

# “A Letter from John Tzetzes, with Notes for the Uncomprehending”

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## *Preface*

*This short story was written in the context of an upper level undergraduate course run by Dr. Dimitris Krallis this fall at Simon Fraser University—Fantasy in Byzantium—which examined the ways in which Byzantine sources have influenced and been reinterpreted in modern fiction. During the course I was struck by the wonderfully vituperative style of John Tzetzes, a twelfth-century polymath infamous even in today’s scholarship for his endless quarrels over minor grammatical points and his near-eternal grudges. Reading Tzetzes, it is hard not to wonder how such a sharp-tongued character would have navigated a society in which literary and political circles were so close knit. Thus, this story began in part as an attempt to play with the idea of how a person like Tzetzes might have tried to walk back a statement that went too far, or was too direct to be veiled by literary references or allegory.*

*The challenge for a Byzantine writer was in part finding a way to incorporate the old into the new in a way that both added depth and bolstered the credibility of the author, and in keeping with this, I set out to try to create my own imitation primary source out of quotes from other Byzantine writers, complete with the explanatory notes we sometimes see requested in Byzantine letters or marginalia. Tzetzes’ personality, and some of his nastiest letters, also reminded me instantly of the kinds of characters that show up in the works of Vladimir Nabokov—the eloquently miserable, self-obsessed narrators of works like *The Vane Sisters* and *Pale Fire*—and so I have drawn on Nabokov’s characterizations and on the structure of *Pale Fire* in an effort to combine the old and the new. The text that follows, connects elements of the past and present, history and fiction, tragedy and satire, which I hope will invite further reflection*

*JMH 34 (2019): Special Issue*

## *Keywords*

John Tzetzes; fiction; history; Byzantium; Nabokov.

***Prolegomena***<sup>1</sup>

To the honourable Theodore Styppeiotos, newly exalted bearer of the imperial ink case,

I learn by the boorish banging of your agents at my door (those without the dignity to refuse to descend into warren to which jealousy has consigned me) that some Aeolos has spoken and sighed into the sea of prattlers who flow through the palace like tides following the sun and moon, causing them to froth over with malicious gossip. The jeering of this wind-bag-King, this literary Melitides whose absurd pretensions must be known to yourself, has implicated me as speaking the blackest calumny against our exalted Emperor, Manuel I, projecting on to me, as though jabbering into a mirror (like his idiot wife does after slipping from bed), only his own envious stupidity; for since we first met, the man has conceived of us as racing alongside like chariots, and has failed to recognize the absurdity of his metaphor. We are not Blues and Greens (or even Blues and Whites); our talents too are like the sun and moon: when he prattles, the jabbering masses pack in, ignorant that he glows only with the palest reflection of my stolen light.<sup>2</sup>

That light, of course, can be blinding (especially for those like our acquaintance, who in the kindest terms might be called a Socratic-cave dweller—and who is in fact more accurately described as a ghostly presence, scabbed with camel disease, cat-faced, anchovy-eyed, and with the voice of a weeping eunuch);<sup>3</sup> more than once has a scholar meekly prodded for a metaphrase when staring dumbfounded at a magnificent page blackened from edge to edge in Tzetze's elegant hand (though you must forgive the simplicity of this instantaneous and unstudied text; I have been forced to take flight to Pantokrator, and the monk next door is currently careening into his walls in a drunken stupor characteristic of his type). To that end, I will labour to explain the subtle allegorizing of Tzetzes to the court so that they may see this attack for what it is: a dart sent stealthily upon me, like Paris, Alexander did, sitting behind Ilos' tomb – the attack of an arrogant and pretentious character whose scurrilous invectives ignore (or rather confirm) the dictum of Euripides: that “no man in good courage would think it right / to kill his enemy secretly, but goes at him face to face.”

Lest this possessed and epileptic, moonstruck son of a goat be emboldened by Tzetzes' self-evident quietness and modesty (for Tzetzes, like Achilles and the Greeks, who set off more quietly than the Trojans, is possessed of an unboastful spirit),<sup>4</sup> I will offer my rejoinder. Now listen and be instructed!

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1 This introductory letter draws heavily on a real letter written by Tzetzes, which is reprinted in all its vituperative glory in Aaron I. Heinrich, “Tzetzes' Letters and *Histories*: A Sample in English Translation,” (Master's thesis, University of Oregon, March 2009). Material drawn from or inspired by other sources has also been incorporated into this introduction, and will be listed below.

2 Inspired by Michael Psellos, G 21 “To the *protoproderos* and *epi ton kriseon*, who was very dear to me, but had acted in a jealous way,” in *The Letters of Psellos: Cultural Networks and Historical Realities*, ed. Jeffreys and Lauxtermann (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 87-88.

3 This magnificently colourful invective is quoted verbatim from Lynda Garland's translation of it, which can be found in Lynda Garland, “Mazaris's Journey to Hades: Further Reflections and Reappraisal,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* vol. 61 (2007), 186.

4 Ibid.

**Concerning the Statue of Manuel Komnenos, Which has Lately Taken the Place of an Older Figure**

Oh, “What advantages you gain from your dominion over all Greece”!<sup>5</sup>

Oh, of most exalted Manuel, whose statue in his coronation garb,

Fresh girded and bedecked in a panoply of colours

To shame all charioteers;

Of The character of the man who holds the reigns of state,

Look; listen; let Tzetzes tell.

For he, when prudent, will fit the attic lyre to his tongue,

And strum out a thought for those discerning men; those judges who,

In the richness of their erudition, make “mere wealth look silly,”<sup>6</sup>

And will demand, in their care for “things like these, the lyre and the song”<sup>7</sup>

Tzetzes’ tongue to dance in fitting, double-making speed,

and in liquid vowels embroider with his words,

a true depiction of this lord, who has been brought by an oracle’s pronouncement,

(and by portents, of which it was said:

“Even the stones will cry out”)

to God’s highest seat,<sup>8</sup>

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5 Aristophanes, “Wasps” in *Frogs and Other Plays*, trans. David Barrett, ed. Shomita Dutta (New York: Penguin, 2007), 29. Garland (“Mazaris’ Journey,” 186) notes that one of Tzetzes’ invectives was written in response to criticism of his commentary on Aristophanes (available only through L. Massa Positano’s *Commentarii in Aristophanem. Fasciculus I continens Prolegomena et Commentarium in Plutum*).

This level of engagement and the use of a limited number of Aristophanes’ plays in Byzantine education suggest that these references would have been comprehensible to some educated Byzantines. I have drawn the idea of expressing critical or dangerous ideas through the repetition of oblique, truncated references from Anthony Kaldellis’ work on the *Timarion*, a Byzantine satire. Kaldellis identifies a number of innocuous seeming literary phrases which, in their original works, directly abut or foreshadow violence or murder. See Anthony Kaldellis, “The *Timarion*: Toward a Literary Interpretation,” in P. Odorico, ed., *Le face cachée de la littérature byzantine: Le texte en tant que message immédiat (Actes du colloque international, Paris 6-7-8 Juin 2008)* (Paris: École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Centre d’études byzantines, néo-helléniques et sud-est européennes, 2012 = *Dossiers byzantines* v. 11) 275-288.

6 Aristophanes, “Wasps,” 29. For a fuller explanation of the jokes and critiques made in the poem through allusion, see the fictional notes and explanations that make up part two.

7 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 7.11, “Concerning the Homeric Proverb ‘Others Care for Things Like These, the Lyre and the Song’ (Story 109),” trans. Vasiliki Dogani. <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades7.html>. Note that these translations, by their translators’ admissions, are necessarily imperfect due to the complexity of Tzetzes’ work. They are, however, the only complete translation of the works in English, and were compiled in consultation with the Suda On Line project.

8 Prophecies would likely have been a dangerous subject, especially when not taken seriously or used in critique. The Byzantine scholar Nicetas Choniates records in his *Historia* that Manuel I put great faith in the “AIMA” prophecy (*Nicetae Choniatae Historia I*, ed. J. A. van Dieten (Berolini 1975), 169.). “AIMA” means blood in Greek, and there was apparently a longstanding belief in Trebizond, where the family originated, that the Komnenoi dynasty (the Komnenoi blood) would reign for four generations, named after the four letters of the word. Some scholars have suggested that Manuel’s belief in the prophecy was so strong that to fit it, he ensured that his Hungarian son-in-law and presumptive heir, Bela, was renamed Alexios during his initiation into the Orthodox church---then also named his first biological son Alexios. For more, see Rustam Shukov, “AIMA: the Blood of the Grand Komnenoi,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 19 (1995): 161-181, doi:10.1179/030701395790836630.

A place deserving of an oration by a great and learned rhetorician;  
 A Hermogenes or a Demosthenes,  
 Who could do justice to our “dear friend,  
 our saviour, the saviour of our city.”  
 “you who are Fortune’s favourite!”<sup>9</sup>  
 Whose sinews are the state and are  
 Fed blood and strengthened by the drumming  
 Of the royal heart which beats  
 Miles away in the breast  
 Of the exalted emperor  
 who “shall be master to them all, governor of the market, of the harbours, of the Pnyx”<sup>10</sup>

But they are gone, cut down by these scything years,  
 “Though I say freely that not even if there were a hundred Homers, Musaeuses, Orpheuses,  
 Hesiods, Antimachuses, and Linuses, or indeed all the other poets and authors of theogonies,  
 would they have written better on this subject matter,”<sup>11</sup>  
 For Tzetzes will surpass them in the correctness of his disposition:  
 speaking also to the uneducated people; to you, fisherman, I will speak in fishhooks;  
 to the apothecary, in humours black and light;  
 and for the wine-sellers, I will speak in tones sweet and sour—  
 though without watering my phrases; for Tzetzes will descend,  
 like another “man among the ancient ones,  
 who composed poems skilfully / and not in the manner of the outcasts of our times,”<sup>12</sup>  
 to wrapping himself in the “most feminine” garb of Penelope,

And will unstitch, verse by verse, his finely woven rhetoric,  
 And unspool the threads of his ingenious intertwinings,  
 Making clear, for those who have not toiled under the *schede*-sketchers,  
 Who at Athena’s pleasure have given men, Tzetzes included, “a magnificent gift that will make  
 him wealthy enough / To shower great generosity in turn”<sup>13</sup>—  
 that rhetorical force, a fortress with many twisted coils, whose labyrinthine shape  
 necessitates a leading thread.<sup>14</sup>

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9 Aristophanes, *Knights*, trans. Thomas Bushnell, accessed December 10, 2018. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/knights.html>.

10 Ibid.

11 Tzetzes, *Allegories of the Iliad*, Prolegomena 480-7, trans. Goldwyn and Kokkini (Cambridge, Mass.: Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2015), 37.

12 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 8.48 “According to the Comic Poet: ‘Biting Myself, but Still Laughing’ (Story 203),” trans. Vasiliki Dogani, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades8.html>.

13 Homer, *The Odyssey* (20.296-298), trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Atria Books, 2013), 276.

14 Panagiotis A. Agapitos, “John Tzetzes and the blemish examiners: A Byzantine teacher on schedography, everyday language, and writerly disposition,” *Medioevo Greco* 17 (2017): 9.

For we must differ with the views of that one time Patriarch who claimed  
 “we all know that sight is the most honoured of senses”,<sup>15</sup>:  
 And proclaim instead, as Asterios wrote, “We children of the muses have colours which are no less /  
 Than those employed by painters,”<sup>16</sup> Which Tzetzes will employ,  
 beginning to unfurl and stretch in brightest pigments, that figure of Manuel which lately has appeared,  
 In a place appropriate, “beside the courtroom door,”<sup>17</sup>

Look up at him, as you entreat, this deity alongside god,  
 to fulfill the needs of his servants,<sup>18</sup>  
 “To have pity now, and lend your aid divine”<sup>19</sup> to we who cluster at his crimson-painted feet,  
 Awed into silence by the man so fitting of the eagles which bedeck them,  
 Which clench in their claws “translucent stones, stones of the precious ones,  
 Lychnites, amethysts, sapphires, hyacinths,”

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Agapitos provides copious examples of Tzetzes’s writings on the topic of education and literary production, and makes the argument that his famously intemperate reactions to minor grammatical disagreements (like Homer and the use of diachronic vowels, which is also noted in Goldwyn and Kokkini’s introduction to *Allegories of the Illiad*) were in fact the (mostly) rational responses of a middle-class man trying to defend his authority as a scholar, noting that:

Schedography certainly became during the twelfth century an embittered educational and literary battle ground, where teachers acted out their fights for professional recognition and financial security in front of the aristocratic patrons of the empire’s capital. In this context, Tzetzes’ finely developed set of abusive imagery is by itself quite a literary achievement and one of the most tangible results of teaching the classics in Komnenian schools. Tzetzes was very sensitive to the ‘modernist’ change of fashion in education and its harmful role, as he saw it, to ‘traditional’ literary culture. (56)

This also ties-in in an interesting way with Vlada Stankovic’s argument that Manuel Komnenos “made a conscious effort to free himself from the influence of prominent intellectuals with whom he could not establish satisfying cooperation or from whom he was unable to command sufficient political obedience... [leading to] a significant generational difference between them.”

The tension between this generational difference and the rise of the *schedos*, associated by Tzetzes with non-traditional, comparatively un-atticized Greek is interesting to consider, and provides the subtext for Tzetzes’ pivot in the explanatory notes towards trying to spin his indiscrete writing as an attack on his scholarly enemies, who might also have opposed Manuel.

For more, see Vlada Stankovic, “A Generation Gap or Political Enmity? Emperor Manuel Komnenos, Byzantine Intellectuals and the Struggle for Domination in Twelfth Century Byzantium,” *Zbornik radova Vizantoloskog instituta* 44, 2007: 209-227.

15 Liz James, “Color and Meaning in Byzantium,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2003): 228.

16 Liz James and Ruth Webb, “‘To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places’: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium,” *Art History* 14, no. 1 (1991): 8.

17 Aristophanes, “Wasps,” 22.

18 Michael J. Kyriakis, “Poor Poets and Starving Literati in Twelfth Century Byzantium,” *Byzantion* 44, no. 2 (1974): 293. This phrase is drawn from a positive twelfth-century *ekphrasis* tentatively attributed to the impoverished writer Theodoros Prodromos. It is identified by Kyriakis as having been written sometime shortly after 1145 or 1146, almost perfectly in-line with the setting of the story, which is meant to take place sometime in the mid twelfth century.

19 Aristophanes, “Wasps,” 22.

Springing from the deepest chasms of the earth,  
 “impossible to reach down there,”<sup>20</sup> without your victories,  
 Those bloody battles when,  
 You first confronted the satrap of Iknion,  
 when the trumpets told and called out,  
 and you, refusing ever to shirk, or let the blows appal you<sup>21</sup>  
 Clenched the mighty thighs now hidden by the loros-scarf,  
 (blossoming with emeralds that “live in groves and lie in mossy beds,”)<sup>22</sup>  
 charged forth, putting your horse to the spur,  
 shot forth from the quiver of your guard,  
 like an arrow “plumed with eagle feathers”<sup>23</sup> flying home  
 to “strike”, to “graze,” to “prick,”<sup>24</sup>  
 the bristled hide of the Emir—  
 who, scouring the east to satiate his bloated coterie with plunder,  
 lays waste to the farmers’ fields, becoming your own Erymanthian boar,<sup>25</sup>  
 Thus minting you, like Alexander, into another Hercules,  
 Changing your chalmys to a lion’s skin before our eyes, and adding, un-engraved,  
 to your imaginary plinth, That “The bronze statue seems to proclaim, /  
 looking at Zeus: I place the earth under my sway; you, Zeus, keep Olympus.”<sup>26</sup>

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20 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 11.14 “The Proverb Saying, And Crevices of Mountain Torrents and Springs Thereof Stand by a Rock to Bring Forth Such a Stone (Story 376),” trans. Muhammed Syarif Fadhlurrahman, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades11.html>.

21 *Digenes Akrites*, trans. and ed. by John Mavrogordato (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 11. <https://archive.org/details/DigenesAkritesGreekEnglish>.

22 This phrase has been taken from Virgil’s description of the Elysian fields in the *Aeneid* (6.641); all descriptions of the imperial raiment which follow have been informed by the discussion in Maria G. Parani, *Reconstructing the reality of images: Byzantine material culture and religious iconography* (11th to 15th centuries) (Boston: Brill, 2003), 11-33.

23 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 9.7 “a Fable of Aesop: ‘Shot by My Own Feathers!’ (Story 260),” trans. Jonathan Alexander, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades9.html>.

24 These phrases, “strike,” “graze,” and “prick” were chosen to reflect the ambiguities detected by Robert Browning in his controversial work on the death of John II. Browning suggests that John died having been poisoned by an arrow meant for a boar – and perhaps not accidentally. He goes on to cite a poem by Tzetzes (unfortunately untranslated) which he argues implies “an unseen hand” behind John’s death (R. Browning, “The Death of John II Comnenus,” *Byzantion* 31 (1961), 232-34). Despite being unproven I have taken Browning’s idea as an inspiration, and this subtext is important throughout the latter part of the poem, as well as in the explanatory notes where I have tried to continue hinting at the charge.

For more on the debate over the subject and author of the poem discussed by Browning, see M. Arco Maori, “Il carmine inedito di Giovanni Tzetzes De imperatore Occiso,” *Bollettino del comitato per la preparazione dell’edizione nazionale dei classici greci e latini* 9 (1961), 73-75.

25 See the fourth labour of Hercules, in which the hero, armed with poison arrows that go astray and kill a man, must capture a boar.

26 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 8.45 “Concerning Lysippos (Story 200),” trans. Vasiliki Dogani, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades8.html>.

So it is with you: for Tzetzes has become a “Sicyonian sculptor” and “he portrays everything exactly,”<sup>27</sup> “making everything fitting for the positions, the occasions, the persons,”<sup>28</sup> Though nothing must be changed in you, whose face bears a complexion “fair and of a light colour Passing into ruddiness,” who exudes, incense like, “a most agreeable odour, exhaled from the skin”<sup>29</sup> And whose eyes, most of all, betray a conqueror’s likeness, “as portrait painters are more exact in the lines and features of the face, in which the character is seen, than in the body”<sup>30</sup>

For who, had they the courage to stare into that bifurcating gaze,  
 Could fail to perceive your scaled chalmys’ golden tablion  
 Twist to be a little soldier(-ly)—“the uniform of a triumphant general,” even Alexander’s breastplate?<sup>31</sup>

### Notes and Explanations

Some chattering cicadas, who in the summer of the exalted Manuel’s reign become only more chattery and troublesome, have buzzed that the first line,<sup>32</sup> “What advantages you gain from your dominion over all Greece,” comes from Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, insinuating that Tzetzes means to frame the august Basileus with a comic phrase, and paint for his audience the Emperor as Philocleon: sitting in judgement with a goat’s wide grin as he can see the naked boys and give rich widows as he pleases, disregarding seals and signatures. These scoffers, quite improvident and unthinking, criticise Tzetzes in an untimely way—blabbering before they reach the second stanza, wherein the phrase “make mere wealth look silly” completes Aristophanes’ line and hooks it well into these fishes’ cheeks, letting Tzetzes string them along.

In fact these fools, who are lymphatic, ugly, infamous, and debauched, are more dumb and ignorant than fish—ignorant that my very defense will be that this phrase in fact declares to them (or would, had they the literary faculties to recognize it) a merciless war.

This war had its antecedents not so long ago at the *theatra* of Leo, Bishop of Athens, to which Tzetzes, as a teacher of justifiably growing renown, was invited and went with mild trepidation. Of course, no contest in Homeric recitation could cow Tzetzes, who more than any can, with extemporaneous speech, compose words and recompose the ancients in ways mendacious enough to claim any composition as a credit, drawing Icarus-like students to himself (the boldest, who will try to climb into the heat of Tzetzes’ invective, not falling back to some other school where they will stew in praise for

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27 Ibid.

28 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 8.38 ““Concerning Alcamenes (Story 193),” trans. Vasiliki Dogani, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades8.html>.

29 Plutarch, “Alexander,” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, trans. Edmund Fuller (New York: International Collector’s Library, 1959), 242.

30 Ibid., 240.

31 See Seutonius’ famous description of Caligula in *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*.

32 Tzetzes, *Chiliades* 9.48 “9.48 Concerning the Phrase ‘The Chattering Language of Cicadas and Athenians’ (Story 301),” trans. Jonathan Alexander, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/TzetzesChiliades9.html>.

their inevitably poor, desperately conscientious work, marred by underscores, transposes, and the unnecessary footnotes they have hung like buckets on the bottom of the page, in hope of catching some worthwhile slop).

No, what Tzetzes fears is what these *theatra* oh so often are: there may indeed be Homer, read by men praised by *sebastokrators* as speaking in rivers of gold (which flow, but somehow never overflow, into two tributaries that terminate with such consistency in their gaping pockets...); yet inevitably there will be no inspired talk, no wreathed, elbow-propped heads, and of course no flute girls; and inevitably those “philosophers” will rise and brutalize The Poet’s lyric words, bludgeoning into diachronic vowels those turns of phrase which carve the filigree on Achilles’ shield, making themselves low like buffalo.<sup>33</sup>

Which they are: for Leo resembles his namesake in spirit, if not in form, and like a lion needs a watering hole at which to wait in ambush for those ruminants that Tzetzes saw. And so he made one: my late arrival saw discarded cups growing like mushrooms in the shade of couches, on which sprawled those obfuscated people who only bear the brow and walk of philosophers (and often also the beard) but nothing else beyond that.<sup>34</sup> For instead of minding books, wherein lies manifold wealth, they have become ignorant scum, the composers of foolish sketches who have utterly barbarized the art of letters, wallowing in the foul-smelling dung of the *shedos* they shit out by writing fooleries and indulging in nonsense.<sup>35</sup> One only wonders what they do without a cow’s tail to keep the flies away (oh wait! they chatter, hoping a mightier hand will squash *tsetses* [flies] for them); but they seemed to please Leo, who like Psellos’ Constantine was diverted by their wrong use of words and urged them on so that he could roll with laughter<sup>36</sup>—less like a lion than a bloated crocodile, spinning to shred its pound of fetid flesh from the corpus of these babble-twisters.

But Tzetzes is not one who will exalt his own works by slandering others who are as worthy of pity as anger; for he, tutored by Aristotle, is like Alexander, who entering into conversations gained so much by his affability<sup>37</sup>—or would be, had the thick venom of envy not begun to squirt at me whenever I digressed into discussion of my descent on the maternal side from Cato, intended only to demonstrate my free and simple demeanor.

But Tzetzes has digressed. Suffice to say that by the end these men, who with their riddles teach only

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33 Panagiotis A. Agapitos, “John Tzetzes and the blemish examiners: a Byzantine teacher on schedography, everyday language, and writerly disposition,” *Medioevo Greco* 17 (2017): 11. This was one of Tzetzes’ preferred insults, and seems to have been related both to the ugly sound the use of diachronic vowels would create and his desire to lower his enemies rhetorically to the status of beasts.

34 Panagiotis A. Agapitos, “John Tzetzes and the blemish examiners: a Byzantine teacher on schedography, everyday language, and writerly disposition,” *Medioevo Greco* 17: 47.

35 Ibid.

36 Psellos *Chronographia* VI, 149-201, quoted in Lynda Garland, “‘And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon...’: an appreciation of the Byzantine sense of humor as recorded in historical sources of the eleventh and twelfth Centuries,” *Parergon* 8, no. 1 (1990): 12-13.

37 Plutarch, “Alexander,” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, trans. Edmund Fuller (New York: International Collector’s Library, 1959), 243.

the vulgar complexity of a tavern keeper, left me to scream:

I want to be a tanner, a stone-cutter,  
 or follow any other craftsman's art.  
 Even a cobbler too, an ignorant inn-keeper  
 who still can't say a single syllable,  
 but when he speaks he pours out buckets of spit,  
 a disgraceful, utterly brainless clod,  
 who makes his progress down the middle of the street  
 furnished with a royal escort,  
 vomiting up a lot of arrogant talk,  
 while a reverend soul, well-bred in discourses  
 goes about homeless, poor, wretched.  
 I see the deranged in the Senate,  
 the brilliant dishonoured, the dull piled high with honours:  
 For it's gold now that talks, everyone admires it.<sup>38</sup>

And so I laid a trap for them, luring them with that which they love most, the ambiguity of a “double tongue” that Tzetzes proclaims in his second stanza – and then undercuts by making them Penelope's suitors “who love lyre and song,” a horde of foolish Ctessipuses, who insult me and throw about their hooves whilst missing things so obvious that a stone could yell it out.

For what else could this mean? Only the most diseased minds would take Tzetzes' offhand allusion to the Oracle of the *Knights* and twist it to imply that I mean to cast the glorious Manuel as a sausage seller who will “cashier the generals... and fornicate in the Prytaneum!”<sup>39</sup> Being so dutiful a son, the magnificent Emperor would not dishonour his father, the so ascetic John, by dipping his point illicitly---most certainly after having been rewarded, for his Roman choices, with his father's blessing and his crown.<sup>40</sup> Nor would Tzetzes, “who understands not the signs of birds,” become some Gylkas and make sarcastic jabs at the mighty Manuel's profundity of thought<sup>41</sup>—that learned dispensation on astrology and the signs which he, doubtless, conceived as the mightiest scholars do: by holding on their brow, like Atlas, the whole universe of their constructed thoughts (From where else does an imperial address spring?).<sup>42</sup>

And so if these dribblers (whose attic verse has lost its bite as they will lose their teeth—from disuse, gumming like flabby worms at honey and jellied peacock!) cry that Tzetzes has insinuated, or has

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38 Michael Haploucheir, *Dramation* ll. 67-80, trans. Andrew White, *Dumbarton Oaks* (2010), 39. Michael Haploucheir was a Senator in late twelfth-century Constantinople.

39 Aristophanes, *Knights*, trans. Thomas Bushnell, accessed December 10, 2018. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristophanes/knights.html>.

40 One of several references to Browning's murder thesis.

41 Demetra George, “Manuel Komnenos and Michael Glykas: A Twelfth-Century Defence and refutation of Astrology,” *Culture and Cosmos* 5, no. 1 (2001): 34.

42 *Ibid.*, 28. Glykas, mentioned in the previous passage, asserts that a “distinguished grammatikos wrote the above lines while he was imprisoned hoping that they would be shown to the holy king and he would receive his freedom.”

conflated the illustrious prophecy of the blood, then let them speak truthfully for once and screech “AIMA cheat!” within your hearing, proclaiming their own fevered minds.<sup>43</sup>

For to reveal twisted and disloyal thoughts, which foment treachery and deceit, is Tzetzes’ aim, as he makes clear saying that he will speak straight. His “leading thread” will show the uneducated the way, giving fitting homage to Manuel in his *ekphrasis*<sup>44</sup>—all meant at face value!—whilst his allusions criss-cross and tie themselves into a snare for those coarse haired, bloated Minoan monsters who gorge in their labyrinths on the city’s most illustrious young, fed by the parents of such persons who, listening to their children speak to them in barbaric manner, somehow tolerate the garrulous non-sense they are told to write.

For who but some grotesque boar-man, tusks fetid from his rooting in the rotted slop tossed into a Constantinopolitan alleyway, would look first for blemishes – nicks and scratches to feed the dark hearts squeezing ichor through the veins beneath their dark breasts? Only they would try to poison an emperor against Tzetzes, observing that he allegorizes Manuel’s statue as like Lychus’ in the *Wasps*, where old men shit behind it and spray it with the piss. The lines, of course, are there, but these, of course, are the same men Tzetzes warns you of! And it is their disrespect which is displayed in the exacting, niggling little observances (characteristic of a poor scribe playing judge and catching ink-drop diphthongs whilst his bedraggled scribbles hide face down in shame): for surely, what meaning could there be in Tzetzes promising to “employ all the colours of a painter” and leaving off the purple? When he begins by placing himself at the imperial feet, marked in his speech by eagles holding all the precious stones which symbolize the graces?

These shrieking cocks, useless as they won’t call out the dawn (being chimeras with the bodies of slugs, still abed and stinking of the rank liquor which pickles them for their masters tables), have squealed hourly through their dinners that Tzetzes has not clad the royal feet in red, but “painted” them in crimson gore, splashed from the bloody battles he describes; that he has reinforced his rhetoric by making Manuel a Saturn devouring his children<sup>45</sup> by alluding to the eagles of the Euphrates and the Tigris, the Indus and the Susa, who gather for their masters, who take:

Newly slaughtered, newly flayed living flesh nearby  
 There they throw down into the chasm of the stones.  
 Some stones are stuck together with flesh by the present heat.  
 The eagles at these places looking down upon the carcasses,  
 Spreading over them, carrying those up.  
 The stones drop down the rest of the carcasses,

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43 Another reference to the AIMA prophecy discussed in endnote eight. See *Nicetae Choniatae Historia I*, ed. J. A. van Dieten (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975), 169.

44 For a discussion of the way in which Byzantine authors used *ekphrasis*, see Anthony Kaldellis, “Christodoros on the Statues of the Zeuxippos Baths: A New Reading of the *Ekphrasis*,” *Greek Roman and Byzantine Studies* 47 (2007): 361-383. For a discussion of *ekphrasis* in the twelfth century, see Antony Eastmond, “An Intentional Error? Imperial Art and “Mis”-Interpretation under Andronikos I Komnenos,” *The Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 502-510.

45 Yet another reference to Browning’s murder thesis, as Saturn is the Latin name (employed here to link Manuel to the Latin mercenaries whom Browning suggests killed John II—at least according to some poets) of Cronus, who envied powers of father and was induced to castrate him and seize his throne.

At the top of the rocks and in the places there.

But that is absurd; for what kind of typhonic monster would not ever “let the blows appal him,” and would feed his Roman kin for Italian pearls? And what author what transmute the Roman eagle into a carrion bird, a bird of omen?

“But!” they will cry, unseen and emboldened, squawking like deformed versions of those parrots who shriek invectives taught by the moneychangers—those noble patrons who will cluck and gather them like hens under their wings so they may prostrate themselves as they are wont, nuzzling their noses against felt slippers like fawning puppies, lying on their backs in the manner of hogs to have their distended bellies stroked. “But! See how Tzetzes weaves the ancients’ words into the blackest and most poisonous treason! For he implies that Manuel is Hercules at his fourth labour, when the hero shot Pholus and Chiron with poisoned arrows! That he is Alexander who, when Pausinas came complaining of the injury he had received, repeated a verse from Euripides’ *Medea*, drawing infamy upon himself as one culpable for an unspeakable crime!<sup>46</sup> He gives Manuel even Alexander’s eyes, which Tzetzes claims show the Basileus’ character, but does not expound and show that those eyes were different! One black and one blue—staring at “the earth” and Zeus’ Olympus with his “bifurcating gaze,” just as Aristophanes’ sausage-seller did, turning, cock-eyed, his “right eye towards Caria and his left toward Carthage!” And Tzetzes claims that he ‘portrays everything exactly!’ But most monstrously of all, steals from Suetonius to have Manuel steal from Alexander’s grave and become a new Caligula!”<sup>47</sup>

But they overstep; for what has Tzetzes said? All their yelping—these philosophic whelps who, fathered by perjurers and mothered by notorious prostitutes, ought to be consigned to Constantine’s garden rather than his palace, so that their pumpkin heads might fall with the other fruits into the pond for the Emperor’s amusement<sup>48</sup>—is predicated on some enthymeme, some unstated argument that they hold in their heads and which leaks like bile from their fishlike mouths. These men, stupid as fish, must have something in their stomachs (though not a tsetse [fly], being pets too fattened and afraid to leap from the stream as they should); something they all have said, and all have thought (for they are more effeminate than women and more cowardly than deer<sup>49</sup>).

Tzetzes then, will rest his defense on this: that having baited the hook, he has caught for you, who have been praised by everyone for your wisdom as someone able to judge situations, a whole brace of liars bent on some conspiracy. I, of course, mean only to bring to your noble self-knowledge of all, and especially of those I know very well and who have worked for you. For I am convinced that all of these, since they have no judgment—not having read Lysias the famous rhetorician, the son of Kefalos, where he says that Andocedes had brought an accusation against his own father; or Aeschine, the

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46 Plutarch, “Alexander,” in *Lives of the Noble Greeks*, trans. Edmund Fuller (New York: International Collector’s Library, 1959), 243.

47 Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1913), 485, [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Caligula\\*.html#52](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Caligula*.html#52).

48 Lynda Garland, “‘And His Bald Head Shone Like a Full Moon...’: an appreciation of the Byzantine sense of humor as recorded in historical sources of the eleventh and twelfth Centuries,” *Parergon* 8, no. 1 (1990): 12-13.

49 Ibid., 19.

son of Atromitus, where they will find that Demosthenes had lodged a complaint against his nephew, Dimomeles—will accuse us of being wicked, since they have obliged us to be so. All these enemies are ours in common, you see! And they will laugh at us like braying donkeys if you do not hasten to punish in all justice these enemies who whisper in breaths perfumed with the stench of tonsil stones! This is why I must not be silent and bring on this suffering. As for you, you will not hear voices from heaven, but a voice coming from us and not from the Galatians, that of the wrath of the very just emperor, if with your own hand you do not chase these lepers down and impose “the unseen hand” of the Imperial state.<sup>50</sup>

But, as you can see, for lack of paper, I must fall into silence.

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50 This final section is comprised of many large chunks from another of Tzetzes’ letters, translated by me from the French translation available in Jean Dayantis, “Une lettre de Ioannes Tzetzes au protosebaste Isaac frère de l’Empereur Byzantin Jean II,” *Byzantion Nea Hellas* 35 (2016): 211-233.

Several changes have been made, with the most important being the ham-fisted inclusion of a final reference to the “unseen hand” which appears in the Tzetzes poem about John II’s death which is quoted in Browning, “The Death of John II Comnenus,” *Byzantion* 31 (1961), 234.

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