

FROM CATO TO PLATO AND BACK AGAIN: FRIENDSHIP AND PATRONAGE IN JOHN TZETZES' *LETTERS* AND *CHILIADES*

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Summary: In many passages of his works, John Tzetzes likens himself to different figures from the Greek and Roman past in order to emphasise relevant features of his authorial persona. This strategy has been the subject of recent studies, which underscore the self-advertising agenda underlying Tzetzes' constant reference to – and identification with – Greek and Roman models. Drawing on and going beyond this strand of literature, this paper pursues two main goals. First, it aims to situate Tzetzes' references to these figures from the past within the broader sociocultural dynamics informing his self-fashioning strategy. To this end, it will focus on passages of his works dealing with friendship and patronage, two social practices that were crucial to any Byzantine writer. Second, the paper seeks to show that Tzetzes uses these figures to reflect upon his condition as a commissioned writer, skilfully employing them to create an authorial narrative that both spells out and plays with the constraints and contradictions stemming from his professional status.

INTRODUCTION¹

If someone wants to know what Cato looked like,
he should look at me: I am the living portrait of Cato

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and Palamedes, the wise son of Nauplius.

(...)

Cato differed from me in that he was not easily angered,
provided that the historical accounts do not lie.

Indeed, temperaments such as ours are normally warm and
irascible.²

This extract from the *Chiliades* perfectly exemplifies one of John Tzetzes' main self-fashioning techniques. In countless passages of his works, this prominent scholar and literatus of twelfth-century Byzantium likens himself to different figures from the Greek and Roman past in order to emphasise relevant features of his authorial persona. Several recent studies have underlined the self-advertising agenda behind Tzetzes' constant reference to – and identification with – Greek and Roman models. Building on the findings of these studies, this paper pursues two main goals. First, it aims to situate Tzetzes' references to these ancient figures within the broader sociocultural context informing his self-fashioning strategy. To this end, it will focus on passages of his works dealing with friendship and patronage, two social practices that were crucial to any Byzantine writer, especially in Komnenian Byzantium. Second, the paper seeks to show that Tzetzes uses these figures to reflect upon his condition as a commissioned writer, skilfully employing them to create an authorial narrative that both spells out *and* plays with the constraints and contradictions stemming from his professional status.

My analysis will be guided primarily by the recent work by Floris Bernard and Ingela Nilsson. Bernard considers authorship as a social act “ridden with moral tensions that authors attempted to resolve.”³ While his study focuses exclusively on the eleventh century, a moment when literati had to struggle both to realise and downplay their social ambitions, his framework also applies to twelfth-century intellectuals and to Tzetzes in particular. Indeed, Bernard's remark that (seemingly) contradictory conceptions of authorship often coexisted within a single author's corpus – if not within individual texts – provides an ideal key to

2 Tzetz. *Chil.* 3 hist. 70.173–75; 185–87. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

3 Bernard 2014b: 41.

interpreting Tzetzes' authorial persona, whose multifaceted-ness has not yet been fully explored. The present paper also engages with Nilsson's recent exploration of Constantine Manasses' authorial voice.⁴ Not only does her study further elaborate upon the "flexibility" of Byzantine authorial voices, which were fluid but, at the same time, recognisable across different works and occasions, but she also focuses on Manasses' use of "fictional markers" as integral to his self-fashioning strategy. These fictional markers mainly consist of citations from – or allusions to – ancient sources and figures, be they Greek, Roman or Biblical. Interestingly, according to Nilsson, the constant and deliberate intermingling of fiction and reality in "the ambiguous Byzantine text" prevents readers from taking "one single interpretation, as demanded by philological practices."⁵

Taking my cue from these observations, I propose a reassessment of Tzetzes' authorial self-fashioning, with a special focus on his references to prominent ancient figures. I argue that, while the presence of these fictional markers is constant throughout Tzetzes' works, they emerge especially when it comes to discussions of friendship and patronage. In the competitive literary environment of Komnenian Byzantium, "the navigation of sponsorships and friendships was central for a successful career"⁶ and it is therefore quite natural that these two social practices play a crucial role in contemporary discourses of authorship. At the same time, however, the often-asymmetric nature of the relationships Byzantine literati had with their friends and patrons could sharpen the very moral tensions and ostensible contradictions pointed out by Bernard. This is especially evident in Tzetzes' self-fashioning strategy: his references to and identification with Greek and Roman "heroes" allow him both to express these tensions and to come to terms with them. Furthermore, the constant blend of past and present, fact and fiction, prevents the reader from extracting a consistent picture of Tzetzes' authorial persona, which is characterised by a deliberate – and artfully staged – coexistence of opposites.

4 See Nilsson 2020: *passim*.

5 Nilsson 2020: 22.

6 Nilsson 2020: 14.

By considering the polyphony of Tzetzes' authorial voice as an essential component of his self-representation, the present paper complements existing research on the scholar's engagement with figures from the Greek and Roman past. As I hope to show, former studies have often failed to capture the complex dynamics informing Tzetzes' strategy of self-fashioning and have seen single-minded self-promotion⁷ or self-marketing⁸ as the main (or only) force behind Tzetzes' authorial persona.⁹ A thorough investigation of Tzetzes' use of fictional markers in his discussions of friendship and patronage will lead to a better understanding of the contrasting forces informing his self-presentation. Throughout my analysis, I will not only be mindful of Nilsson's warning against trying to find a "single interpretation" for Byzantine texts, but I will also suggest that, in some cases at least, ambiguity is the very effect that Tzetzes tries to produce. Moreover, in addition to proposing a more nuanced picture of Tzetzes' authorial tactics, the present study will also provide new insights into Byzantine discourse on friendship as well as on the dynamics of Komnenian patronage, thus contributing to scholarship on Byzantine culture and society at large.

1. A LOYAL FRIEND

In the self-representations disseminated throughout his writings, Tzetzes likes to fashion himself as the living portrait of Palamedes and Cato the Elder.¹⁰ If the former deserves a prominent place because of his

7 On Tzetzes' identification with Cato as an instrument for self-promotion, see Xenophonotos 2014. On the importance of Cato for Tzetzes' authorial self, see Pizzone 2018, who, while being closer to the approach proposed in this paper, focuses on a different set of passages.

8 On the interpretation of Tzetzes' self-fashioning as a consistent strategy of self-marketing, see, most recently, Savio 2020: passim and especially 35-39, which focus especially on Plato and Simonides. While briefly considering the potential ambiguity of Tzetzes' identification with Plato, Savio does not explore this possibility further.

9 For a nuanced analysis of Tzetzes' identification with a Greek hero, see Pizzone (forthcoming a).

10 Apart from the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, see also Tzetz. *All. Il.* prol. 724-39, now available in the English translation by Goldwyn & Kokkini 2015: 54-

intellectual excellence, the latter is especially (but not exclusively) appreciated for his incorruptibility and frugality. Cato's resistance to any form of bribery features also in a short but meaningful epistle (*Letter 73*) that Tzetzes addresses to John Basilakes.¹¹ This letter, which deals explicitly with friendship and gift-giving, will be the main focus of the present section and deserves to be quoted in some detail. From the context, we gather that Basilakes had recently sent his correspondent some kind of gift, which Tzetzes appreciates but refuses. Referring to the exemplary behaviour of both Cato and Epameinondas, Tzetzes declares that his affection is completely impartial and cannot be bought.

(...) I am deeply grieved that you pay no heed to my injunctions, but instead you keep sending me gifts. May God, who himself is Truth, be witness to my words: I do not know how others consider gifts; as far as I am concerned, however, even if I would perhaps not go as far as to equate them to death, I certainly regard them as a grievous burden and a flesh-eating plague. The only thing I need is sincere affection, which I know you possess in great quantity. Let others care about gifts! For this reason, even if I am extremely thankful to your Lordship for the gifts you sent me, I will keep none of them. If I did not do this, you would never abide by my requests of your own accord. O saintly lord, know that Tzetzes is a faithful and thoroughly impartial friend, who, following the example of Epameinondas, Cato and every other such hero of the past, hates gifts. As they declared, Tzetzes, too, declares: "You will not persuade me to love someone as a friend by paying me" and "If you want me as a slave, then buy me off with gifts, but if you are looking for a friend, keep your gifts for yourself or use them to buy off those who are not free." The friendship I cultivate is pure and is therefore completely disinterested and utterly incorruptible.¹²

57. On the reasons behind Tzetzes' identification with Palamedes, see Lovato 2017a: 142-48.

11 According to Kazhdan (ODB, s.v. *Basilakes, John*) Basilakes was a nephew of Tzetzes. For a more cautious interpretation, see Grünbart 1996: 211. On the term ἀνεψιός, which did not necessarily refer to a real kin relationship, see Mullet 1988: 6-7, Grünbart 2005a: 416-17 and 2005b: 164; 174-75.

12 Tzet. Ep. 73.107.3-22.

These references to Cato and Epameinondas can be better appreciated when considered alongside the *Chiliades*, a long verse commentary that Tzetzes composed, in part, to explain the learned allusions scattered throughout his highly sophisticated correspondence.¹³

Epameinondas receives only a short *historia* in the *Chiliades*.¹⁴ The anecdotes recounted by Tzetzes inform the reader that the Theban general, who was “endowed with a free soul” (ἐλευθερόψυχος), refused the riches he was offered by an acquaintance. Instead, he suggested that they be given to someone in real need of them. As noted by Leone in his critical apparatus, in this case Tzetzes seems to have confused Epameinondas with Pelopidas, who was the protagonist of a very similar story in Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*.¹⁵ The *historia* devoted to Epameinondas ends with another episode recounting how he punished a soldier who was trying to extort money from a war prisoner.

Compared to the short text devoted to Epameinondas, the *historia* on Cato is much longer and more complex. Tzetzes goes to great lengths to demonstrate that his Roman alter ego was not only immune to luxury, but also completely incorruptible. To illustrate this latter point, which is particularly relevant to the exegesis of *Letter 73*, Tzetzes details how the censor reacted when offered rich presents by a delegation of foreign ambassadors who wanted to ensure his loyalty.

When they learned that this was Cato, having honoured him as required,
 they said: “O Cato, general of the Romans who are descended from
 Aeneas,
 the kings of the Britons, desiring to have you as their friend,
 sent you these crates full of gold.”
 And he replied: “Do they want to have me as their friend or as their
 slave?”
 When the ambassadors said, “as their friend,” Cato added:
 “Then leave, and give them back their gold.

13 On the structure and aims of the *Chiliads*, see now Pizzone 2017.

14 Tzetz. *Chil.* 10 hist. 346.

15 See Leone 2007: 407 and Plut. *Pelop.* 3.4.

It is slavery, not friendship, that can be bought with riches.
I will be their loyal friend even without gifts.”¹⁶

Before comparing this *historia* with *Letter 73*, it is worth remarking that, as with Epameinondas, Tzetzes alters his source, which is once again Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*. In the Plutarchean version of the story, it is not Cato who refuses the gifts, but his idol, the consul Manius Curius Dentatus.¹⁷ Moreover, the foreign ambassadors were not Britons, but Samnites. Finally, and most importantly, in Plutarch’s account there is no explicit mention of friendship. On the contrary, Manius Curius’ short reply, which is briefly reported in indirect speech, completely rules out the option of a friendly agreement with the interlocutors: instead of receiving gold, he says, he prefers to conquer those who own it. Far from being a promise of loyal friendship, the words of Plutarch’s hero sound like a not-so-covert declaration of war.

Therefore, in his rewriting of the anecdote, Tzetzes does not only alter the identity of the main characters, but he also modifies both the context and the outcome of the entire event: instead of being represented as a fearless general, Cato is depicted as the advocate of selfless friendship, an ideal that he carefully defines in his address to the Britons. Consequently, the censor’s short monologue, artfully enlivened through the use of direct speech, is also a likely addition by Tzetzes. Like Epameinondas, Cato plays such an important role in Tzetzes’ strategy of self-presentation that the scholar does not hesitate to modify his sources to suit his authorial agenda.¹⁸

A comparison between the *historia* just examined and the related passage of *Letter 73* seems to strengthen this interpretation. In this epistle, Tzetzes not only paraphrases but literally repeats the words spoken by Cato in the *historia*. When he states that his friendship can be bought neither by gifts (δωρεαί) nor by payments (μισθοί), the scholar is truly acting as a living – and speaking – portrait of Cato. But what is the message that Tzetzes is trying to convey to his reader(s) by further insisting on

16 Tzetz. *Chil.* 10 hist. 347.652–60.

17 Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 2.2.

18 Tzetzes’ modifications of the Plutarchean representation of Cato have partly been pointed out by Xenophonotos 2014.

his identification with the censor? Why use an illustrious example of incorruptibility to define his relationship with Basilakes in particular and his conception of friendship in general?

A rhetorical game?

Of course, Tzetzes might simply be playing with a literary *topos* that is fairly widespread in the correspondence of eleventh- and twelfth-century literati. While the conventions of politeness required gifts to be gratefully accepted, refusing gifts was a sophisticated way for Byzantine intellectuals to stress the intimacy of the bond with their correspondent.¹⁹ Indeed, only close friends knew when it was possible to act outside the prescriptions of social etiquette without offending each other.

The rejection of material gifts was often accompanied by a parallel motif, where the recipient asked for a different, more spiritual kind of present, that is a “gift of words.”²⁰ This was common especially in epistolary exchanges between literati, who thus implicitly stressed the pricelessness of their intellectual work. Such a request could also be directed to influential addressees, who were not necessarily devoted to *hoi logoi*,²¹ but were nevertheless invited to respond with further missives, rather than material goods. This formed part of a subtle strategy to reduce the inherent inequality between the two correspondents: by playing on the superiority of the gift of words, (supposedly) acknowledged by both parties, the literati strove – at least theoretically – to lessen the distance between themselves and their powerful “pen pals.”

These motifs feature also in Tzetzes’ letter to Basilakes. We find, for instance, the *topos* of the refusal of material gifts, which the scholar ostensibly considers as annoying burdens. Instead of material presents,

19 See Bernard 2015: 185–89 on the social freedoms characteristic of particularly close friendships.

20 On the development of this motif in eleventh-century literature and on its use by the intellectual elites as a tool of social distinction, see Bernard 2011, 2012, and 2014a: 330–33.

21 On the semantic complexity of this expression, see Drpić 2016: 23. In the present context, *hoi logoi* refers to what we may define as literature and literary production.

Tzetzes asks for a much more valuable kind of gift, namely pure affection. As the first section of the letter makes clear, the principal form of expression of such a sentiment is the composition and exchange of further missives.

Yet, despite these clear references to well-known epistolographic *topoi*, the missive to Basilakes also presents some interesting variations on the literary and social conventions that regulate this particular kind of letter exchange. These variations acquire further meaning when compared to the relevant extracts from the *Chiliades*.

Let us focus on the rather blunt passage where Tzetzes explicitly declares his disgust for any kind of material gift. It has been noted that the authors of most letters featuring the gift refusal motif do not in fact reject the gift.²² Indeed, despite stating their preference for another, more spiritual kind of gift, they end up not only accepting the material present, but also expressing their gratitude towards the sender. Contrary to this common practice, in his letter to Basilakes, Tzetzes clearly and unequivocally *declines* the gifts offered to him. What is more, he even declares that, by doing so, he aims at finally convincing Basilakes to stop sending presents once and for all.

Of course, these statements were not meant to be taken at face value. Tzetzes is clearly playing with the epistolographic tradition, taking a (by then) long-established set of rhetorical strategies to the extreme. The humorous tone of the passage is conveyed by the hyperbolic images through which Tzetzes expresses his supposed revulsion towards material goods. Certainly, Tzetzes seems to unveil his own rhetorical game, when he states that equating gifts with death is too emphatic, but then qualifies them as “a grievous burden and a flesh-eating plague,” thus introducing two further images that are almost as hyperbolic as the first. Similarly, the blunt exhortation to Basilakes to stop sending gifts is to be interpreted as a bold and playful variation on the gift refusal motif. The seemingly close relationship between the scholar and his correspondent allows the former to engage in this literary game with a certain audacity.

22 See e.g. Bernard 2011: 4-5, who focuses on Michael Psellos. There are, however, exceptions, such as those quoted by Cernoglazov 2011: 59-60 (especially John Mauro-pous' Ep. 37, which displays interesting thematic similarities with Tzetzes' Ep. 73).

Being a *philos* of Tzetzes, Basilakes would know how to interpret his apparently unceremonious reply.

A multi-layered self-portrait?

Nevertheless, as Tzetzes knew very well, assuming such a discourteous attitude, however ironically, was a tricky enterprise, which could end up causing serious misunderstandings, especially if the addressee did not appreciate the hidden humorous meaning of such seemingly ungrateful behaviour. Indeed, on another occasion, Tzetzes was forced to apologise to an illustrious correspondent of his who had not understood the joke and had been offended by the scholar's apparent disrespect.²³ Why, then, resort to a rhetorical expedient that might prove quite risky? As mentioned above, the nature of Tzetzes' relationship with Basilakes may have given him confidence that his gift-refusal game would not be misunderstood this time.

However, the audacious tone of Tzetzes' missive might also be motivated by a deeper self-fashioning agenda. An attentive reader of the *Chiliades*, in which mentions of Cato always accompany especially meaningful moments in the scholar's self-presentation, would note the reference in *Letter 73* to the censor. And indeed, if we reconsider the two *historiai* on Cato and Epameinondas, we will notice that, in both cases, their utter lack of interest in earthly possessions is connected to another dominant theme of Tzetzes' works, namely the motif of freedom, ἐλευθερία. Both in the letter to Basilakes and in the extracts from the *Chiliades* quoted above, the acceptance of material gifts is associated either with slavery or salaried labour. The oscillation between the terms δωρεά ("gift") and μισθός ("salary, payment") is particularly noteworthy in this respect. Significantly, it is precisely when he purportedly quotes the incorruptible Cato in the final section of *Letter 73* that Tzetzes hints at the interchangeability of these two words, which actually do not appear in the

23 See *Ep. 16*, where Tzetzes apologizes to an unidentified bishop, who had interpreted the scholar's playful refusal of a gift as a sign of disrespect. On this text, see Bernard 2015: 188.

source text.²⁴ What is more, the original context of the anecdote might have added a further layer of meaning to Tzetzes' refusal to accept gifts as a sign of friendship. Specifically, the scholar may have had in mind a diplomatic practice that is discussed in many Byzantine sources, namely the use of gifts to ensure the loyalty – and therefore the obedience – of more or less willing allies.²⁵ The potentially binding power of gifts becomes a major undercurrent in the Tzetzean portrayal of Cato's proud words to the Britons.

If the acceptance of gifts can be equated to salaried labour or even to slavery, those who are ἀδωρότατοι ("completely immune to gifts" and hence "incorruptible") are also, consequently, ἐλευθεριώτατοι ("utterly free"). It is certainly not a coincidence that, throughout the *Chiliades*, the only character deserving of the epithet ἐλευθερόψυχος ("endowed with a free soul") is the impartial Epameinondas. Of course, such a connection between indifference towards earthly goods and liberty of the soul might simply be read as the expression of an ascetic ideal. However, the kind of liberty that Tzetzes claims for himself seems to apply only to a specific set of circumstances and cannot be interpreted as a generic spiritual freedom from earthly temptations. Indeed, from his very first writings, the scholar gives a rather precise definition of the kind of liberty he has in mind.

In an extract from the *Exegesis of the Iliad*, Tzetzes associates lack of interest in material riches with the possession of an ἐλευθέρα γνώμη, which we might define as "liberty of opinion" or "freedom of judgement."²⁶ More interestingly still, in another passage of the same work, Tzetzes seems to consider such an ἐλευθέρα γνώμη as a sort of innate, psychological trait which corresponds to a physiological feature:²⁷ he is convinced that freedom of thought is typical of those who have a warm and irascible temperament. Needless to say, these traits clearly echo

24 Plutarch (*Cat. Mai.* 2.2.) only mentions the "gold" that Manius Curius was offered by the Samnites.

25 See the texts quoted by Grünbart 2011: xvii–xviii. Among these, a passage by Anna Komnene (*Alexias* 7.8.7) displays striking similarities to Tzetzes' account of Cato's reply to the Britons.

26 Tzetz. *Exeg. Il.* 210.14–211.8, commenting on *Il.* 1.122 (especially 211.2–4).

27 Tzetz. *Exeg. Il.* 317.14–318.3 (especially 317.14–16).

Tzetzes' self-portrait, a version of which features at the very beginning of the present paper. Such a connection between ἐλευθέρᾳ γνώμῃ and irascibility puts us in mind of the many occasions on which Tzetzes ended up alienating former friends and patrons because of his temper and unbridled outspokenness.²⁸ Freedom of judgement and speech could often come with a price, especially if they jeopardized the cultivation of influential connections.

True friendship has no price?

In light of these considerations, we can now interpret Tzetzes' *Letter 73* from a more informed perspective. Here, Tzetzes is not only expanding upon a well-known *topos* in order to confirm his intimacy with Basilakes and represent them both as kindred souls sharing a common devotion to *hoi logoi*. Nor is he simply stating a general commitment to an ascetic way of life. Rather, the connection between gifts and slavery on the one hand, and the oscillation between the terms δωρεά ("gift") and μισθός ("salary") on the other, clearly hint at the potentially insidious implications of gift exchange.

Byzantine writers were well aware of the dangers constantly looming behind apparent friendship and the social conventions connected to it, such as the practice of gift exchange.²⁹ Like friendship itself, a gift could hide a deeper, far from selfless, agenda. Indeed, an obligation of reciprocity was often implied, binding the receiver to the giver. Tzetzes' *Letter 73* and the related passages of the *Chiliades* represent a rather unusual exploration of the often-unspoken consequences entailed by "friendly" gift-giving, laying bare the inherent ambiguity of this practice. More specifically, his emphatic self-identification with Cato the ἀδωρότατος and

28 See e.g. Tzetzes' disagreement with his first employer, the *doux* of Berroia, which might have been caused by the scholar's frankness, as suggested by Agapitos (forthcoming). For a different interpretation, see Braccini 2009–2010: 154–55; 169 and 2010: 89; 99–101. On Tzetzes' lack of diplomacy, see also his quarrel with Andronikos Kamateros, as summarised by Agapitos 2017: 22–27 and Pizzone (forthcoming b).

29 On the pragmatic nature of Byzantine friendship, see the seminal study by Mullett 1988 and, most recently, Bourbouhakis 2020 (especially 291–93), who focuses on epistolary exchanges.

ἐλευθεριώτατος is meant to convey two complementary messages. First, Tzetzes is clearly enhancing the value of his friendship, which cannot be bought and is therefore literally priceless. Consequently, those who want to benefit from it need to earn it through their own merits. In exchange, however, they will have a friend who, being completely unbiased, will always do and say what he deems right and true. Tzetzes might be outspoken and excessively frank, but he is no hypocrite. Secondly, and consequently, by underlining his revulsion towards all forms of gifts and by speaking through Cato, Tzetzes is also defending and negotiating his own freedom of thought and expression. No gift or donation will manage to enslave him: following the example of his Roman alter ego, Tzetzes prefers to lead a simple life rather than sell his liberty for a couple of crates full of gold.

Certainly, the letter to Basilakes is not the only text where Tzetzes connects the theme of gift refusal to his aspirations for liberty and independence. On many other occasions, the scholar presents himself as an ἄδωρότατος intellectual who does not care for material goods, but only for the pure affection of his friends.³⁰ In some instances, the gift-refusal motif is connected to Tzetzes' exclusive interest in the spiritual sphere of *hoi logoi*, a feature prominent also in eleventh-century authorial self-portraits, such as that of John Mauropous. However, as it has been demonstrated, Mauropous' self-fashioning as an ascetic intellectual is nothing but a "smokescreen," aimed at reconciling his worldly success with widespread misgivings towards the practice of writing, especially writing for wealth and renown.³¹ Can we imagine something similar for Tzetzes' self-presentation as the alter ego of the ἄδωρότατος Cato? To put it differently, can we take Tzetzes' claims at face value? And, more importantly, did Tzetzes intend his audience to do so?

For all his proud declarations to the contrary, not only did the scholar accept the gifts that were sent to him, but he also asked for more, especially when he did not receive what he had been promised. His audacious claims to intellectual and moral independence are inevitably attenuated

30 From Tzetzes' *Letters* alone, we may quote as illustrative examples *Epistles* 19, 82 (especially 122.18–21) and 39. On the latter, see Shepard 1979 and Cernoglazov 2011: 60–61.

31 Bernard 2014b: 57.

by the need to adapt to the constraints imposed by long-established social conventions as well as material needs – or even desires.³² In this context, the intentionally hyperbolic tone of the admonition to Basilakes brings into question the explicit meaning of the message, thus suggesting that more than one reading is possible. Certainly, Tzetzes emphatically urging Basilakes to stop sending gifts once and for all might even be interpreted as a joking exhortation for Basilakes to do just the opposite.

The possibility of multiple interpretations mirrors the tension in Tzetzes' multifaceted self-presentation, which unites ostensibly incompatible images within the very same work and, consequently, within the same authorial persona. As will be shown in the next section, the equilibristic nature of Tzetzes' position emerges even more clearly when we turn to patronage. Since the rhetorical and social conventions regulating friendship and patronage often coincide, we are bound to encounter similar motifs to those discussed above. Indeed, Cato is once more evoked as the symbol of Tzetzes' struggle both to protect and promote his independence. Nevertheless, new themes also arise, closely connected to Tzetzes' position as a "professional writer."³³

2. A FREE INTELLECTUAL?

Before analysing some other passages of the *Chiliades* where Cato plays a central role, it is worth reading some extracts from *Letter 75* to John Triphyles, which seems to have inspired these further references to the Roman censor. In the very first lines of the letter, Tzetzes appears to openly recognise and accept his condition as a professional writer. Using a fitting Aristophanic expression, the scholar goes as far as to define himself as an ἄνθρωπος ἐγγλωττογάστρω ("a man who lives by his tongue"):

32 Cp. e.g. the *historia* on Simonides' silver Muse that will be discussed *infra*.

33 On Tzetzes as a professional writer, see Rhoby 2010.

I am a man who lives by his tongue or, rather, it would be more appropriate to say that I live by my wit.³⁴ 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.³⁵

At first glance, Tzetzes seems to both legitimise and dignify his personal situation by comparing it to that of two illustrious predecessors. Like Simonides and Plato, Tzetzes, too, had to sell his works in order to survive. However, Tzetzes' reception of both Plato and Simonides is not as clear-cut as it might appear. If we read the final section of this same letter, we will note that Tzetzes seems to have some misgivings about the choices made by his ancient colleagues. More precisely, he appears to harbour a particularly strong dislike for Plato.³⁶ After having sardonically begged Plato's very soul for forgiveness,³⁷ the scholar goes on to express his uninhibited opinion of both the philosopher and his commercial exploitation of his own writings:

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 by. 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 and I do not rely on anything else of the sort, nor do I receive any such free gifts from anyone. I believe that doing so would amount to an injustice against those who were aborted by Nature and were thus deprived of a harmonious shape.³⁸

34 For the Tzetzean neologism *νοογάστωρ* and its relationship with the Aristophanic *ἐγγλωττογάστωρ*, see Lovato 2021.

35 Tzet. *Ep.* 75.109.17–110.3.

36 For some preliminary remarks on Tzetzes' reception of Plato, see Lovato 2016: 341–42.

37 Tzet. *Ep.* 75.110.3–4.

38 Tzet. *Ep.* 75.111.1–11.

In this passage, Tzetzes refers back to Plato's habit of selling his philosophical works, a behaviour that he connects once again with Simonides' silver Muse. However, in these summarising remarks, Plato's commercial exploitation of his literary products is also equated to other, much less honorable services that he performed for his patrons: adulation and cookery. This irreverent depiction is a clear response to the controversial positions expressed in Plato's *Gorgias*, where rhetoric is not only compared to cookery and flattery, but is also considered to be far inferior to philosophy.³⁹ Tzetzes, who cannot accept such a disparaging view of what he considers to be the most important *technē* of all, takes Plato's arguments to the extreme and uses them against their author, who ends up embodying all the negative features that are associated with rhetoric in the *Gorgias*.⁴⁰

Having thus cut Plato down to size, Tzetzes goes on to describe his own situation, carefully distancing himself from the philosopher. Contrary to Plato, Tzetzes is neither a flatterer nor a cook. It is only his literary production that allows him to survive in the "sea of life," since he never devoted himself to dubious activities such as those practised by his predecessor, nor did he accept any kind of free gift from anyone (οὐδὲ προῖκα παρ' οὐδενὸς οὐδέν τι λαμβάνοντες). In this passage, the scholar is keen on highlighting the gratuitous nature of the presents he rejected. In his eyes, accepting them would amount to accepting charity, thus committing an injustice towards those who are truly deprived. Despite the different context, we are confronted once again with the gift-refusal motif. In this specific instance, Tzetzes is clearly comparing himself to Epameinondas, who, as recounted in the *Chiliades*, not only refused the gifts he was offered, but also suggested that they be given to people in need.⁴¹

Considering Tzetzes' emulation of the incorruptible Cato in his letter to Basilakes and the ἐλευθερόψυχος Epameinondas in the epistle to Triphyles, it is unsurprising to find both of these figures appear again in

39 On Tzetzes' reversal of the Platonic description of rhetoric, see also Kolovou 2007.

40 In Tzetzes' writings, the comparison between rhetoric and cookery could also convey appreciation for one's rhetorical prowess (Cesaretti 1991: 200-1).

41 Cp. *Chil.* 10 hist. 346.614-18, as well as the discussion *supra*.

the section of the *Chiliades* commenting upon this very passage of the letter to Triphyles. Significantly, in this short *historia* aimed at emphasising Tzetzes' integrity, we encounter the same oscillation between the notions of gift-giving and payment that characterised the epistle to Basilakes. However, since *Letter 75* to Triphyles is mostly concerned with Tzetzes' professional status, the fluctuation and potential overlap between these two concepts is the starting point for a reflection on the scholar's relationship with his clients and patrons.

Tzetzes was incorruptible, emulating the ancients
 like Epameinondas, Cato and all other such heroes.
 He did not accept anything that was offered as a free gift by the members of the ruling class,
 no matter their standing, even though many were those who offered,
 so much so that even when, during a terrible famine, one of the most illustrious rulers
 offered to provide him and his slaves with a pension, he replied, as if addressing him directly:
 "Go and find yourself some caretakers for your old age.
 As for Tzetzes, he is not suited to live like a caretaker."
 He thought that he would wrong those aborted by Nature,
 who made them crippled, blind, crooked and maimed:
 he believed these to be the rightful receivers of free donations of money.
 Tzetzes himself did not accept any gold in exchange for his exegeses,
 and he would hardly receive food, drinks, fruit and the like.
 But some people want to copy his treatises,
 and thus, he let his works be copied in exchange for an adequate quantity of gold
 – doing so only rarely and entrusting them to a selected few –
 as Plato did in the past with his own dialogues.
 But, in addition to selling his dialogues,
 Plato was a flatterer and a cook and he forced everyone
 to give him money and to buy the books of others
 for one hundred mines or even more, as when Dio
 bought the works of Philolaus and Sophron.

As for Tzetzes, when even the *Augousta* sent him gifts,
he accepted them, albeit unwillingly. He thought it would be rude to
refuse.

He rejoiced in the toil of writing provided that he was paid for his
works.⁴²

Only in the case of the Empress, of all people, did he happily receive
donations,

even though they did not amount to a payment.⁴³

Tzetzes begins this *historia* by fashioning himself as ἀδωρότατος and by highlighting once more his affinity with Cato and Epameinondas. Following the example of his Greek and Roman models, Tzetzes rejected all the donations he was presented with by many powerful benefactors. As in *Letter 75*, the scholar remarks that this kind of pecuniary donation (χρημάτων δόσεις) should be destined for people in need. This time, however, Tzetzes is much more explicit when it comes to the reasons behind his refusal of this kind of gift, which he once again equates to charity. Being well aware that accepting these donations would have made him forever indebted to and even “owned” by his benefactors, Tzetzes bluntly declares that he has no intention of becoming a caretaker.

Immediately after this bold declaration of independence, Tzetzes goes on to list the kind of rewards he would accept, but only as payment for his intellectual and literary activity. The scholar seems to be drawing a clear distinction between the apparently free but potentially binding δόσεις, which he always refused, and the well-deserved compensation that he received for his services, just as other literati did before him. However, if we analyse the following lines of the *historia*, we will remark that, once again, the scholar’s position is not as clear-cut as it might appear. The proud self-depiction of the opening passage is soon replaced by a careful – and at times almost apologetic – explanation of Tzetzes’ dealings with his clients and sponsors.

42 There seems to be a textual problem at line 37 (πονῶν καὶ γράφων δ’ ἔχαιρεν, ἄνπερ μισθοὺς λαμβάνοι). Since, with ἄνπερ, Tzetzes generally uses the subjunctive and not the optative, the simplest solution is to replace the optative λαμβάνοι with the omophonic subjunctive λαμβάνῃ. My translation is based on this emendation.

43 Tzet. *Chil.* 11 hist. 364.13–39.

Tzetzes opens the second part of the *historia* by denying that he has ever received any gold in exchange for his exegetical works (ἐρμηνεύματα). This transition seems to have been inspired by the earlier reference to the insidious, financial δόσεις offered by the scholar's anonymous benefactors. To strengthen his point, Tzetzes specifies that, as a reward for his "exegeses," he never accepted anything but food, drinks and the like. It is not easy to understand what Tzetzes means exactly by the term ἐρμηνεύματα, which he seems to distinguish from the "treatises" (συγγράμματα) mentioned two lines later. Based on other passages of his writings, we can infer that, when he talks about his "exegetical works," Tzetzes mainly refers to his teaching and/or to materials written with students in mind.⁴⁴ This seems to be corroborated by an extract from his commentary on the *Clouds*, where he criticises Aristophanes for having represented Socrates as a greedy teacher. As everyone knows, Tzetzes observes, Socrates used to repeat that "he did not have time to care for silver" (ἀργύριον τηρεῖν οὐκ ἄγω σχολήν). Consequently, he never asked for anything in exchange for his "lessons": the only rewards he accepted were food and drinks.⁴⁵ If we compare this scholium with the *historia* quoted above, we are tempted to conclude that, when he mentions the recompense for his ἐρμηνεύματα, Tzetzes is deliberately posing himself as a new Socrates, the very epitome of the selfless teacher who generously shared his knowledge with anyone who was willing to learn.⁴⁶

44 See e.g. *Ep.* 22, where, to describe the activities he assigned to his pupils, Tzetzes repeatedly uses the verb ἐρμηνεύω and its derivatives. Cp. also *Ep.* 79, where Tzetzes complains about a student who was not interested in his ἐξηγήσεις. On Tzetzes as a didactic poet, see van den Berg 2020.

45 Tzetz. schol. in *Nubes* 98a.405.3-14. In this passage, Socrates is contrasted not only with Simonides, but also with Theodorus of Cyrene, who is criticised for his habit of asking money in exchange for his "lessons." Interestingly, this detail about Theodorus does not seem to appear anywhere else. The same applies to the anecdote of Socrates' two *pithoi*, which might be read as a sort of response to the story of Simonides' two chests (on which see further *infra*).

46 As is the case with Tzetzes' representation of his relationship with Eirene-Bertha, this self-description is far from a faithful representation of the scholar's dealings with his students. On many occasions, Tzetzes mentions the financial rewards that he received in exchange for his teaching: cf. e.g. *Ep.* 22 and *Ep.* 50, on which see Grünbart 2005: 415-16; 423.

This self-representation as a disinterested dispenser of wisdom, however, is partly muddled by the following lines. Tzetzes immediately complicates the picture by specifying that, in some cases at least, he *did* ask for a pecuniary payment in exchange for his works. The reader now learns that the scholar's treatises (συγγράμματα) were so successful that some people asked to copy them. To be granted the permission to do so, these potential clients were required to provide the author with an "adequate quantity of gold" (χρυσίου ἱκανοῦ), thus following the example set by Plato and his sponsors. Once again, however, Tzetzes swiftly proceeds to attenuate his former statements. To begin with, he is careful to point out that, contrary to Plato, he did not "sell" his works to just anyone. What is more, unlike the restrained Tzetzes, not only was Plato unreserved when it came to asking for financial compensation, but he also went as far as to ask his patrons to buy the books composed by others, such as Philolaus and Sophron.

Significantly, after focusing on Plato's reprehensible relationship with his Sicilian patrons, Tzetzes turns to discussing his own behaviour towards one of his most illustrious sponsors, the *Augousta* Eirene-Bertha. Even if Tzetzes does not state it explicitly in this passage, he is likely referring here to the *Allegories of the Iliad*, which, as far as we know, was the only work that Eirene-Bertha ever commissioned from Tzetzes. The scholar talks about his dealings with his imperial patroness in other, more well-known passages of his works, where he complains about the unfair treatment he received from the empress's treasurer.⁴⁷ In these texts, the agreement between Tzetzes and the unreliable treasurer is presented as a sort of contract which stipulated how much money Tzetzes was supposed to receive upon completion of the work. As is clear from Tzetzes' outbursts, the agreed sum was never paid and the scholar ended up finding another sponsor for his *Allegories*. In light of these considerations, the way in which Tzetzes presents his relationship with the *Augousta* in the *historia* here quoted is quite surprising.

Indeed, in this *historia*, Tzetzes only refers to some unspecified "gifts" (δῶρα) that he received from the empress. In line with his initial self-

47 See Tzetzes, *Ep.* 57 and *Chil.* 9 hist. 264.271-90. On the letter, addressed to the empress's treasurer, see Grünbart 1996: 207-8. For the patronage relationship between Tzetzes and Eirene-Bertha, see Rhoby 2010: 159-63 and Grünbart 2005a: 418; 422-23.

fashioning as the alter ego of Cato and Epameinondas, Tzetzes is careful to highlight that he would have preferred to refuse them. Apparently, though, the high status of the giver prevented him from doing so. The empress' gifts (δόσεις) feature once again in the concluding lines of the *historia*, where they are explicitly contrasted to the μισθοί (payments) that Tzetzes received from his other clients. The scholar goes to great lengths to specify that the only person from whom he "gladly" accepted any kind of donation (δόσις) was the *Augousta* herself. It is worth noting that this is the very same term that, some lines earlier, Tzetzes had used to qualify the gratuitous – and therefore potentially insidious – "gifts" offered by his anonymous benefactors. In this case, however, Tzetzes seems to be particularly keen to emphasise that the donations coming from the empress were *not* to be considered as payments received in exchange for a service. This is, in my opinion, the meaning of the adverb ἀμισθίως (literally "without reward") featuring at the end of the passage (τῆς σεβαστοκρατοῦσης δε μόνης καὶ ἀμισθίως | δόσεις λαμβάνων ἔχαιρεν ἐκ πάντων τῶν ἀνθρώπων). Given Tzetzes' aversion towards any form of 'gratuitous' gift, the reasons for his puzzling insistence on the lack of (financial) payment are especially worth exploring.

To better appreciate Tzetzes' representation of his relationship with his patrons and clients, it is necessary to consider more closely the role played by the different figures that he employs to define his authorial and professional status. The following paragraphs will therefore focus on his reception of Plato and Simonides. As we will see, if the example of Plato spells out the risks connected to the commodification and uncontrolled circulation of one's works, then Simonides is the perfect case study to explore the consequences of the creative constraints imposed by patronage. Moreover, both the poet and the philosopher turn out to be particularly "good to think with" when it comes to the discourse of gift-giving and, more broadly, to the correct etiquette to be observed with one's patrons, especially when they belong to the imperial court. While investigating these themes, we will encounter again some of the apparent contradictions that permeated most of the passages analysed so far. As I argue, the figures of Plato and Simonides allow Tzetzes to ar-

ticulate the ethical tensions inherent to his professional and social condition. At the same time, however, the very use of these fictional markers alerts the reader to the staged and performative nature of such self-presentation, which, by constantly oscillating between past and present, fact and fiction, offers an ever-shifting portrait of the author.

Plato's insatiable greed: matters of plagiarism and social etiquette

Despite initially posing himself as the living portrait of the uncompromising Cato and Epameinondas, in the *historia* describing his dealings with his students and sponsors Tzetzes ends up creating a considerably more nuanced self-representation. The reader is gradually introduced to the rather flexible solutions that the scholar has to accept in order to earn a living out of his intellectual activities. While Tzetzes refuses the insidious charity of his many admirers and imitates the example set by the frugal Socrates insofar as his teaching is concerned, when it comes to his much-admired "treatises" the situation changes. If Socrates did not care for silver at all, Tzetzes does care for gold when potential clients ask for the permission to copy some of his most appreciated works. In this respect, Tzetzes seems to follow quite closely the precedent set by Socrates' most famous pupil, the pragmatic Plato.

However, despite admitting to selling his own works, Tzetzes immediately distances himself from Plato, who asks for money in exchange for *each and every one* of his dialogues, thus systematically commodifying the products of his intellect and education. As Tzetzes endlessly emphasises, not even Plato's Sicilian patrons were safe from his insatiable requests. Such rapacity is undoubtedly one of the main reasons for Tzetzes' negative reception of the philosopher. Tzetzes associates Plato's reckless commercial enterprises with his proclivity for flattery. More specifically, he seems to imply that, in addition to regularly putting a price on what is priceless, Plato ended up "selling" himself to the powerful men he worked for.⁴⁸ According to Tzetzes, this kind of moral slavery eventually

48 See e.g. *Chil.* 10 hist. 357.818, where Plato is defined as εἷς ἐκ τῶν μισθίων (one of the "salaried labourers") of the two Sicilian tyrants he "worked" for.

led to a literal form of enslavement: tired of the philosopher's machinations, his former Sicilian patrons decided to get rid of Plato by selling him to a slave trader.⁴⁹ Furthermore, while Tzetzes never tells us what happens to Plato's own writings once they were sold, in yet another passage of the *Chiliades* he expands upon the fate of the volumes that the philosopher's patrons bought for their protégé, such as the writings of the Pythagorean Philolaus and the mimes composed by Sophron. Tzetzes informs us that, as soon as he laid hands on these books, Plato considered them to be his property, which he could reuse as he pleased to compose his own dialogues.⁵⁰

This anecdote further clarifies the reasons behind Tzetzes' misgivings towards the creation of a potentially indiscriminate book trade. Those who participate in such an enterprise with their own works run the risk of sacrificing their autonomy, not only because they might be forced to execute the instructions of their clients, but also because they might end up losing control over their own literary creations. When he discusses the commercialisation of his works, Tzetzes seems to be especially concerned with this second aspect. Indeed, from what we can infer from the scholar's own words, the clients who paid for permission to copy his books were interested in works whose content was well-known and appreciated. To put it differently, these "buyers" do not seem particularly interested in influencing the *creative* choices of the author. In this case, the greatest danger is represented by the constantly looming threat of plagiarism or by the uncontrolled diffusion and potential alteration of works that were associated with Tzetzes' name.⁵¹

The desire to control the circulation of one's writings was already apparent in literature from the eleventh century. We know, for example,

49 See, e.g. *Chil.* 10 hist. 359 passim and hist. 362.988-92. This line of interpretation is further developed by Pizzone (forthcoming a), who focuses especially on twelfth-century book markets.

50 Tzet. *Chil.* 10, hist. 355.798-803 and hist. 362. See especially ll. 998-99, where Plato is accused of having stolen most of his philosophical theories from Philolaus. On these and other similar passages, see Lovato 2017b: 215-17. The depiction of Plato as a plagiarist is not an original invention by Tzetzes: for a discussion of his sources, see Pizzone (forthcoming a).

51 On Tzetzes' practices of authorisation, see Pizzone 2020. On his misgivings towards the commodification of books, see Pizzone (forthcoming a).

that John Mauropous allegedly preferred his works to be read “inside,” by the light of a small candle, rather than in a public place, in the presence of large audiences.⁵² Such a motif was certainly connected with the elitist atmosphere of the eleventh-century literary circles, but it could occasionally be linked both with the alleged rejection of the commodification of literature and with the threat of plagiarism.⁵³ Fear of losing control over one’s writings, often presented as one’s very offspring,⁵⁴ was even more pressing in twelfth-century Byzantium, where literati tried to secure the few positions available at the imperial court or in the Patriarchate by presenting compelling compositions that could attract particularly coveted sponsors. As we know from many passages of his works, Tzetzes himself had often been the victim of plagiarism: even the successful Eustathios is known to have “stolen” from Tzetzes’ writings without ever crediting him.⁵⁵ Therefore, when distancing himself from Plato’s indiscriminate commercial enterprises, Tzetzes might be expressing his unease towards the book trade he himself was involved in, trying to ward off the fate suffered by Philolaus and Sophron, whose works became the “property” of those who acquired them.

Keeping control of his writings, however, is not the only reason why Tzetzes tries to separate himself from Plato. As mentioned, from as early as the eleventh century, the idea of letting one’s writings circulate widely was seen as a potential manifestation of both arrogance and greed. In a time when gaining cultural capital could lead to a considerable accumulation of both social and economic capital, literati struggled to reconcile their worldly success – and ensuing wealth – with the image of the disinterested intellectual that they tried to sustain throughout their works. According to Christian notions of humility, writing was in itself a suspicious enterprise, since the very gesture of taking up the pen and expressing one’s opinions bordered on arrogance. Doing so in exchange for money or social advancement was all the more unacceptable, since it degraded the (supposedly) detached nature of any engagement

52 Bernard 2014b: 59.

53 On Mauropous defending himself against an anonymous plagiarist, see Bernard 2014a: 273–74.

54 See Cullhed 2014b: 63 for an example taken from Tzetzes’ *Chiliads*.

55 See e.g. Cullhed 2014a: 23* and 2014b: 63.

with *hoi logoi*. As noted, this tension between ambition and ascetic conceptions of the literatus permeates the self-presentation of John Maupous, who, despite his successful career at the imperial court, was keen to pose as a poor and dispassionate intellectual. The same fluctuation characterises the works of Michael Psellos, emerging first and foremost in descriptions of his relationship with patrons and students: throughout his vast oeuvre, Psellos can either appear as a disinterested dispenser of wisdom (an image strikingly reminiscent of Tzetzes' self-fashioning as a new Socrates)⁵⁶ or as a rather blunt petitioner, who does not hesitate to ask for generous rewards in exchange for his works.⁵⁷

The conflict between an ascetic conception of literature and the desire for social and financial success was felt all the more strongly by a twelfth-century intellectual who had no choice but to live by his pen – or, rather, by his tongue, to rephrase the Aristophanic image we encountered in *Letter 75* above. Indeed, I argue that Tzetzes' censure of Plato's attitude towards his patrons is informed by these irreconcilable – but equally powerful – ethical models. Thus, in addition to alluding to the potential connection between the “book market” and plagiarism, the story of the greedy Plato epitomises the tension between Tzetzes' attempt to pose as a disinterested devotee of *hoi logoi* and his desire to see his work appreciated – and adequately rewarded – by prestigious sponsors. By condemning Plato's shameless requests for payment, Tzetzes seems to be proposing his more accommodating behaviour as a paradigm of restraint, while at the same time repelling potential accusations of greed. However, as we learn from many other passages of his works, Tzetzes could be quite explicit – and considerably less accommodating – when voicing his disappointment regarding thrifty patrons who dared ask him to write for free.⁵⁸ Indeed, his requests for material support are so frequent and candid that they earned him the title of the

56 See Bernard 2014a: 193 for the relevant passages. Bernard further remarks that Maupous equally liked to pose as a selfless teacher who distributed his knowledge for free (προϊκα).

57 On Psellos as an “extremely multi-sided writer and social actor,” see Bernard 2014b: passim and especially 56.

58 See e.g. *Chil.* 5 hist. 31.942–49. Similar themes occur in *Chil.* 1 hist. 25.679–82.

“begging poet,”⁵⁹ which he shares with Theodore Prodromos, the Komnenian *Betteldichter* par excellence.⁶⁰ By comparison to Prodromos, however, Tzetzes seems to be particularly sensitive to the tension between the desirable (but unattainable) ideal of the ascetic poet and the unavoidable reliance on patronage. More interestingly still, not only is Tzetzes aware of this contradiction, but he even seems to playfully allude to it when, for example, he admits to his affinity with the dubious tribe of the Aristophanic ἐγγλωττογάστορες (“those who fill their stomach with their tongue”).

With these considerations in mind, we can now return to the puzzling *historia* where Tzetzes describes his relationship with Eirene-Bertha. As noted, the scholar is careful to point out that, despite his aversion towards gratuitous gifts, he could not decline the presents sent by his patroness, which he is at pains to distinguish from the more commercial concept of μισθός (“payment”). The insistence on the language of gift-exchange and the explicit refusal of the notion of payment might be read as a further attempt to push back against potential accusations of cupidity. Even if he is forced to compromise his self-depiction as the living portrait of the ἀδωρότατος Cato, Tzetzes thus manages to elevate his relationship with the empress from the contractual dimension of the μισθός to the more gracious rhetoric of gift-giving. Furthermore, by replacing μισθοί with “gifts” (δῶρα, δόσεις), Tzetzes seems to find an acceptable synthesis between his condition as a professional literatus and the paradigm of the ascetic poet: instead of a commercial agreement, his patronage relationship with the *Augousta* becomes an intimate exchange between kindred souls, where artistic and literary excellence is automatically rewarded by the admiring empress.

However, there might be another reason why Tzetzes decides to partly contradict his former self-depiction as the alter ego of Cato. I would argue that, through this rather surprising representation of his relationship with the *Augousta*, Tzetzes is at the same time trying to voice

59 On Tzetzes’ “rhetoric of poverty,” see Cullhed 2014b: 58–61.

60 On Tzetzes and Prodromos as the epitome of the twelfth-century “begging poet,” see Beaton 1987 and Bazzani 2007. On the self-ironic tinge of Prodromos’ self-presentation as a poor poet, see again Bazzani 2007.

and drive away a feeling of unease that surfaces time and again when it comes to the works that he wrote as imperial commissions.

Simonides' silver Muse and the loss of authorial autonomy

To clarify this point, I will now turn to the other “mercenary writer” figure that Tzetzes employs as a foil against which to define his own authorial ethos, namely Simonides. Apart from featuring in the now familiar *Letter 75* to Triphyles, he is also the protagonist of a short but meaningful *historia* that Tzetzes explicitly connects to this epistle.⁶¹ Once again, the polymath recounts how Simonides was the first poet to ask to be paid in exchange for his compositions.⁶² What comes next, however, does not feature in any of the texts analysed so far and deserves to be read in full:

At first, lyric poets wrote for free.
The first to write for a reward was Simonides.
He had two chests made for him
and he called one of them the chest of gifts and the other the chest of
 thanks.
Whatever he received in exchange for his compositions,
he put in what he called the chest of gifts. Thus, he eventually filled
 it.
Instead, the chest of thanks was empty.
If someone ever expected him to write for free,
he would say: “There are two chests in my house:
one is called chest of gifts and the other chest of thanks.
When I open the chest of gifts, inside I find
what I require to buy whatever I need.

61 See Tzetz. *Chil.* 10 hist. 354.779–82.

62 On Simonides as the first commissioned poet, see e.g. Schol. in Pind. *Isthm.* 2.9a–b. For a more in-depth discussion of the sources employed by Tzetzes, see Savio 2020: 36–37 with n. 21. Interestingly, in the writings of Eustathios of Thessaloniki it is Pindar who becomes the epitome of the commissioned (and mercenary) writer: for a detailed analysis, see van den Berg (forthcoming).

If I open the chest of thanks, however, I find it empty
 and from what is inside there I am unable to buy what I need.”
 With these words, he would ask to be paid for every composition,
 as Anacreon and the famous Callimachus say,
 along with many other eloquent men.
 This same Simonides did not write hymns to the gods,
 since he avoided working for free. He wrote eulogies for boys instead,
 in exchange for which he received much, and indeed sufficient, gold.
 When someone asked him: “Why is it that you do not write anything
 for the gods,
 but you only write eulogies for young boys?,” Simonides replied:
 “Young boys are my gods, since it is from them that I receive what I
 ask.”⁶³

Tzetzes opens this *historia* by contrasting Simonides to other unnamed lyric poets, who, unlike him, did not require to be paid in exchange for their compositions. To strengthen his point, the scholar describes the two chests that Simonides showed to those who asked him to write for free. Tzetzes might have used many different sources to compose his version of the story and the vast majority are listed in Leone’s critical apparatus. Most of these texts either define the recompense asked for by Simonides as a *μισθός* – thus emphasising the contractual nature of the relationship between poet and clients – or employ the term *ἄργυρος* (“silver”), which highlights the pecuniary nature of the required payment. In his own rewriting of the anecdote, Tzetzes employs both terms, thus combining the notion of contract with that of financial calculation. Interestingly, however, when he reports Simonides’ own words, Tzetzes only employs the term *δωρεά* (translatable as “gift” or “donation”), which recurs in only one of his sources.⁶⁴

Indeed, in the first section of the *historia*, the same episode seems to be presented from two different angles: the perspective of the narrating

63 Tzetz. *Chil.* 8 hist. 228.807–29.

64 See schol. in Theoc. 16 arg. Notably, however, in this scholium *δωρεά* does not qualify the “gifts” requested by Simonides, but refers to a hypothetical composition by the poet, which would have been considered as a “gift” by its recipient, had Simonides accepted to write it for free. On this text, see Rawles 2018: 228.

voice and the point of view of Simonides himself, whose words are conveyed through direct speech. The selective use of the term δωρεά is particularly meaningful in this respect: by insisting on the more abstract notion of gift-giving, the character of Simonides artfully downplays the commercial nature of his demands – thus appropriating a rhetorical strategy that was quite typical of Tzetzes himself. As we might recall, in the *historia* where he describes his dealings with his many sponsors, Tzetzes is equally eager to avoid the notion of monetary payment. Not only is he quite reluctant to mention the gold he received in exchange for his “treatises,” but, when it comes to his “exegetical works,” he is very keen on pointing out that he only accepted what was necessary to satisfy his basic needs. Significantly, the theme of necessity is another common element linking Tzetzes’ representation of Simonides with his own self-depiction as a mercenary writer. In the letter to Triphyles, Tzetzes justifies his requests for payments by stating that his literary activity was his only source of income: he did not ask to be rewarded out of greed, but out of necessity. In the *historia* we have just read, Simonides thus seems to be repeating the very same arguments adopted by Tzetzes in many of his works. More significantly still, Simonides’ insistence on the motif of “need” (τὸ χρειῶδες) is the result of a deliberate choice by Tzetzes. This theme appears in only one of the sources referring to Simonides and even there it does not feature as prominently as it does in Tzetzes’ rewriting of the story.⁶⁵

If we put all these elements together, we are tempted to conclude that the Simonides who shows his two chests to his clients in order to be paid for his work is not that dissimilar from Tzetzes the professional writer, who asks for an appropriate reward in exchange for his services. And indeed, if we look at the way in which Simonides is represented in other passages of the *Chiliades*, we will remark that Tzetzes seems actually to admire his ancient colleague. Not only is Simonides remembered for his many victories in all kinds of poetic contests,⁶⁶ but he is also listed, along with the much-admired Palamedes, amongst the inventors of the Greek alphabet.⁶⁷ Not once do we find the scathing tones reserved for Plato. As

65 Stob. 3.10.38.

66 Tzet. *Chil.* 1 hist. 24.623–42 (see also schol. in *Chil.* 1.624.1–12).

67 Tzet. *Chil.* 5 hist. 28.808–10 (but see *Chil.* 12 hist. 398. 42–47 for a partial rectification).

the *historia* here analysed makes clear, Simonides could have been a more fitting model for Tzetzes the commissioned writer, who almost seems to be lending his own voice to the ancient poet.

However, as the narrating voice of this same *historia* immediately points out, Simonides' behaviour towards his patrons was far from exemplary. After recounting the story of the two chests, Tzetzes observes that the poet abused the clever stratagem, since he never once accepted to write without receiving a monetary compensation. As the reader might recall, this is exactly the same mistake made by Plato. But is Tzetzes' disapproval directed only at what he seems to perceive as a particularly censurable breach of etiquette? Or is this implicit association between Plato and Simonides aimed at conveying a further message?

As noted above, when criticising Plato's commercial enterprises, Tzetzes creates a clear connection between the philosopher's reprehensible behaviour and his moral (and literal) enslavement at the hands of his patrons. Liberty also seems to be the issue at stake in the final section of the *historia* on Simonides. This time, however, Tzetzes is not reflecting upon the potential loss of autonomy and ownership stemming from the commodification of one's own books. Rather, he is spelling out the threats to one's authorial liberty that might arise from the creation of a systematic, contractual relationship with one's patrons, especially when the latter can – and aspire to – actively influence the contents of the works they commission. According to Tzetzes, this is exactly what happens to Simonides: his decision always to write for a price inevitably limits his creative independence, forcing him to follow his patrons' desires, which are both very specific and very limited. In Tzetzes' *historia*, the debasing consequences of similar constraints are expounded by the poet's anonymous interlocutor, who clearly expects a skilled author like Simonides to compose solemn hymns to the gods instead of writing (much less dignified and dignifying) eulogies for young boys. Considering the generally positive image of Simonides that emerges from the *Chiliades*, we are tempted to conclude that, this time, Tzetzes' point of view overlaps with that of the unnamed acquaintance of the poet: why should a remarkable writer such as Simonides squander his talent by choosing topics and – possibly – poetic forms that do not allow him properly to express his exceptional abilities?

From what we know about Tzetzes' relationship with his imperial patrons, we might even go a step further. I suggest not only that Tzetzes' perspective is represented by the words of the unnamed interlocutor of Simonides, but also that the scholar may have directed this same question to himself. Just like Simonides, Tzetzes was confronted with sponsors demanding that he compose works that he clearly considered beneath him. This is especially evident when it comes to the writings commissioned by female patrons, such as the *sebastokratorissa* Eirene and the empress Eirene-Bertha. Indeed, as has been convincingly demonstrated,⁶⁸ Tzetzes both complains about the vagueness of the instructions he received⁶⁹ and also implies that, had he been given the chance, he could have shown the true extent of his knowledge. The basic demands of his commissioners, however, prevented him from appropriately showcasing his talent.⁷⁰

The significance of Simonides for the conceptualisation of Tzetzes' professional status is further illuminated by a detailed analysis of the scholar's use of his sources. Interestingly, Leone's critical apparatus does not mention any potential model for the seemingly unique concluding episode of the *historia*. However, if we take a closer look at the *scholia vetera* on Pindar, we will remark that a similar anecdote was recounted about another ancient author, Anacreon. In contrast to that of Simonides, Anacreon's literary production is indeed characterised by a considerable number of erotic poems celebrating beautiful young boys, whom

68 Jeffreys 1974: 151-57.

69 See e.g. Tzetz. *All. Il.* prol. 1207-14.

70 Both in the *Iliad Allegories* and in the *Theogony*, Tzetzes states that he had to limit himself to writing what was necessary to – or required by – his imperial reader(s) (Jeffreys 1979: 151-54; but see Pizzone (forthcoming a) for a different interpretation of the *Theogony*). In these texts, Tzetzes implies that, had the circumstances been different, he could have said much more – as he does in some of his other works (compare for example the complex introduction to the *Exegesis of the Iliad* with the rather simple prologue of the *Iliad Allegories*). Interestingly, when Constantine Kourtzes became the new sponsor of the *Allegories*, the length and complexity of Tzetzes' allegorical interpretations seemed to increase, as noted by Rhoby 2010: 164-65; 170. Gender might have somehow influenced Tzetzes' authorial choices, as suggested by the fact that the scholar qualifies the *Theogony* – and, indirectly, the *Iliad Allegories* – as γυναικεῖαι βίβλοι (Jeffreys 1974: 154).

the poet was said to consider as no less than his “gods.”⁷¹ Once again, as he did with Cato and Epameinondas, Tzetzes alters his source by giving a prominent role to characters who did not feature in his models, but whom he considered to be especially meaningful for his strategy of self-presentation. Moreover, just as in the episode of Cato and the Britons, the modifications introduced by Tzetzes focus on very specific – and particularly suggestive – details. For example, while also dealing with the issue of commissioned poetry, the Pindaric scholium reworked by Tzetzes does not mention Anacreon as an example of mercenary author. Quite the contrary, Anacreon features in a sort of catalogue of ancient writers who devoted themselves to the celebration of beauty *without* asking for payment in return. In this context, Anacreon’s response to the anonymous interlocutor inquiring about the poet’s tendency to write only hymns to young boys acquires a different meaning than it does in Tzetzes’ story. Therefore, along with the alteration of the identity of the characters involved, the connection between Simonides’ choice of inferior topics⁷² and the necessity to satisfy his patrons’ desires can be quite safely considered as an original amendment on Tzetzes’ part. As with Cato and Epameinondas, the scholar is so intent on projecting his own experience onto the figure of Simonides that he ends up attributing to the poet words and deeds that the tradition ascribed to others.

These alterations of the original source, along with the fact that Tzetzes decided to place this episode in a pivotal position of his *historia* on Simonides, show the importance of this anecdote for the scholar’s reception of the poet and, consequently, for his strategy of authorial self-fashioning. This becomes all the more evident if we consider that Tzetzes clearly wanted this text to be read along with the letter to Triphyles and the other *historiai* connected to it, including the one devoted to his relationship with Eirene-Bertha.

71 Schol. vet. in Pind. *Isthm.* 2.1b (especially ll. 8–10: Ἀνακρέοντα γοῦν ἐρωτηθέντα, φασί, διατί οὐκ εἰς θεοὺς ἀλλ’ εἰς παῖδας γράφεις τοὺς ὕμνους; εἰπεῖν, ὅτι οὗτοι ἡμῶν θεοὶ εἰσιν). I am grateful to Andrea Capra for his help in locating Tzetzes’ source.

72 See e.g. the hierarchy of literary genres that Tzetzes sketches in *schol. in Ranas* 585.858.3–6. In this passage, the scholar seems to imply that lyric poets who write hymns to the gods and celebrate athletic victories deserve not only to be paid, but also to be honoured and supported by society as a whole.

If we return one last time to the *historia* detailing Tzetzes' interaction with the empress, we might be able to add a further layer of meaning to the lines where the polymath hesitantly admits to having accepted the gifts (δόσεις) sent by her, emphatically distinguishing these from the μισθοί that he received from his other clients. Certainly, these remarks might have aimed both to reject potential accusations of greed and to sublimate the scholar's agreement with the empress into a more personal exchange. However, Tzetzes' evident desire to downplay the commercial and contractual nature of his dealings with the *Augusta* might also be read as an attempt to – at least theoretically – distance himself from Simonides' silver Muse and the limits to one's authorial autonomy that such a mercenary goddess might entail. Indeed, the threat faced by Simonides might even be more insidious than the loss of copyright stemming from selling the rights to one's own books. If the author might lose control of works that have already been written in the latter case, in the former he might not even be able to write what he really wants, thus inevitably subordinating his will (and his fame) to the desires of his patrons, who become his only "gods." I would argue that Tzetzes' representation of his relationship with Eirene-Bertha both reveals and tries to dispel the scholar's apprehension at the potential overlap between Simonides' situation and his own. This is probably why the scholar is ready to momentarily put down the mask of the ἀδωρότατος Cato and to admit to having accepted the ostensibly gratuitous δόσεις of his patroness: apparently, the consequences of a contractual agreement with a powerful sponsor could prove even more constraining than the gratitude owed to the occasional donor of a gift.

As it turns out, Tzetzes was not the only one to feel restricted by his condition as a commissioned writer. The implicit accusations that we have detected in his subtle representation of Simonides are reminiscent of the equally subtle complaints expressed by some of his contemporaries, who have also been labelled as "professional writers." A relevant case in point is, for example, Constantine Manasses' *Description of the Little Man*. As recently observed, this apparently innocuous description of a courtly event may hide an implicit jab at the ignorant members of the aristocracy, who are amused by the "exotic" little man just as much as

they are entertained by their poets, proving their inability to appreciate the value of refined education.⁷³

This said, just like Manasses' self-image as an undervalued court poet, Tzetzes' complex treatment of Simonides, along with its echoes in his own patronage relationship with Eirene-Bertha, cannot be considered as an accurate representation of the situation and attitudes of the "real author." Indeed, as some oblique remarks by Eustathios seem to suggest, Tzetzes must have been rather proud of his imperial commissions, so much so that his adversaries accused him of being an arrogant braggart.⁷⁴ Furthermore, if we are to believe the details provided by his own letters, Tzetzes did not limit himself to accepting the gratuitous gifts supposedly offered by the *Augousta*, but went as far as to berate her treasurer for not living up to his end of the bargain. With this last example, however, we are already crossing the tenuous line separating the "real author" from the "model author." And if the first is often out of reach for the modern reader, the second can prove just as elusive, especially when it comes to Tzetzes and the fluctuating nature of his self-presentation. For instance, what should we make of the alter ego of the inflexible Cato who, despite some ostensible hesitations, is willing to follow the precedent set by the much less uncompromising Plato and Simonides? And how are we to interpret Simonides' – and Tzetzes' – apologetic references to their apparent privation? After all, as we learn from the *Chiliades*, Simonides' mercenary Muse yielded "much, and indeed, sufficient gold," just as Tzetzes' commodification of his "treatises" allowed him to earn "an adequate amount of gold." Are we really dealing with a poor poet who is forced to renounce his much-cherished independence only to avoid dying of starvation? Or does Tzetzes' comparison with Plato and Simonides hide more than the apologetic self-representation of a needy – but incorruptible – intellectual?

73 For this interpretation, see Nilsson 2020: 23 and 182–85. As I argue elsewhere (see Lovato 2021), another relevant parallel is the *Timarion*, on which see also Labuk 2019: 71–76.

74 See e.g. Eust. *Il.* 1.3.1–4, to be read with Cullhed 2014a: 9*–10*.

From inconsistency to polyphony

These questions highlight a fluctuation that goes to the very essence of Tzetzes' self-presentation, which is marked by the coexistence of different, and apparently contrasting, authorial voices. As I have shown, this authorial polyphony is not to be interpreted as a lack of consistency on the part of the author, nor should this multiplicity be ignored or downplayed so as to fit one's interpretation of the writer's agenda. Rather, the mutability of the authorial voice is a recurrent – and often deliberate – feature of many Byzantine sources, which elude our search for a consistent message or a specific intention. In this context, a reassessment of Tzetzes' strategies of self-presentation makes a particularly meaningful contribution to recent scholarly developments focusing on the flexibility of the Byzantine authorial self. Indeed, the present study has shown that authorial polyphony is an effect that Tzetzes both searched for and skillfully manipulated to different ends throughout his works.

The difficult coexistence of idealised figures such as Cato and Epameinondas with dubious characters like Plato or Simonides perfectly epitomises the equilibristic nature of Tzetzes' professional and social condition, which forced him to find an impossible balance between contrasting ethical models. Just like his predecessors in the eleventh century, Tzetzes needed to reconcile his ideal self-image as an ascetic and autonomous intellectual, embodied by Cato and Epameinondas, with the constraints stemming from his condition as a commissioned writer dependent on both the support and the requests of powerful patrons and friends. By constantly oscillating between the utter liberty of the Roman censor and the moral (and literal) slavery of the greedy Plato, Tzetzes represents the unsolvable contrast between desirable – but unattainable – ideals and the much less noble – but unavoidable – practices of the professional writer.

However, while clearly echoing contemporary socio-cultural practices, Tzetzes' polyphonic voice is also the result of a narrative carefully crafted by its author *and* protagonist. The central role played by figures belonging to the Greek and Roman past points to an ulterior kind of tension traversing Tzetzes' authorial self, which does not only oscillate between conflicting ethical paradigms, but also between story and history,

fact and fiction, playfulness and gravity. As noted in the introduction, the constant intermingling between these different dimensions does not allow the reader to extract a single, univocal message. More interestingly still, in some instances, it is Tzetzes himself who seems to allude to – and play with – the possibility of multiple meanings, challenging the audience to identify the rhetorical and discursive strategies sustaining them. Take, for example, the letter to Basilakes that we analysed at the beginning of this study: how is the reader supposed to interpret the over-emphatic tone characterising Tzetzes' identification with the gift-hater Cato? Is one supposed to take it seriously or does the playful tone of the letter – along with the artful manipulation of its sources – suggest quite the opposite of what is explicitly said? The same interplay between fictional markers and playfulness characterises the letter to Tryphiles, which is the very source of Tzetzes' many *historiai* on his own professional ethos. Once again, the references to ancient Greek figures, dressed in an unmistakably Aristophanic language, alert the audience to the potentially ironic tone of what is being said. Are we really to believe Tzetzes' attempts to set himself apart from mercenary intellectuals such as Plato and Simonides and to pose himself as the incorruptible Cato? Or are his protestations of selflessness yet another strategy to attract the sympathy – and material support – of gold-bestowing patrons?

Such ambiguity is one of the most prominent hallmarks of Tzetzes' authorial voice and is an essential component of the endless game between this author and his readers, both past and present. After all, as Tzetzes himself states in a very self-conscious passage of his *Chiliades*, not only there are many stories about Cato, but the very same story can be told in different ways.⁷⁵ If this is true for the inflexible censor, how can it not apply to the Protean Tzetzes, who is both the director and the main character of his own authorial narrative?

75 Tzetz. *Chil.* 10 hist. 347.665-74. On this passage, see also Pizzone 2018, 302-3. For Tzetzes' use of "*amphoteroglōssia*" as a rhetorical tool to "negotiate power" and unmask "the compromises faced by an intellectual struggling for patronage," see Pizzone (forthcoming a).

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