

# EPISTOLARY POETRY IN BYZANTIUM AND BEYOND

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## EPISTOLARITY IN TWELFTH- CENTURY BYZANTINE POETRY

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## EPISTOLARITY IN TWELFTH-CENTURY BYZANTINE POETRY

### Singing Praises and Asking Favors *in Absentia*

Nikos Zagklas\*

“Unrestricted by ‘high’ or ‘low’ subject matter, the verse epistle values sociable exchange, but it esp. explores how the ‘private’ can be read by the ‘public’ to assert the relations between these domains.”<sup>1</sup>

This brief description is concerned with a period which has been described as the “golden age” of this literary form.<sup>2</sup> However, the verse letter has a long history in the Latin west, stretching from the time of Horace and Ovid all the way to the Renaissance before finding its way to the Elizabethan court, and reaching its peak in the Augustan literature of the eighteenth century. Throughout its long tradition, the verse letter has often been viewed as a protean literary form, permeated with various modes and themes. Because of its inherent generic hybridity, forged through the synergy of poetry and letter-writing practice, it is a type of text that frequently transgressed established literary conventions and norms to serve both literary and pragmatic functions. As with letters in prose, it was used as a medium of communication, maintaining (intellectual) friendships or fostering socially asymmetrical exchanges between patrons and clients; and just like its prose counterparts, it could even mirror a fictional correspondence. While many of these aspects have been extensively discussed for various other literary traditions, be they

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1. Keith 2012, 421.

2. For an introduction to eighteenth-century English letters, see Overton 2007.

premodern or early modern, this is not the case for Byzantium. This paper focuses on the twelfth century, when a series of developments, ranging from social mobility and authorial individualism to intellectual friendship and antagonism, left a distinct mark on the contemporary letter-writing practice.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, the essay takes a look at poems that have received little attention, at least when it comes to their epistolary features. It will first address some challenges that arise when we try to draw the borderlines of this thematically, aesthetically, and functionally diversified group, especially in conjunction with the ambiguous image emanating from Byzantine book culture and with the conversion of mutually entangled modes of plea and praise into pervasive components of much of the poetry written during this period. After a brief presentation of the material, it will focus on three texts by Theodore Prodromos, the court writer *par excellence* of the second quarter of the twelfth century, to show how his physical absence from the court and intellectual life spurred him to author letters in verse and how face-to-face praise and supplications were superseded with long-distance encomiastic and supplicatory communications.

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In the third quarter of the twelfth century, John Tzetzes, among his other gigantic literary undertakings, set out to put together, in a chronological order, a collection of his own letters, forging a highly self-representational image of his intellectual and social activity in twelfth-century Constantinople.<sup>4</sup> The final collection of 107 letters must have been the result of a long redrafting process, especially since it was supplemented by the so-called *Histories*, a vast didactic commentary with a strongly autobiographic nature running to more than 12,000 fifteen-syllable verses.<sup>5</sup> The manuscript tradition and some paratextual evidence reveal at least three redactions of the collection, but the letters and the *Histories* are preserved together only in the last two redactions, with their main divergence being the way the letters and the commentary is arranged.<sup>6</sup> As with many other letter-writers assembling their letters into a single collection,<sup>7</sup> Tzetzes had to make decisions about the letters which should have been included or excluded in the final draft of his collection. A good example reflecting this laborious and time-consuming process of selection is probably Letter 10, a fictional letter to his brother Isaac Tzetzes, who had lost his life in Rhodes while

3. See, for example, Grünbart 2005b; Grünbart 2014; Hartmann 2014. An influential study on the corpus of a single twelfth-century letter-writer still remains Mullett 1997.

4. John Tzetzes, *Letters*, ed. Leone 1972; for a study of Tzetzes' letter collection with a focus on their prosopographical significance and their chronological order, see Grünbart 1996.

5. John Tzetzes, *Histories*, ed. Leone 2007; for a detailed study of this work, see Pizzone 2017.

6. Pizzone 2017, 184n9.

7. In addition to authorial collections, various other types of letter collections were put together throughout Byzantine times; see Riehle 2020c, esp. 477–90.

coming back from a military mission to Aleppo. Although the title of the letter survives, its actual text was not included in the collection, with the author justifying his decision with the following words:<sup>8</sup>

Because of the excessive grief and the frequent misuse of *dichrona*—for it was written in iambs—after crossing it out,<sup>9</sup> I trampled it under my feet.

Ἦν διὰ τὸ ὑπερπαθῆσαί με καὶ διὰ τὸ καταχρήσεις πολλὰς αὐτὴν ἔχειν τῶν διχρόνων—διὰ στίχων γὰρ ἦν ἰάμβων—χιώσας συνεπάτησα.

According to this brief note, Tzetzes destroyed the poem he wrote after the death of his brother because he felt that grief was no excuse for the erratic use of *dichrona*, which he regarded as unpolished metrical mistakes. This speaks for the significance the Byzantines placed on the composition of correct iambs and in particular Tzetzes' obsession with avoiding the random lengthening or shortening of *dichrona*,<sup>10</sup> but it also shows that some letters by Tzetzes were composed in verse.

Even though the text did not make it into the letter collection, this is one of the few examples of a potential inclusion of a (twelfth-century) verse letter in such a collection.<sup>11</sup> Tzetzes and other Byzantine authors regarded and used some poems as letters, but the situation in the manuscripts provides an ambivalent image regarding the generic classification of these texts.<sup>12</sup> As with other types of poetry and literature more broadly, verse letters are devoid of their original purpose in Byzantine manuscripts. They turn from occasional texts with an extratextual aim into literary ones and are usually grouped with other kinds of poetry—but rarely with prose letters. Though both prose and verse works were part of the broader conceptual category of *logoi*,<sup>13</sup> in most of

8. John Tzetzes, *Letters*, no. 10, ed. Leone 1972, 19.5–7; trans. Pizzone 2017, 189 (slightly modified).

9. What Tzetzes means here is that he drew lines over the text in his personal copy during the process of creating his letter collection. This was a common practice in Byzantium; for example, in codex Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 101, an autograph transmitting the letters of Demetrios Kydones, the text of some letters is crossed out by the author himself; see Hatlie 1996.

10. See Lauxtermann forthcoming; cf. also van den Berg 2020.

11. There is also the verse letter addressed to John Lachanas, which is embedded in the narrative of the *Histories* (see later, 69, 70). It is unclear whether this text was originally a self-contained letter, which was later inserted in the *Histories*, simply because it is written in political verses, or if it was written as part of the *Histories* from the very beginning; for the practice of using letters (including some in verse) in long narrative texts, see Cupane 2020, and the excerpts taken from *Libistros and Rhodanne* in Anthology nos. 33–34. What is more, some manuscripts transmit a jocular letter in verse by Tzetzes after prose Letter 107 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Par. gr. 2750, fol. 235r; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1369, fol. 104v), which was not included in the modern edition by Leone. I owe this reference to Aglae Pizzone, who plans to prepare an edition of this unknown text.

12. See Introduction, 17.

13. See Bernard 2014, 34–47.

the manuscripts the borderlines between them are more clear-cut, since prose works are often grouped together with other prose works and poems with other poems, with their generic classification usually being downgraded in terms of importance. Even if some prose and verse works share many common generic features, their form is quite often a more important criterion than the generic one for their arrangement in the manuscripts.

In addition to the somewhat ambiguous situation in Byzantine book culture, the twelfth century poses a further challenge, mainly because of the persona of the “begging poet,” crying out for help and asking for various boons, usually in the form of some sort of material remuneration, which governs the discursive narrative of much of the poetry written between roughly 1120 and 1170.<sup>14</sup> While this development seems to have pushed the increase in the number of verse letters during this period, at the same time it blurs the boundary lines of this type of text, for it is not always easy to determine whether a poem that sings the praises of a patron and/or puts forward a request was used as a letter. Much twelfth-century occasional poetry is addressed to various individuals, and so are both prose and verse letters. To make things even worse, orations and letters are two types of texts that share many formal features, a similar structure and an analogous formulaic language.<sup>15</sup> Their main difference is that the former usually presupposes the physical presence of both the author and the addressee, while the latter builds upon a distant relationship between a sender (the author) and the recipient (the addressee), or the supplicant and the patron.

A very good case exemplifying this functional and generic ambivalence is the well-known poem addressed to Anna Komnene by Theodore Prodromos,<sup>16</sup> an author with outstanding talent in the art of asking favors. This poem has been described as a “begging poem” in the learned language,<sup>17</sup> or even as a “learned letter.”<sup>18</sup> After a number of invocations, ranging from the Holy Trinity and angels to his works and books, the poet addresses Anna Komnene by stressing her imperial status and the qualities of her learning, asking her to pay heed to his sufferings (vv. 1–9). Prodromos then sketches his personal background by saying that his father incited him not to become a lowbrow craftsman, but to fashion for himself a career as a man of letters (vv. 10–44). Prodromos duly

14. Though the secondary bibliography on this generically and thematically varied type of poetry is vast, the focus has always been placed on the four Ptochoprodromic poems, resulting in the lack of a comprehensive overview of this literary phenomenon and its various manifestations. For a study of the Ptochoprodromic poems, see Kulhánková 2021 (with ample bibliography); for an excellent study of poetry teeming with requests and its ties to the letter-writing practice with a focus on Manuel Philes, see Kubina 2018.

15. For similar remarks on the verse letters by Martin Opitz in the Baroque time, see Sperberg-McQueen 1982, 528.

16. Theodore Prodromos, *Poems*, no. 38, ed. Hörandner 1974, 377–81.

17. See Kulhánková 2010, 175–80.

18. Beaton 1987, 5.

followed his father's advice and acquired an in-depth education (vv. 45–67), but he eventually came to realize that there was no profit in it, expressing a deep remorse for all his choices (vv. 68–84). Upon a very detailed self-referential account running to some seventy verses, the poet shifts the focus on his current critical situation, comparing it to the “Tantaleian Punishment”; Prodrornos faces the same problem as Tantalus, who could not quench his thirst, although he stood in a pool of water (vv. 85–108).<sup>19</sup> He has come closer to death, and for this reason he employs *logoi* (v. 110: λόγους προτίθημι μεσίτας) to intercede with Anna Komnene for the acquisition of a reward of an unspecified nature; otherwise Hades, he claims, will snap him away.

Since Prodrornos concludes his poem with an explicit request for recompense for his work, it reads like a petition partaking of the gift-giving discourse, which is a common topic of many prose letters.<sup>20</sup> Like petitionary letters in prose, it includes a formal address to the recipient with a *captatio benevolentiae*. The long self-referential narrative and the statement about his current circumstances set the ground for the construction of an effective request for assistance. We miss, however, a formal greeting and a leave-taking, which might have been originally part of the text but later omitted in the process of copying it in a manuscript.<sup>21</sup> But as has been already said, there is a thin line between orations and letters. In his study on eighteenth-century verse letters, Bill Overton noted: “what further compounds the problem is that almost any kind of poem may be written as an epistle, from panegyric to satire, or epithalamium to elegy.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, much of the occasional poetry of the twelfth century with a panegyric nature might have been verse letters, but we often lack evidence to classify them as such. Thus the main challenge for classifying the poem to Anna Komnene as a letter or an oration—with the one not excluding the other—is the scarcity of evidence about the exact circumstances of its delivery. Was it read out by Prodrornos himself in front of the *kaisarissa* before some kind of audience? Or was it sent as a letter and then a messenger read it before her?

The poem to Anna Komnene is not the only text vacillating between two generic groups. Take, for example, the verse letter by John Tzetzes for his deceased brother that was never included in his letter collection. Isaac was posthumously addressed by his brother, which imputes a sense of fictionality to it, while in terms of genre, it should have been close to the category of funerary discourse, simply marked as a letter because it was meant to be sent to his brother in Rhodes. Even twelfth-century poems with ekphrastic elements can acquire an epistolary function when they are sent to the person

19. Hörandner (1974, 377) interpreted this passage as an allusion to an illness, but what Prodrornos does here is to present his poverty as a Tantaleian disease to raise the effectiveness of his request.

20. Bernard 2011a; Introduction, 12.

21. On this issue of “de-epistolization” see Introduction, 15.

22. Overton 2007, 2.

who commissioned them. Manganeios Prodromos wrote for the *sebastokratorissa* Irene a poem at the time when she accompanied her brother-in-law Manuel I on campaign.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, the poem has a strong ekphrastic focus praising the beauty of Irene's imperial tent and her virtues, including no indication that would remind us at all of the structure of a letter. However, once we reach the final verse of the poem we read the following: ἔρωσο, Χάρις καὶ Σειρήν καὶ Μοῦσα Καλλιόπη ("Greetings, grace and siren and Muse Calliope"). This farewell formula may be interpreted as a kind of experimentation with epistolary formulaic features, but it may also demonstrate how easily a poem can shade into a letter.<sup>24</sup>

But for all these challenges—which speak for the flexibility of this literary form, the various degrees of epistolarity of many texts, and at the same time the functional elusiveness of much twelfth-century poetry—the situation is more clear about some other poems from this period, for they include some genre markers or a structure peculiar to letter-writing practice. A good starting point for the classification of some poems as letters is always their rubrics—irrespective of whether they go back to the author or are later additions by scribes.<sup>25</sup> The title of Theophylaktos of Ohrid's Poem 2 (= Anthology **no. 22**) informs us that the text is a type of ἀντίγραμμα, a response to a letter sent by Nikephoros Bryennios from Constantinople; the title of Theodore Prodromos' Poem 68 (= Anthology **no. 24**) indicates that it is an apologetic verse letter to Stephanos Meles on behalf of the author for his long-delayed visit to the recipient. Some other poems even have the marker ἐπιστολή in their headings or in the main text: Prodromos' Poem 72 (Anthology **no. 25**) to Theodore Styppeiotēs,<sup>26</sup> the letter to Lachanas in John Tzetzes' *Histories*,<sup>27</sup> and a poem by Manganeios Prodromos for Irene the *sebastokratorissa* (Anthology **no. 27**). A letter by Euthymios Tornikes sent to an otherwise unknown Constantine Doukas is labeled as *pit-takion* (Anthology **no. 32**), a term usually reserved for official documents or for the designation of letters in the vernacular.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the headings, some poems also have internal textual evidence, mainly some stock epistolary formulae or even indications that these texts were used as letters. For example, in

23. See Anthology **no. 28** with Mullett 2018, 417–19.

24. Similarly, it would not be possible to determine that a metrical ekphrasis of Naxos by Joseph Bryennios was sent as a letter to a certain Georgios if there was no such hint in the heading; see Tomadakes 1983–86, 337–40. To make things even more complicated, even *shedē* sent to various imperial figures acquire the function of letters on account of their verse epilogues, which usually address a patron. See, for example, the two *shedē* by Theodore Prodromos in Vassis 1993–94.

25. See Introduction, 17. For a study on the headings of Byzantine poems, see Rhoby 2015.

26. The poem is designated as such only in the manuscript Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Marc. gr. Z. 524, fol. 103v (see **Cover Image**).

27. This is indicated in the prose explanatory note between the heading and the main text of the letter in which Tzetzes notes that the text partakes of judicial, deliberative, and encomiastic rhetoric; see John Tzetzes, *Histories* 4, ed. Leone 2007, 142.

28. See Introduction, 11.

Poem 71 addressed to Theodore Styppeiotes, Prodromos asks from his recipient to report the military success of the emperor in the following manner: “write to me about these things” (ταῦτα γράφε πρὸς ἐμέ, v. 84),<sup>29</sup> while Manganeios Prodromos, in a poem directed to Irene *sebastokratorissa*, notes: “I weave a letter [literally, ‘piece of writing’], a great comfort” (μέγα παρηγόρημα τὸ γράμμα πλέκω, Anthology **no. 27**, v. 2), with the phrasing of both texts hinting at the use of their poems as letters.

When compared with earlier centuries, twelfth-century Byzantium may have seen an increase in the production of verse letters,<sup>30</sup> but still this figure makes up only a small fraction of the total amount of surviving twelfth-century letters. For example, Theophylaktos of Ohrid, the most prolific author of letters in the time of Alexios I Komnenos, wrote 135 prose letters,<sup>31</sup> but we only know of two verse letters; on the other hand, Theodore Prodromos’ corpus amounts to twenty-eight prose letters,<sup>32</sup> but only four out of dozens of poems addressed to various individuals can be classified as letters with certainty.<sup>33</sup> Despite the small number of letters in verse, they prove to be elastic texts (just like their prose counterparts), mirroring a wide range of occasions with a variety of themes. Theophylaktos of Ohrid, in a jocular verse letter, summons the imperial doctor and former student Michael Pantechnes to pay a visit to him and heal his severe sciatica (Anthology **no. 22**),<sup>34</sup> while in another one he declares to Nikephoros Bryennios that he is void of any literary inspiration, for the land of Barbarians (Bulgaria) has taken the best of him (Anthology **no. 21**). Theodore Prodromos sent a letter to his intellectual peer Ioannikios (Anthology **no. 23**), one letter to Stephanos Meles (Anthology **no. 24**) and another two letters to his former student Theodore Styppeiotes (Poems 71 and 72 = Anthology **no. 25**) on various occasions and under various pretexts, such as to apologize for his delayed visit or to seek help and succor. Manganeios Prodromos directed an extensive letter to the *sebastokratorissa* Irene, which takes on the form of consolation for the sufferings of the recipient revolving around the happiness and the misfortunes of the Mother of God before and after His birth (Anthology **no. 27**). John Tzetzes, in a verse letter filled with mythological, biblical, and historical exempla attacks the grammarian John Lachanas, when the latter was promoted to the prominent rank of *zabareïōtēs*, the officer in charge of the imperial arsenal.<sup>35</sup> Euthymios Tornikes wrote a letter to

29. Theodore Prodromos, *Poems*, no. 71, ed. Hörandner 1974, 518.

30. See Introduction, 27.

31. Theophylaktos of Ohrid, *Poems*, ed. Gautier 1986; Mullett 1997.

32. Theodore Prodromos, *Letters*, ed. and trans. Op de Coul 2007.

33. Possibly Poem 46 (ed. Hörandner 1974, 431–3) addressed to Irene the *sebastokratorissa* was also sent as a letter, but this is a poem that needs more research.

34. For the prose letter that revolves around the same topic, see the appendix later, 76–77.

35. John Tzetzes, *Histories* 4.471–779, ed. Leone 2007, 142–52. On the office of *zabareïōtēs*, see Koliass 1980, 27–35.



Constantine Doukas with the request to make mention of him in the letters the recipient sends to an ill priest in his vicinity (Anthology **no. 32**).

Various kinds of classification can be imposed on this diversified corpus of texts: highly discursive and less discursive letters,<sup>36</sup> fact-based and fictional letters,<sup>37</sup> letters with a pragmatic or a literary function, or even letters about professional or personal matters. But it is often not easy to classify without avoiding some degree of arbitrariness or thematic overlapping. This holds especially true for letters standing for professional or personal relationships. These types of relationships are not easily distinguished from each other in a society with a strict class-stratified patronage system like that of the twelfth-century Byzantium, when patrons or fellow peers were elevated to the status of friends, and ties of patronage are veiled behind the convention of friendship to facilitate the exchange of gifts and favors.<sup>38</sup> *Philia* (friendship) and asymmetrical relationships are entangled to such a degree that makes it impossible to separate them; in an extensive analysis of the rhetoric of Elizabethan supplicatory letters by suitors, Frank Whigham has argued that letters aim “to create a community of author and addressee in pursuit of a specific and local goal.”<sup>39</sup> In the same vein, the verse letter in twelfth-century Byzantium quite often turns out to be a literary medium that fostered the system of patronage and helped the letter-writers to pursue their extratextual aims, especially in moments of physical absence from the public sociocultural life of Constantinople. This is very well exemplified in the case of three poems by Theodore Prodromos to Ioannikios the monk, Stephanos Meles, and Theodore Styppeiotes.

The first poem, no. 62 (= Anthology **no. 23**), is addressed to Ioannikios the monk, an obscure figure who was a middle-class teacher and a prolific scribe.<sup>40</sup> The poet opens his letter with an oath, increasing its authority by comparing it to those taken by Pythagoras to the tetractys and by the ancient gods to the water of the Styx (vv. 1–4).<sup>41</sup> Prodromos solemnly swears to Ioannikios that he did not forget his addressee, their strong bonds of friendship, or the sweetness and eloquence of his works. He has a good reason for his long absence: an illness, matching the severity of the Hydra, the legendary many-headed monster, hinders his visit to him (vv. 5–12). But a letter full of reproaches from Ioannikios has hurt his heart. Ioannikios has been very harsh to his friend Prodromos, even though he was lying in bed, deprived of any physical movement. This is the reason he could not visit him and fulfill a friendly request from Ioannikios,

36. The length of verse letters ranges from nine lines, as with Theophylaktos' letter to Michael Pan-teches, to over three hundred in the case of John Tzetzes' letter to John Lachanas.

37. Such as the verse letter by John Tzetzes addressed to his brother Isaac after the latter's death; see earlier, 65–66.

38. See, for instance, Bernard 2014, 322–33.

39. Whigham 1981, 865.

40. Papaioannou 2013, 257–8; cf. also Nesseris 2014, 139–57.

41. On these oaths, see the Commentary.

probably alluding to a commission of a work by him.<sup>42</sup> In the concluding verse, Prodrornos says that he knows how sincere the heart of his addressee is and that severe reproaches are part of a friendship (v. 18).

Poem 68 (= Anthology **no. 24**) has as its recipient Stephanos Meles, another learned man of Prodrornos' day and a high-ranking official who served as *logothetēs tou dromou*.<sup>43</sup> In the opening address, Meles is portrayed as Prodrornos' savior, helping him during all kinds of difficulties. Prodrornos does not fail to hint at the important rank and rhetorical prowess of his patron (vv. 1–2). In the main part of the text (vv. 3–11), the author goes into detail about the symptoms of his disease (nausea, loss of hair, fever, swelling, etc.). To highlight the acuteness of his condition, Prodrornos claims that he was burning from fever for seven days long. But despite being wracked with the pangs that the disease has inflicted on him, he incites his numbed legs to work in order to visit Meles and prostrate himself before him. The letter concludes with a confident statement that Stephanos Meles will keep helping him as he has done so many times in the past.

The third poem, no. 72 (= Anthology **no. 25**), is addressed to another powerful official, the imperial secretary Theodore Styppeiotēs. Just like the poem to Meles, Prodrornos first focuses on the rank of the addressee and his prominent place in the senatorial council (vv. 1–2), and of course Meles is portrayed as another rescuer of Prodrornos. In playing with the ambiguous meaning of the word ἄνθρωξ (see Commentary) and alluding to classical and biblical texts, Prodrornos informs Styppeiotēs about the severe situation of his illness that prevents him from visiting his former student. His disease is like a snare that keeps his legs trapped, hampering his visit to Styppeiotēs to throw himself at his feet (as he would have done with Meles). Prodrornos has gone through various sufferings, which have been relieved a bit thanks to Styppeiotēs' generosity. Even though he is not able to be present at the court, Styppeiotēs will remind himself about Prodrornos (vv. 31–35). At the end of the poem, Prodrornos accentuates once more Styppeiotēs' mercy. Extraordinary coals of compassion, Prodrornos says, are burning inside him, whose flame are fanned by Saint Nicholas, the saint *par excellence* for compassion and concern for the misfortunes and sufferings of humans. As a result, the poet has high hopes that Styppeiotēs will continue providing help to him.

These poems may be directed to three different recipients, but all of them are associated, in one way or another, with Prodrornos' activity as an intellectual in Constantinople. The first aims to maintain an intellectual friendship;

42. See v. 4, where Prodrornos says that he did not forget Ioannikios' "noble requests." Prodrornos was commissioned by Ioannikios to write poems for him. For example, Poem 61 (ed. Hörandner 1974, 492–3) is an epigram meant to be used as a preface for a collection of *schedē* composed by Ioannikios.

43. For Meles, see Delouis 2014, 27–33.

the other two are supplicatory letters, propagating the image of the poor intellectual in the court circles. Just like the poem to Anna Komnene, briefly discussed earlier, they have a basic tripartite structure: 1) an opening address that aims to obtain a goodwill and gain their sympathy (*captatio benevolentiae*); 2) a description of his current condition; 3) a request to be excused (in the case of the letter to Ioannikios) or an entreaty for further support (in the case of the poems for Meles and Styppeiotes). Unlike the text for Anna Komnene, they swarm with various implicit and explicit indications regarding their use as letters. As mentioned earlier, one of them (Poem 72 = Anthology **no. 25**) is even designated as a letter (ἐπιστολή) in its heading. More importantly, all of them revolve around a health issue of the author, presenting it as the main reason for his inability to visit the recipient, and justifying his decision to dispatch a letter.

The health issue to which Prodromos refers might have been smallpox.<sup>44</sup> Prodromos was infected with this disease probably around the year 1140,<sup>45</sup> which could be considered a rough *terminus post quem* for these poems. It is even possible that all three letters were sent in close chronological proximity and refer to the same disease, but this cannot be proven.<sup>46</sup> What can, however, be said with certainty is that all three poems came to fill in for Prodromos' absence from the public sphere. Twelfth-century Constantinople with its highly competitive environment often made authors feel socially unprotected and insecure. Social insecurity and anxiety in turn triggered not only intellectual antagonism,<sup>47</sup> but also a struggle for attention, which in the case of Prodromos should have been even more intense because of his health issues. Physical isolation spread over the social life of Prodromos, compelling him to confront the ultimate fear a twelfth-century author working on commission could face, that of dislocation from the court, the land of opportunity for social advancement. What is more, the description of his disease and his inability to visit them, even if it is the pretext for sending a letter, paves the way for expressions of fealty and the effective articulation of various kinds of requests. This holds especially true for the two poems for Meles and Styppeiotes, which are supplicatory and encomiastic letters, filled with assertions of courtesy to two individuals who were closer to the source of power and therefore could give assistance to Prodromos during the hardships he mentions. And the close comparison of the two letters shows that these codes may have been typified, but surely they are not empty courtesy.<sup>48</sup> Both poems aim to forge a bond of social exchange between the author and two dominant statesmen and contribute to

44. Hörandner 1974, 30–1. It is worth noting that illness is a common theme in Byzantine letters; see Mullett 1981, 78; further references in Riehle 2020b, 22n115.

45. Hörandner 1974, 30.

46. For example, Hörandner notes that the verse letter to Styppeiotes refers to a later disease; see Hörandner 1974, 523.

47. Zagklas 2021.

48. See Bernard 2020.

his representation as an intellectual in peril. The tactic of the author is that of absolute submission to the social authority of the letter's recipient. For example, in both letters he says in a solemn and emphatic manner that he would throw himself before the knees of his recipients if he could visit them at the palace. The letters seek to reconstruct a court audience, despite the distance between the supplicant and the patron, or even to make a case for an audience with the emperor using these two officials as mediators. The strategy of supplication in these verse letters follows the same basic method used in supplicatory poems performed by the author himself. Prodromos' self-assurance is veiled behind a self-effacing tone that pervades the entire discursive narration of the poem. Prodromos is well aware of the force of imputing on both of his patrons a cloak of generosity, the refusal of which would question their status, but not that of the supplicant. The emphasis on the intellectual skills of the addressees is not accidental either: to support the learned supplicant is to support oneself, making the response to the petition even more binding for the patron.<sup>49</sup>

The goal of both letters is to convince the two patrons to continue assisting the poet, but they seem to be part of a larger group of poems addressed to these two prominent officials filled with supplications and requests for various boons to the author. Poem 69 is a text addressed to Stephanos Meles seeking intercession; in the first part (vv. 1–17), Meles is complimented for his learning, his rhetorical eloquence, and his orations singing the praises of imperial victories, while in the second part the supplicant implores Meles to mediate with the emperor (vv. 18–25).<sup>50</sup> In Poem 71, the poet asks Styppeiotos, who was always keen in reading his teacher's works of imperial oratory, to write to him and to provide more material about the emperor's victories for encomia, and not to forget to speak to the emperor about his dire situation. Both texts are more goal-oriented than Poems 68 and 72, in the sense that the author puts forward a specific request. Moreover, unlike the three poems included in the Anthology, they do not contain a reference to his disease, nor does Prodromos claim that he is unable to visit them because of his bad health. It is possible that they were written before or after his infection, while the one to Meles (Poem 69) may have been performed by the author himself.

The metrical form of these three letters mirrors the strong interest of the three recipients in poetry. Whereas Stephanos Meles and Ioannikios have authored poetry,<sup>51</sup> Styppeiotos, in Poem 71, is reminded of his enthusiasm about his teacher's poetry, especially that one celebrating the imperial victories. The verse letters to Ioannikios and Meles are indeed the only twelfth-century letters

49. All these tactics have been aptly discussed in Whigham 1981.

50. Theodore Prodromos, *Poems*, no. 69, ed. Hörandner 1974, 510–11.

51. Meles is probably the author of two religious epigrams; see Delouis 2014. Ioannikios is probably the author of a Pseudo-*Psellian* poem including instructions on the correct composition of iambs; see Hörandner 2012b, 62. In addition, many *schedē* written by Ioannikios have verse parts.

composed in hexameters,<sup>52</sup> which further signifies the metrically exquisite tastes of the recipients and their high intellectual status. However, the choice of verse for the composition of these three praising and supplicatory letters acquires an even more special implication when read against his activity in the court. The use of verse by Prodrornos represents his public status as an imperial herald writing poetry for the family of the Komnenoi on various occasions. By contrast, most of his prose letter correspondence stands on the threshold between the private and public spheres, aiming to foster personal relations and promote a wide social network that would supplement his professional activity. This does not mean that we should draw a sharp line between them and say that prose and letter, on the one hand, and verse and encomia, on the other, stand for private and public respectively, but the dynamics of the negotiation between form, genre, and occasion seem to shift their balance across his output and throughout his long career, adjusting to specific circumstances and occasional needs. At one point, for example, Prodrornos sent a prose letter to Stephanos Meles claiming that the use of letters cannot fully substitute for face-to-face encomia. This heavily encomiastic letter was sent to Meles when he was escorting the emperor on one of the military campaigns to Cilicia and Syria, probably sometime in 1137/38.<sup>53</sup> But upon his return to Constantinople, Prodrornos notes, Meles will be duly celebrated with an oration performed by the author himself. Prodrornos goes on to say that the use of an encomium is much more appropriate than that of a letter, whose trustworthiness is manipulated because rhetoric goes to extremes. All this suggests that Prodrornos seems to have preferred panegyrics in the recipient's presence.<sup>54</sup> If this letter was indeed sent in 1137/38, most probably before Prodrornos' infection with smallpox, then it is not a coincidence that many verse letters date from later stages of his career (and especially his verse letter to Meles). His infection with smallpox and his constantly fragile health in later years marked a caesura in his career, and the use of verse, combined with the form of letter, made sure that he would be able to carry on his activity as a courtly orator and to exhibit his self-image as a have-not intellectual. It is the moment when the public orator who did not hesitate to articulate his pleas transforms into a semi-private orator and a letter-writer aiming to continue working as orator *in absentia*.

Taking all these together, many verse letters may be well hidden in the manuscripts and often camouflaged behind the elusive concept of begging poetry,

52. On the rare use of the hexameter for Byzantine verse letters, see Introduction, 5–7.

53. Papademetriou 1905, 202n119.

54. Theodore Prodrornos, *Letters*, no. 15, ed. Op de Coul 2007, 126:

Ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν σοι ἐπιανίοντι διὰ μείζονος ἢ κατ' ἐπιστολὴν ἐπιμαρτυρούμεθα λόγου οὐ κομπεία ῥητορικῆ τὴν ἀλήθειαν καπηλεύοντες· τί γὰρ δεῖ τῶν ἐπεισάκτων τοῦ φυσικοῦ καλοῦ νικῶντος τῶν ἐγκωμίων τὴν δύναμιν; ἀλλ' ὡς ἐν ἱστορίας νόμῳ τὰ σὰ καλὰ τοῖς ὀμιγόνοις ταμειῶν μένοι.

but it is clear that poetry and letter-writing practice joined forces on several occasions in the twelfth century to fulfill a wide array of aims. As in the case of the eighteenth-century English verse letter, which is “unrestricted by ‘high’ or ‘low’ subject matter,” “values sociable exchange,” and “explores how the ‘private’ can be read by the ‘public’ to assert the relations between these domains,” so too the verse letter in twelfth-century Byzantium is a form that helped authors to achieve their social aspirations and gave rise to mosaics of semi-private communications and public rhetoric.

## Appendix

### *Theophylaktos of Ohrid, Letter 129*<sup>55</sup>

Τῷ ἱατρῷ τοῦ βασιλέως, κυρῷ Μιχαὴλ τῷ Παντέχνῃ

Ὑμεῖς δὲ αἰεὶ μὲν ἡμᾶς ταῖς ἐλπίσι σανεῖτε ὡς ἤξοντες καὶ ἐπισκεψόμενοι, αἰεὶ δὲ ἐξαπατήσετε· οὕτως ἡμᾶς περιφρονεῖτε τοὺς χαμαι ἐρχομένους οἱ ἀεροβατοῦντες ὑμεῖς. Ἀλλὰ γὰρ ὀψέ ποτε ἐχέκολλον ἀπορρίψαντες, ᾧ πρὸς τὰ αὐτόθι ἔχεσθε, παράκλησις ἡμῶν γένεσθε. Τὰ δὲ φόβητρα, ἃ ἡμῖν ἐπανατείνεσθε, μορμολύκια παιδῶν εἰσίν, ἤγουν πτωχῶν τινῶν ἐπισκόπων. Ὁ δὲ πάσης Βουλγαρίας ἀρχιεπίσκοπος, ὃν ὅσοι περ ὀρῶσι τε καὶ ἀκούουσιν, οἴονται μεδίμνοις ἐκμετρεῖσθαι τοὺς χρυσίνους ἐκάστης ἡμέρας, τὴν ὑμετέραν παρουσίαν ὡς πτωχοῦ τινος οἰήσεται, ὃς περίεσιν αἰτίζων ἀκόλους, οὐκ ἄορας οὐδὲ λέβητας, κἄν μικρόν τι λάβῃ, τῷ ληφθέντι ἀρκοῦμενος.

Μόνον ἐλθε καὶ οἱ πάροικοι μόνοι, οἱ παρὰ τοῦ Βλαχερνίτου ἀποκρυβέντες, πλουτίσουσί σε, ἀνὰ ἓν σκόρδον δόντες. Τηροῖο ὑπὸ Κυρίου πάσης κακίας ἀνώτερος.

To the imperial doctor sir Michael Pantechnes

You always raise my spirits with the hope that you will come and visit me, but you always deceive me; in this way, you, who stride high in the air, look down upon us, who tread on the ground. But finally, albeit late, throw away the adhesive substance<sup>56</sup> to which you have gotten stuck till now and become my consolation. The fears you present to me are the bugbears of children,<sup>57</sup> or

55. Ed. and trans. Gautier 1986, 582–3.

56. ἐχέκολλον: an adhesive substance for medical use (see e.g. Galen, *On the Powers of Simple Drugs* 12.322.11). The use of a medical term aims to shape a shared linguistic norm between Theophylaktos and the recipient of his letter, who was an established physician. Moreover, Theophylaktos seems to have taken an interest in medicine, since he authored an epigram for a book with Galenian treatises (*Poems*, no. 3, ed. and trans. Gautier 1980, 350–51).

57. The imagery of “childish bugbears” is also used by Theophylaktos in his verse letter to Michael Pantechnes (Anthology no. 22, v. 2).

rather of some poor bishops.<sup>58</sup> But the archbishop of all Bulgaria, who, according to the view of all those who see and hear him, measures his daily income with *medimnoi*,<sup>59</sup> will consider your visit as that of a poor man, who goes around asking for a bite of food, not swords nor cauldrons,<sup>60</sup> and who is satisfied with what he receives, even if he receives only a little.

Just come [to me], and the *paroikoi* who have been concealed by Blachernites will suffice to make you rich, if each of them gives you a clove of garlic.<sup>61</sup> May the Lord keep you safe from all evil.

58. It is not easy to interpret the phrase *πτωχῶν τινῶν ἐπισκόπων*, but it is possible that Theophylaktos simply refers to poor and weak bishops of the church establishment with imaginary anxieties (just like children who are frightened of bugbears).
59. This is a unit of measurement for both grain and land (*ODB* 2:1388 s.v. “modios”). Theophylaktos probably aims to ironically accentuate his (alleged) surplus income.
60. This is an allusion to Homer, *Odyssey* 17.222, where Odysseus disguised as beggar is hit and mistreated by the arrogant goatherd Melanthius. Theophylaktos means that, despite the noble social distinction of Pantechnes, he will be received as a poor beggar, making a joke with his payment.
61. *Paroikoi* are peasants dependent on the properties of people who owned large amounts of land (see *ODB* 3:1589–90 s.v. “paroikos”), while Theodore Blachernites is a priest condemned for his Messalian heretic views (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* 10.1.6, ed. Kambylis and Reinsch 2001, 282–3); see also Gouillard 1978, 19–24. This seems to be another witty joke: the *paroikoi* working for Blachernites will suffice to make Pantechnes rich if each of them offers him a clove of garlic.