἐγὼ εἶπον· σὲ δὲ λοιπὸν ἀποκρινεῖσθαι καιρός.

ΕΡΜΗΣ: Οὐ γὰρ τῆς φωνῆς, ὦ ξένε, συνῆκας, Ἑλλην ὦν. ὁ δέ σοι νόμον εἰδέναι φησίν. Νόμος γὰρ τὸ “λέγε” παρὰ Ῥωμαίοις.

ΑΓΟΡΑΣΤΗΣ: Εὖ γε ποιεῖς, ὦ Λόγιε, τὰ ὑποδύσκολα ταῦτα καὶ δεινῶς βαρβαρικὰ ἐξηγούμενος κάλλιον ἢ ὅλοι Πρόκλοι τοὺς Ἀλκιβιάδας καὶ τοὺς Τιμαίους. πῶς δὲ καὶ καλεῖσθαι τε ἀξιώσομεν, ὦ νομοθέτα;

ΠΟΜΠΩΝΙΟΣ: Πομπώνη νόμηγε.

ΑΓΟΡΑΣΤΗΣ: Φέρε, ὦ ἐξηγητῶν γενναιότατε· ἀποσάφει καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τοῦ Λοξίου.

ΕΡΜΗΣ: Πομπώνιος σοι καλεῖσθαι φησι. Ῥώμης δὲ θυγάτηρ ἢ κλῆσις.

*Buyer:* So, O Roman, what would we say is your specialization?

*Pomponius:* Law (*lege*).

*Buyer:* I've just said. Now it's time for you to answer.

*Hermes:* Since you are Greek, O visitor, you do not understand the language. He's telling you he knows law. That's what *lege* means amongst the Romans.

*Buyer:* You do the right thing, O eloquent one, interpreting these awkward and awfully barbaric things better than all those Prokloses interpret Alkibiadeses and Timaios. How then shall we call you, O law-maker?

*Pomponius:* My name is Pomponius (*Pomponii nomine*)

*Buyer:* Go on, O best of interpreters: elucidate the rest of the mystery.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Individuals (both, as it seems, Byzantines and foreigners) acting as interpreters of Latin were undoubtedly part of Komnenian court in the twelfth century, see. N. Oikonomidès, “L'uniliguisme officiel de Constantinople Byzantine (VII<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> s.),” *Σύμμεικτα* 13 (1999) 19.; Ch. Brand, “An Imperial Translator at the Comnenian Court,” *Byzantinoslavica* 59 (1998) 217–221.

<sup>47</sup> Λοξίας is the epithet of Apollo, and one of its explanations can be “from Apollo's ‘crooked’, i.e. ambiguous, oracles” (LSJ s.v.).



*Hermes*: He says his name is Pomponius. This name is of Roman origin.

The obvious pun is that the buyer misinterprets the ablative of Latin *lex* as the imperative of Greek λέγω. But the joke based on the homophonic similarity seems to be only the first layer. Prodromos seems also to make fun of Latin as a barbaric language. It would be tempting to think that the buyer's opinions concern not so much the ancient Romans and their language but rather contemporary visitors from the West. To the best of my knowledge, the twelfth-century writers, while writing about ancient Latin, did not describe it as either barbaric or mysterious; but in fact, it seems, they did not evaluate it at all. John Zonaras concerning Tertullian simply states that his book was first written in Latin (Ῥωμαϊκῆ διαλέκτῳ) and translated into Greek.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, the argument that Latin is a barbaric language was indeed used in the debate between Michael III and Pope Nicholas I in the ninth century.<sup>49</sup> However, the notion of the 'barbarism' of Latin goes back to time of Libanios and Themistios.<sup>50</sup>

Anthony Kaldellis has noted that while the Byzantines "regarded Latin as their 'ancestral language', in times of tension with Old Rome<sup>51</sup> they could switch codes and deride it by

<sup>48</sup> Zonaras *Epit.hist.* 11.3.3 (III 12 Dindorf). On Zonaras' interests in the Roman past and Latin terms see R. Macrides and P. Magdalino, "The Fourth Kingdom and the Rhetoric of Hellenism," in *The Perception of the Past in Twelfth-Century Europe* (London 1992) 130. Nicetas Choniates in his unfavorable description of the Latins highlights that they are speaking a different language, φωνῆ ἀσύμφωνος Ἑλλησι, by which he may mean vernacular languages (*Hist.* 602.5 van Dieten).

<sup>49</sup> As can be reconstructed from the pope's reply, *Ep.* 86 (dated 865): *In tantam vero furoris abundantiam prorupistis, ut linguae Latinae iniuriam irrogaretis, hanc in epistola vestra barbaram et Scythicam apellantes ad iniuriam eius, qui fecit eam* (PL 119.932A).

<sup>50</sup> A. Vasilikopoulou, "Ἡ πάτριος φωνή," in N. G. Moschonas (ed.), *Ἡ ἐπικοινωνία στο Βυζάντιο* (Athens 1993) 103–104.

<sup>51</sup> And the entire Frankish West, I would suppose.

reviving the attitudes of the sophists of late antiquity toward the impoverished and barbarous language of the West.”<sup>52</sup> The same disdain can be detected, I believe, in Manganeios Prodromos' poem no. 35, in which he speaks of humiliating a “proud, haughty Latin” who was the prince of Antioch.<sup>53</sup> I am not suggesting that we have here an example of some Prodromic anti-Latin agenda, but rather a joke well rooted in both a Byzantine reluctance towards ‘others’ and especially Latin others and a Byzantine rhetorical tradition of opposing New and Old Rome.<sup>54</sup>

This short passage of Prodromos also offers an answer to the question posed by Margaret Alexiou: “can it be that it is Byzantinists, not the Byzantines themselves, who lack a sense of humour?”<sup>55</sup> The editor of the *Bion prasis*, du Theil, was perplexed by the use of *lege* in the wrong case (p.144): “peut-être faut-il lire λέγες ου λέγεμ.” Funnily enough, the editor, as it seems, did not understand or did not appreciate the Byzantine joke. But this seems to be the case with the entire text—scholars decided years ago that *Bion prasis* is not worthy of scholarly attention.

<sup>52</sup> A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge/New York 2007) 68.

<sup>53</sup> E. Miller, *Recueil des historiens des Croisades: Historiens grecs II* (Paris 1881) 305, lines 72–77: “Who has seen a proud, haughty Latin, insolent, huge, bold and reckless, brought down from his conceit and pride and unrestrained boldness to the depths of extreme humility, to an unexpected fall and the ruin of death, as in the case of the crazy Prince of Antioch?” I am grateful to Prof. Elizabeth Jeffreys for providing me both with the bibliographical reference and her unpublished translation.

<sup>54</sup> On jokes about ‘others’ in Byzantine culture see J. Haldon, “Humour and the Everyday in Byzantium,” in G. Hallsal (ed.), *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge 2002) 48–72 (published also as “Laughing All The Way to Byzantium: Humour and the Everyday in the Eastern Roman World,” *Acta Byzantina Fennica* N.S. 1 [2002] 27–58).

<sup>55</sup> M. Alexiou, “The Poverty of Ecriture and the Craft of Writing: Towards a Reappraisal of the Prodromic Poems,” *BMGS* 10 (1986) 31.

Prodromos' text ends with a riddle (p.150). Zeus, having closed the auction, says that there is one life which will be auctioned later, together with "ordinary lives" (τοῖς ἀγοραίοις βίοις συνεμποληθησόμενον).<sup>56</sup> The character to be auctioned is described as effeminate, perfumed, and called Swan because of his music. Does Prodromos speak about an ancient poet or a contemporary character—perhaps this description was meant as a final test for his students? Several ancient poets were called Swan—Pindar, Anakreon, Alkaios. However, none of them fits the Prodromic description without problems.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, the mystery remains unsolved given our inability to read all the intertextual hints of the Byzantines.

Although Prodromos unquestionably uses Lucian's text, he does so in a very creative way. Whereas prices of the philosophers' lives in Lucian's work vary without any discernible pattern, the prices in Prodromos are very carefully graduated, starting with Homer, worth five talents (the two last *bioi*, Pomponius and Demosthenes, are each sold for one and a half minai). Whether we have here an attempt at a quantitative, so to speak, evaluation of the importance of various writers in Byzantium is difficult to say, but it was certainly done on purpose. Obviously the fact that Homer is not only the most expensive but also is given more space than others testifies to the popularity of the Poet in Byzantium and especially in the twelfth century.<sup>58</sup> Homer's popularity during the Komnenian

<sup>56</sup> This is a clear allusion to the last sentence of Lucian's text, where Hermes says (27): ὑμᾶς δὲ εἰς αὐρίον παρακαλοῦμεν· ἀποκηρύξειν γὰρ τοὺς ἰδιώτας καὶ βαναύσους καὶ ἀγοραίους βίους μέλλομεν.

<sup>57</sup> It was suggested to me by Eric Cullhed that Gregory of Nazianzus calls himself a swan in his poem *De seipso*, 2.1.39.55 (PG 37.1333). The MS. of *Bion praxis* however reads κύκκνος, which is either a scribe's mistake or a conscious allusion to somebody's stuttering (for a similar word-play see *Timarion* 41). What is more, most likely Prodromos himself stuttered: *in eos qui ob paupertatem providentiae conviciantur*, PG 133.1297–1298 (I owe this citation to Prof. Wolfram Hörandner and Nikolaos Zagklas).

<sup>58</sup> Generally on Homer in Byzantium see R. Browning, "Homer in Byzantium," *Viator* 6 (1975) 15–33; on Homer in the twelfth century, A.

period is well attested. Tzetzes wrote his allegorical commentaries on Homer for the wife of Manuel I, Berta-Irene von Sulzbach, whom he calls “most Homeric” (ὀμηρικωτάτη, p.1 Boissonade). What is even more interesting, Balsamon, in his commentary on the anti-theatre canons of the council in Trullo of 692, mentions among other performances held at the Komnenian court something called “Achilleus,” which could have been public recitations (performances?) of parts of the *Iliad*.<sup>59</sup> Such an extensive discussion of Homer in *Bion prasis* must be then the reflection of contemporary interest in Homeric works and shows that Prodrōmos’ text is well rooted in its times.

To sum up, I think that *Bion prasis* is a ‘centonic’ comic dialogue written with Prodrōmos’ own students in mind. Of course one cannot exclude the possibility that this text was presented in a *theatron* to which Prodrōmos’ peers and friends belonged (like the one where, I believe, *The Executioner or the Doctor* and *Amarantos* might have been read).<sup>60</sup> But even if this was so, it would not change its main premise—to joke about classical education and discuss its usefulness. Perhaps *Bion Prasis* should be also seen as a part of the same discussion of the use of the ancient tradition to which also belongs, I believe, the text by Nikolaos Kataphloron who, perhaps (self)-ironically, accused the rhetors of Constantinople of being grave-diggers who steal the ideas of the dead (i.e. ancient writers) and shamelessly perform them in the *theatra* (καὶ περὶ μέσα τὰ θέατρα τὰ νυκτὸς θεατρίζουσι κλέμματα).<sup>61</sup> Therefore, contrary to what Robin-

<sup>59</sup> Vasilikopoulou-Ioannidou, *Ἡ Αναγέννησις τῶν γραμμάτων κατὰ τὸν ἸΒ αἰῶνα καὶ ὁ Ὅμηρος* (Athens 1971).

<sup>59</sup> PG 137.693A–B. On the *homeristai* in Byzantium see E. Dauterman Maguire and H. Maguire, *Other Icons. Art and Power in Byzantine Secular Culture* (Princeton 2007) 40; and Marciniak, in *Medieval and Early Modern Performance*.

<sup>60</sup> Edited in Romano, *La satira bizantina* 310–325, and T. Migliorini, “Teodoro Prodrōmo, *Amaranto*,” *Medioevo greco* 7 (2007) 183–247, respectively. *The Executioner* offers clear references to the audience listening to the text (312, 316).

<sup>61</sup> M. Loukaki, “Τυμβωρῶχοι καὶ σκυλευτῆς νεκρῶν: Οἱ ἀπόψεις του Νικολάου Καταφλώρον για τη ρητορική και τοὺς ρήτορες στην Κωνσταν-

son suggested, Prodromos' text tackles the issues important for contemporary Byzantines—the appropriation and use of classical models. *Bion praxis* very clearly shows *how* to use the knowledge of Attic and of ancient texts that students required—be it as a doctor, in court, or for lamenting loved ones. Cum 'satirical' grano salis of course.<sup>62</sup>

September, 2012

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τινούπολη του 12ου αιώνα,” *Symmeikta* 14 (2001) 154.

<sup>62</sup> The work on this text was possible owing to a Summer Fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks (2010) and a short-term fellowship granted by the Institute of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, University of Vienna. This text is part of a larger project funded by the National Science Centre of Poland, “The Dance in the role of Thersites – Byzantine satire between the 11th and 15th centuries.” I am indebted to Margaret Mullett, Ingela Nilsson, Katarzyna Warcaba, and Janek Kucharski who read and offered comments. My special thanks go to Eric Cullhed whose unpublished translation I have consulted. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions. All mistakes are of course my own.