

Uncovering Aristotle's Debt to Protagoras (80A30 D.-K./D32 L.-M.)

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THIS PAPER sets out to reveal a contribution made by the fifth-century sophist Protagoras to the field of literary scholarship, as described by Aristotle. A papyrus commentary preserved in *P.Oxy.* II 221 (second century A.D.) shows Protagoras commenting with approval on the narrative structure of a passage in *Iliad* 21. I will argue that Aristotle played a role in reporting the sophist's views on literary criticism and will suggest that he may have incorporated them in his own scholarship.

It is widely acknowledged that a survey of the earliest forms of literary criticism cannot overlook the contribution of Protagoras of Abdera.¹ Together with Prodicus of Ceos, he

¹ See G. Lanata, *Poetica pre-Platonica. Testimonianze e frammenti* (Florence 1963) 186–189; R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford 1968) 32–33, 37–39; A. Brancacci, “Protagora e la critica letteraria,” in M. S. Funghi (ed.), *ΟΛΟΙ ΔΙΖΗΣΙΟΣ. Le vie della ricerca. Studi in onore di Francesco Adorno* (Florence 1996) 109–119; A. Ford, “Sophists without Rhetoric: The Arts of Speech in Fifth-Century Athens,” in Y. L. Too (ed.), *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden 2001) 85–110, at 97–103; R. Hunter, *Critical Moments in Classical Literature. Studies in the Ancient View of Literature and its Uses* (Cambridge 2009) 22 (who, however, devotes little space to Protagoras himself and is more interested in the homonymous Platonic dialogue); M. Corradi, *Protagora tra filologia e filosofia. Le testimonianze di Aristotele* (Pisa 2012) 158–166; A. Rademaker, “The Most Correct Account: Protagoras on Language,” in J. van Ophuijsen et al. (eds.), *Protagoras of Abdera: The Man, His Measure* (Leiden 2013) 87–111, at 100–103; and P. Woodruff, “Why Did Protagoras Use Poetry in Education?” in O. Pettersson et al. (eds.), *Plato's Protagoras. Essays on the Confrontation of Philosophy and Sophistry* (Cham 2017) 213–227, at 214–216 and 218–222. For an over-

pioneered ancient scholarship on Greek language and literature. Aristotle certainly had a hand in the transmission of such material. In this paper I propose that he was not a mere passive witness, but that he reworked some Protagorean ideas about literature in his own work on Homer.

The scope of Protagoras' literary interests extended to the study of narrative structure. *P.Oxy.* 221, col. xii.19–25, an exceptionally learned papyrus commentary to *Iliad* 21, possibly by the grammarian Ammonius,² is evidence that he engaged critically with the famous Iliadic “Theomachy,” an episode already disputed in antiquity (see e.g. Plato *Resp.* 391B). Protagoras reportedly observed that the fight between Achilles and the river Scamander worked as a “transitional scene” whose main function was to separate the Trojans' slaughter from the

view of Homeric students in the time of the Sophists see N. J. Richardson, “Homeric Professors in the Age of the Sophists,” *PCPhS* 21 (1975) 65–81; F. M. Pontani, *Sguardi su Ulisse. La tradizione esegetica greca all'Odissea* (Rome 2005) 27–33; F. Montanari, “The Idea of History of Literature. The Beginnings in Ancient Greek Culture,” in J. Grethlein et al. (eds.), *Griechische Literaturgeschichtsschreibung. Traditionen, Probleme und Konzepte* (Berlin 2017) 153–169, at 157–163.

² I take Ammonius (second century B.C.) to be the author of this commentary, even if doubts about this are yet to be dispelled. The problem lies in the disputed significance of the text placed in between two columns at right angles to the body of the text: Ἀμμώνιος Ἀμμωνίου γραμματικὸς ἐσημειώσαμην. It could mean either that Ammonius wrote (or had someone copy) and signed his commentary, or that this Ammonius only emended the copy of the text and/or added critical signs: see K. McNamee, *Annotations in Greek and Latin Texts from Egypt* (Oxford 2007) 286, who is more inclined to the first option. Regardless of its authorship, *P.Oxy.* 221 is one of the earliest surviving pieces of evidence for ancient Homeric commentaries and possibly the most learned. See discussion in J. Lundon, “Homeric Commentaries on Papyrus. A Survey,” in S. Matthaios et al. (eds.), *Ancient Scholarship and Grammar: Archetypes, Concepts and Contexts* (Berlin 2011) 159–179, at 174–176, and F. Schironi, “Greek Commentaries,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 19 (2012) 399–441, at 420–424. On the grammarian Ammonius see L. Pagani, “Ammonius [3] Ammonii filius,” in *Lexicon of Greek Grammarians of Antiquity* (http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/24519278_Ammonius_3_Ammonii_filius).

battle of the gods, and perhaps also to enhance Achilles' prominence. This passage is well worth dwelling on for its attempt to analyze *in nuce* the narrative structure of poetry:

Protag. 80 A 30 D.-K./D32 L.-M. = Ammon. schol. Hom. *Il.* 21.240 (V 101.19–25 Erbse) = *P.Oxy.* 221 col. xii.20 = *CPF* I.1*** 88 T 2.

Πρωταγόρας φησ[ιν πρὸς τὸ διαλαβεῖν τὴν / μάχην τὸ ἐ[πεισό]διον γεγονέναι τὸ ἐξῆς τῆς Ξάν[θου καὶ] Ἰθνητοῦ μάχης ἴν' / εἰς τὴν θεο[μαχία]ν μεταβῆ, τάχα δὲ / ἴνα καὶ τὸν [Ἀχιλ]λέ[α] ἀύξῃση...

Protagoras says that the following scene, namely the battle between Xanthus and a mortal, takes place with a view to dividing up the battle in order to make a transition to the battle of the gods, and possibly also to magnify Achilles...

Protagoras argues that Scamander's opposition to Achilles works as a narrative device: most of Book 20 and the first third of Book 21 revolve around Achilles' chasing and slaying of the Trojans. The intervention of the divine river (21.136 ff.), who reacts to the killing of his fellow Trojans and attacks Achilles with great waves, gives us a narrative break from Achilles' wild fury.³ This scene not only serves to retain the audience's attention, it is also instrumental to the plot. That Achilles is forced to abort his *aristeia* in the face of the river Scamander leads to the involvement of Hephaestus against the river, and thus of the other gods who act severally on behalf of the Trojans or the Greeks. The fighting moves from the human to the divine plane, providing further narrative variety. Scholars have wondered whether Protagoras is responsible for the final statement that this narrative structure might also heighten the importance of Achilles.⁴ If his, these words would show that in Protagoras'

³ In a rather similar way, the scholar Zenodorus identified a narrative rule, according to which there could not be two divine scenes in the *Iliad* which directly follow each other, and instead the human and divine planes should alternate: see R. Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic at Work. Terms and Concepts of Literary Criticism in Greek Scholia* (Cambridge 2009) 279–281.

⁴ For example: Lanata, *Poetica pre-Platonica* 187; K. Nickau, "Epeisodion

time there was discussion about the prominence of Homeric heroes.⁵ This accords with Plato's *Hippias Minor*, where the eponymous sophist claims that the poet wanted to extol Achilles in the *Iliad* as an example of virtue and Socrates takes issue with this literary judgment. Aristotle also ascribes prominence to Achilles and makes him an instance of μεγαλοψυχία, "greatness of spirit" (*An.post.* 97b15–25).

As far as one can judge, the content of the assertions in the papyrus may well be Protagorean. That Plato at *Protagoras* 340A equates Socrates with the Scamander attacked by Achilles/Protagoras serves as indirect evidence that the sophist may have had a connection with this very passage of the *Iliad*.⁶ Furthermore, according to Plato, Protagoras was an expert in "correctness of diction" (ὀρθόπεια) and evaluated poetic compositions according to this standard (340B–348A).⁷ Aristotle, the main source after Plato for Protagoras' contribution to literary

und Episode. Zu einem Begriff der aristotelischen Poetik," *MusHelv* 23 (1966) 155–171, at 159 n.18. E. Howald, *Die Anfänge der literarischen Kritik bei den Griechen* (diss. Zürich 1910) 28 n.3, is an isolated voice in considering the last words about Achilles spurious. A. Capra, "Protagoras' Achilles: Homeric Allusion as a Satirical Weapon (Pl. *Prt.* 340A)," *CP* 100 (2005) 274–277, at 276 n.16, suggests that, given Plato's equation of Protagoras with a godless Achilles facing the Scamander, it may well be that Protagoras in fact had a preference for Achilles and thus that those last words are ascribable to him.

⁵ For this important observation see Corradi, *Protagora tra filologia e filosofia* 162–163.

⁶ This Platonic allusion was first detected by B. Manuwald, *Platon. Protagoras. Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Göttingen 1999) 318, and further discussed by Capra, *CP* 100 (2005) 274–277.

⁷ This passage has been widely discussed and several divergent interpretations have been put forward. Plato's recreation of Protagoras' analysis must have been plausible to be effective: see I. Andolfi, "Una vetrina esegetica per tre sofisti. Il carme di Simonide nel Protagora di Platone," *SemRom* 3 (2014) 117–149, for a discussion of Protagoras' fragments in relation to the Platonic passage. For Protagoras' ὀρθόπεια in Plato see further *Phdr.* 267B–C = 80 A 26 D.–K. = D22 L.–M. and *Cra.* 391C = 24 D.–K. = D21 L.–M.

criticism, provides decisive support to Plato's assertions.⁸ Particularly relevant to *P.Oxy.* 221 is Aristotle's report that Protagoras found fault with the imperative mode of speech of the *Iliad's* opening line (*Poet.* 1456b15–18 = 80 A 29 D.-K. = D25 L.-M.): the bard should pray to the Muse but instead gives her an order. Although Aristotle is generally critical of Protagoras' views, nevertheless he emphasizes the sophist's philological interests, in particular in the modes of utterance studied today by pragmatics.

However, the phrasing of the commentary clearly shows that it follows later conventions of literary criticism. Especially striking is the use of τὸ ἐπεισόδιον to refer to specific scenes in epic, as was done in drama, which smacks of Aristotelian terminology.⁹ Even if the term ἐπεισόδιον was already in use in

⁸ Protagoras distinguished different genders of nouns (*Rh.* 1407b7–8 = 80 A 27 D.-K. = D23 L.-M.) and applied them to his analysis of the proem of the *Iliad* (*Soph.el.* 173b17–22 = 28 D.-K. = D24 L.-M.). The sophist claimed that Homer had erred in construing μῆνις “wrath” and πῆληξ “helmet” as feminine (they were masculine, ὁ μῆνις and ὁ πῆληξ); for a different interpretation see J. Lougovaya and R. Ast, “Menis and Pelex. Protagoras on Solecism,” *CQ* 54 (2004) 274–277. Scholars have detected in Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between endings and genders (*Poet.* 1458a8–17) similarities to Protagoras' Homeric criticism (Lougovaya and Ast 276 n.6; Corradi, *Protagora tra filologia e filosofia* 152–153).

⁹ The translation of ἐπεισόδιον in the Aristotle passage, and consequently in Protagoras' fragment, varies in modern scholarship. The thorough discussion by Nickau, *MusHelv* 23 (1966) 155–171, has shown that it stands for “scenes” and not for “secondary episodes.” See also the more recent discussion by A. Köhnken, “‘Logos’ and ‘episodion’ in Aristotle's *Poetics*,” in E. K. Emilsson et al. (eds.), *Paradeigmata. Studies in Honour of Øvind Andersen* (Athens 2014) 61–65. Similarly, the verb διαλαμβάνω has been variously glossed, often as “to diversify,” but (following Nickau 159 and the first editors) it is best translated “to divide (the action).” Cf. also A. Capizzi, *Protagora. Le testimonianze e i frammenti*² (Florence 1955) 203; Lanata, *Poetica pre-Platonica* 189; and R. Janko, *Aristotle Poetics I. With the Tractatus Coislinianus, A Hypothetical Reconstruction of Poetics II, and the Fragments of the On Poets* (Indianapolis 1987) 140–141. On the influence of Aristotle's scholarship on the scholia see, for example, N. J. Richardson, “Literary Criticism in the Exegetical Scholia to the *Iliad*: A Sketch,” *CQ* 30 (1980) 265–287, at 266,

fifth-century comedy (Crat. fr.208.2 K.-A.; Metag. fr.15 K.-A.), it was Aristotle who applied it to epic poetry as well.¹⁰ Because epic and drama are both narrative genres, according to Aristotle they share a common technique of plot construction. In particular, the *Poetics* echoes the concept enunciated by Protagoras concerning the function of scenes in articulating epic narrative (1459a36: ἄλλοις ἐπεισοδίοις διαλαμβάνει τὴν ποίησιν, “with other scenes [the poet] divides up the poem”). Besides the application of ἐπεισόδιον to epic, the verb Aristotle uses to describe plot articulation, again, is διαλαμβάνω. In this passage, then, he comments on epic plot construction and praises Homer for coherently devising a narrative with a well-defined outline that encompasses various scenes. Other poems like the *Cypria* and the *Little Iliad* do not attain comparable literary excellence because their scope is not as narrow and their narrative comprises an unstructured succession of episodes. Finally, one of the closing words of the papyrus commentary, ἀύξηση, points to the rhetorical device of αὕξησης, “amplification,” which Aristotle describes in the *Rhetoric* (1368a25) as a form of praise mostly employed in epideictic speeches. Its use is pervasive in the exegetical scholia as well, with reference to a wide array of literary devices that add to the importance of a character or of a scene.¹¹

A final item of interest in the words ascribed to Protagoras by *P.Oxy.* 221 concerns the verb μεταβαίνω. As with αὕξησης, the Homeric scholia regularly use this verb and its cognate μετάβασις to refer to narrative “transitions” from one episode/

268, 270, 271–273, 281.

¹⁰ Relevant Aristotelian passages are: *Poet.* 1455b1, b15; 1459b22–31. See S. Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle. Translation and Commentary*² (London 1998) 257–266, and Janko, *Aristotle Poetics* 140–141, 207. In consequence, ancient Homeric scholia employ ἐπεισόδιον as well: schol. Hom. 6.37–65 (II 137 Erbse), 10.38–39 (III 11), 13.521a (III 501), 14.153b (III 592), 15.219 (IV 60), 23.63b (V 377).

¹¹ See Richardson, *CQ* 30 (1980) 276, and Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic at Work* 290–291.

scene/topic to another.¹² Although the word already recurs in the *Poetics*, it is mainly employed there to denote “transformation.”¹³ Therefore, the use of words like ἀύξησης and μεταβή in our passage betrays a later layer of textual reworking that draws on technical vocabulary characteristic of the scholia. This does not come as a surprise, as the papyrus text shows numerous and significant similarities with the so-called exegetical scholia “both in wording and in substance.”¹⁴ To sum up, the chances that we are reading Protagoras’ own words are very small indeed.

I suggest that the unknown author of this commentary has learned of Protagoras’ views from Aristotle. This proposal is supported by the lexical parallels analyzed above. In addition, the fact that Aristotle is cited by the commentary a few lines below (col. xiv.27–32) lends further plausibility to this hypothesis. We learn that, while commenting on one of the most problematic scenes of *Iliad* 21—Poseidon and Athena’s intervention in Achilles’ favor with encouraging words and without taking action—Aristotle defended the poet by arguing that Hephaestus was in charge of defeating Scamander (in effect, a battle of fire against water). In all likelihood, he did so in his lost *Homeric Problems*.¹⁵ Arguably, the author of our commentary (“Ammonius”) may have found Protagoras’ remark on *Iliad* 21 when reading Aristotle’s work. This reconstruction explains the presence of two linguistic layers, one Aristotelian and one grammatical.

¹² See the fundamental discussion in Nünlist, *The Ancient Critic at Work* 61–64, 83–101.

¹³ See especially 1449a37, 1452a16, and 1455b27.

¹⁴ Lundon, in *Ancient Scholarship and Grammar* 175; already noted by the first editors, B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* II (London 1898) 56. This is especially visible in connection with lines 165–499 of Book 21 in the Geneva scholia (Lundon 176).

¹⁵ This passage is analyzed at length by R. Mayhew, *Aristotle’s Lost Homeric Problems: Textual Studies* (Oxford 2019) 153–157, who also reviews the sometimes divergent textual choices of modern editors.

I would make a further suggestion in this connection. As noted above, Protagoras' pioneering literary interests set the course for future developments in what we would call today philology and narratology. Considering the entirety of the ancient evidence about his literary engagements, especially with the Homeric text, it is remarkable that Aristotle is the only accurate source we appear to have. Even though other authors, both early (like Plato) and late (like Diogenes Laertius), bear witness to Protagoras' thoughts on the correct use of language, Aristotle alone shows how Protagoras had put it into practice in connection with the Homeric text. In the two cases quoted above, he did not agree with the sophist's criticism of Homer but rather defended the poet.¹⁶ By contrast, in the passage under analysis, Protagoras appreciated Homer's narrative craft and reviewed it positively, in line with Aristotelian tastes. Arguably, Aristotle may have internalized some of Protagoras' literary intuitions, such as his view on episodic structure in epic poetry. This is not to say that Protagoras invented the notion of a narrative episode, but that his antecedent work may have stimulated and helped Aristotle to systematize his views on the art of poetic composition. If Aristotle measured himself against Protagoras' ethical relativism, it is not unreasonable to assume that he also gave consideration to his literary theories. Furthermore, my analysis of *P.Oxy.* 221, if correct, proves that Aristotle was hardly a passive witness to Protagoras' scholarship. Instead, he adopted what he thought suitable, as his treatment of episodes in Homeric epic shows. In the field of Homeric and poetic exegesis, Protagoras casts a long shadow, assuredly longer than the one commonly assumed.

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¹⁶ Mayhew, *Aristotle's Lost Homeric Problems* 155.