

Basilios Bessarion on George of Trebizond's translation of Plato's *Laws*

Maria Semikolennykh

Russian Christian Academy for the Humanities, Russia
maria.semikolennykh@gmail.com

Abstract

George of Trebizond (1395-1472) has spent a significant part of his life translating Greek books into Latin. The bulk of his translations is impressive: from Ptolemy's Almagest to John Chrysostom's homilies and works by Cyril of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Aristotle. He was quite an experienced translator, who had worked out an elaborated method explained in several writings. At the height of his career, George rather hastily translated Plato's Laws. The haste and, probably, George's bias against Plato and Platonism resulted in numerous inaccuracies of translation. Several years later, Basilios Bessarion closely scrutinized these faults in the fifth book of his In Calumniatorem Platonis, a comprehensive work aiming to refute the arguments set out in George of Trebizond's anti-Platonic treatise Comparatio Philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis. The paper analyses the use of such rhetorical devices as sarcasm and irony in Bessarion's In Calumniatorem Platonis and especially in his commentary on George's translation of Laws; it also aims to demonstrate how Bessarion turns George of Trebizond into a comic figure, thus compromising both the opponent and his interpretation of Plato's doctrine.

Keywords: George of Trebizond, Basilios Bessarion, Plato, rhetoric, irony

1. Introduction

Basilios Bessarion's (1399/1400-1472) *In Calumniatorem Platonis* is quite a serious treatise dealing with Platonism and the image of Plato himself, as well as examining many complex problems (from Plato's mathematics, logics, and political ideas to the significance of his doctrine for the Western Christian thinkers) in greater detail. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this treatise for the history of the Early Renaissance Neoplatonism: the thorough exposition of Plato's views supplemented by numerous neatly translated quotations from the dialogues, for the first time allowed Latin readers to make a close acquaintance with the ancient philosopher, whose doctrine was at that time known mostly from the commentaries, paraphrases, and Latin translations of miscellaneous fragments of his writings. The popularity and relevance of Bessarion's work are testified by the fact that its initial edition of about 300 copies (1469) was soon reprinted twice – in 1503 and 1516 (Hankins 1990: 215; Monfasani

2008: 4-5).

The structure and contents of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* are in many respects determined by the structure and contents of another book written during the same period by another famous Greek intellectual: *Comparatio philosophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* of George of Trebizond (1395-1471). The author of this work (which was, in contrast with Bessarion's treatise, initially written in Latin) did not hide his hostility towards Plato. On the pages of *Comparatio*, the ancient philosopher and his followers turn into heresiarchs and false prophets, whose teachings inflict misery on individual people and the entire human race (Hankins 1990: 172-173; Monfasani 1976: 155-159; Semikolennykh 2017). Bessarion responds to George's accusations, analysing his arguments consistently. At the very beginning of the book, he lays down the following plan: "Firstly, I will talk about Plato's wisdom and doctrine, then about his similarity with our writers and the refutation of the arguments against this point, and, finally, about his modesty and virtuous life"¹. This is, in principle, consistent with the contents of the three parts of *Comparatio*, where the author proves Plato's ignorance, his utter hostility to Christianity, and the immorality of lifestyle chosen by the philosopher and his followers. Following this initial plan, Bessarion wrote a short Greek treatise in three books almost immediately after the appearance of *Comparatio*. Approximately a decade later, in 1466, this treatise was translated into Latin and published under the title *Liber Defensionum contra Objectiones in Platonem* (Hankins 1990: 209-215; Monfasani 1976: 212-213). A significantly revised Latin version of 1469 was prepared with the direct participation of several Bessarion's *familiares*, including Nicollo Perotti (who, at that time, was no longer the secretary of the cardinal but the bishop of Siponto), and supplemented by another three books: the theological treatise on the merits of Platonic philosophy, which probably was written by a Dominican, Giovanni Gatti (Monfasani 2008: 5; Monfasani 2011: 185-186), the small and relatively independent philosophical treatise *De natura et arte adversus Georgium Trapezuntium Cretensem*, as well as the critical analysis of the translation of Plato's *Laws*, entitled *De erroribus interpretis Legum Platonis*.

Ironically, it was George who made the first Latin translation of Plato's *Laws*, and it was his translation which became the target for Bessarion's criticism in the fifth book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis*. In this fourteen-chapter work, Bessarion² comments on his opponent's mistakes consistently, one at a time. Finding a mistake, he in all cases cites the Greek original, then George's erroneous translation, then his own correct translation, and, quite often, adds some further explanations. In doing so, Bessarion never passes up the opportunity to emphasize that he draws readers' attention only to the most obvious and gross blunders of the translator – in fact, there are much more mistakes in George of Trebizond's *Laws*.

Published almost 20 years after the translation itself, this commentary raises many questions, starting with why Bessarion decided to make it a part of his treatise. And especially striking is Bessarion's caustic irony: this undoubtedly biased and unfriendly critic takes the translation apart, one translator's blunder after another, and never misses the slightest opportunity to make a sarcastic remark. At the very beginning of his analysis, Bessarion invites readers to appreciate the translator's "highest studiousness and diligence" (*summum studium et diligentia*), immediately noting that there is no place in George's work "which would be devoid of mistakes" (*nullus sit locus, qui vacet errore*). These words become the leitmotif of the thirteen following chapters, up to the last one, devoted to the analysis of mistakes, which

¹ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 2r): "Primo sapientiam Platonis atque doctrinam mox scriptorum ejus cum nostris similitudinem, et argumentorum contrariorum dissolutionem. Tum probitatem morum vitamque integerrimam explicabo".

² The 1503 Yale copy of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* contains a note belonging to the notable Anglican churchman Robert Ridley. According to this note, Jacob Faber informed him that the work did not belong to Bessarion at all, and, in particular, the translation of the *Laws* was corrected by Theodore Gaza, one of Bessarion's *familiares* (Monfasani 2008: 6).

George made in the translation of *Epinomis*, and ending with the words: “(...) we decided that it is necessary to point out not all or many, but only some errors, which make it possible to appreciate how well-versed is the translator. Indeed, if anyone wants to compare his translation with what Plato wrote, then he will certainly notice as many mistakes as words. And if this is so, you, learned men, in whose hands this [composition] may fall, decide for yourself, if he has deservedly made himself the judge of the greatest and most glorious philosophers, the strict critic (*censorem*) of the deepest teachings, and the blamer of Plato”³.

What can explain such an intonation of the text, which, one would think, should be rather dry and scholarly? Was Bessarion’s irony merely a tribute to the critic’s dislike of the translator, or it aimed to achieve some other goals? To answer these questions, a few words should be said about the functions of ironic or sarcastic criticism and the place of irony in the Medieval and, in particular, Byzantine literature. Then, we consider several cases when Bessarion resorts to irony while analysing George of Trebizond’s translation of *Laws*, and pay some attention to the circumstances in which this critical commentary on the translation was compiled and included in *In Calumniatorem Platonis*.

2. Irony and its functions in medieval literature

Most often, we resort to irony or sarcasm when circumstances are not what they are expected: for example, we can theatrically thank a person who caused us inconvenience or praise the weather during a terrible hurricane. Such figures of speech may seem strange: all in all, the purpose of communication is to exchange information; at first thought, irony unnecessarily complicates such an exchange. Nevertheless, there are many reasons for the usage of this stylistic device: for instance, Maggie Toplack and Albert Katz identify 17 possible reasons for sarcastic irony, including the creation of a humorous effect, the expression of mockery, irritation, or aggression, and even the fact that an ironic sentence is usually better remembered (Toplack et al. 2000: 1469-1470). Julia Jorgensen’s experiments show that irony can help the speaker to win the favour of the audience, as well as “save face” and avoid accusations in rudeness or injustice that straightforward criticism could bring (Jorgensen 1996: 627). Moreover, we can “grasp” the irony only in the context and provided that we understand the speaker’s intentions (Toplack et al. 2000: 1470). Irony exists only on condition of mutual understanding between interlocutors (or an author and a reader) and a kind of “ironic context” or ironic contradiction (Colston 2015: 108-111).

Apparently, irony was not a rare phenomenon in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. There were instances of irony in proverbs and sayings, *exempla* (Gurevich 2007: 226-227), and literary works of a wide variety of genres. In the 15th century, Niccolò Tignosi, an Italian physician and professor of medicine, noted in his commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics* that parents often spoke ironically while scolding their children (Knox 1989: 7-8).

Aristotle semantically relates the concept of “irony” (*ἡ εἰρωνεία*) to the concept of “boasting” (*ἡ ἀλαζονεία*): both imply a deviation from the truth, namely exaggeration (boasting) or understatement (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1108a 20 ff). At the same time, (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: 1419b 6 ff) irony is compared with buffoonery (*ἡ βωμολοχία*) as a kind of a joke more appropriate for a free person, since, unlike buffoonery, “it is employed on one’s own account”. In this sense, irony is a kind of self-depreciation that Socrates practiced.

³ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 108r): “(...) non omnes, aut plurimos, sed aliquot duntaxat errores notaremus, quibus satis judicari quanta esset interpretis peritia posset. Nam si quis suppetente otio, conferre hujus interpretationem cum Platonis scriptis voluerit, tot certe errores, quot verba notabit. Quae cum ita sint, utrum ne merito maximorum, atque illustrium philosophorum judicem, optimarum disciplinarum censorem, et Platonis reprehensorem se constituerit, vos viri docti, in quorum manus haec forte venient, de hoc homine iudicate”.

However, already in Cicero and Quintilian's writings, irony turns into a trope applicable not only to oneself, but also to another person. Speaking of irony, Cicero uses two terms: *inversio*, when one says something opposite (*contrarium*) to what exists (Cicero, *De Oratore*: II, lxxv, 261-262), and a more subtle *dissimulatio*, when one absolutely seriously utters something different from what he really thinks (Cicero, *De Oratore*: II, lxxvii, 269-271). In this case – Cicero says – we deal with a “pretender” (*εἰρων*); in his opinion, Socrates honed this sort of jokes to perfection. According to Cicero, irony is an exquisite kind of joke “both serious and salty, suitable for both oratory and private conversation”, appropriate for communication between peers. There is also another type of pretence, when something bad is called worthy and good (Cicero, *De Oratore*: II, lxxvii, 272). Unlike Cicero, Quintilian prefers to use the Greek term ἡ εἰρωνεία while discussing irony, although he mentions that some translate it into Latin as *dissimulatio* or “pretence” (in his opinion, this word has too narrow a meaning). According to Quintilian, irony is something opposite to what is said or implied (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*: VIII.6.44, 53-4); in the second case, when “thoughts are opposite to words”, not only statements, but also large passages, entire writings, and even a whole life may be ironic – as in the case of Socrates (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*: IX.2.46). For both rhetoricians, the key is the concept of *contrarium*, which is not straightforward; it means not only the “contrary”, but also the “opposite” (*oppositio*) in the Aristotelian sense, and the relations implied by this term can be multiple:

We must next explain the various senses in which the term “opposite” is used. Things are said to be opposed in four senses: (i) as correlatives to one another, (ii) as contraries to one another, (iii) as privatives to positives, (iv) as affirmatives to negatives. Let me sketch my meaning in outline. An instance of the use of the word “opposite” with reference to correlatives is afforded by the expressions “double” and “half”; with reference to contraries by “bad” and “good”. Opposites in the sense of “privatives” and “positives” are “blindness” and “sight”; in the sense of affirmatives and negatives, the propositions “he sits”, “he does not sit”.

(Aristotle, *Categories*: 11b15-20)

However, in the end, any opposition can be reduced to a contradiction, and thus every case of irony depends on the contradiction between a statement and its implied negation. Irony denies what is said (Knox 1989: 36-37).

Byzantine intellectuals inherited this conception of irony. In a recently published essay on the history of the concept of ἡ εἰρωνεία and its derivatives in the Byzantine literature, E. Braounou notes that the very term “irony” is ambiguous and takes a rather unsettled place in the system of Byzantine rhetoric. She analyses the diverse contexts in which this term was used (from the comedies of Aristophanes, Socratic irony, and the correlation between the concepts of “irony” (ἡ εἰρωνεία), “buffoonery” (ἡ βωμολοχία), and “boasting” (ἡ ἀλαζονεία) in Aristotle to its numerous occurrence in the works of Byzantine writers) and concludes that, for the vast majority of Byzantine scholars, irony was a rhetorical device, which meant “the use of words to denote something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning with the aim to express a specific feeling or attitude: most often scorn, derision, or bitterness” (Braounou 2011: 328). It is worth noting that, in the Latin tradition, irony, according to Quintilian, could be both a trope (when used overtly in short remarks) and a figure of speech (when used covertly in longer fragments of the text), though the majority of Renaissance authors considered this distinction theoretically unreasonable and generally useless (Knox 1989: 39).

Irony seems to be highly flexible: it can appear in a sentence of any type and be combined with any tropes and figures of speech. We can find elements of irony in texts of almost any genre – up to historiography and theological treatises. Perhaps, in the case of irony and sarcasm, it is worth talking not so much about the figure of speech or rhetorical device but about the specific modality of the text, the intentions of its author (cf. Marciniak 2016: 351). For

example, Hermogenes of Tarsus, whose works were very important for the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, used a whole set of “ideas” to categorize different types and subtypes of style (Hermogenes, *On Types of Style*, 225-226): sweetness (*γλυκύτης*), clarity (*σαφήνεια*), beauty (*κάλλος*), highness (*μέγεθος*), and so on. Hermogenes associated irony with “acid” ideas (Hermogenes, *On Types of Style*, 340, 365-367, 384): *δριμύτης* (subtlety), *τραχύτης* (asperity), *σφοδρότης* (vehemence), and especially *βαρύτης* (indignation). At the same time, irony presents the perfect opposition to the idea of modesty (*ἐπιείκεια*): it may seem that the author of the ironic utterance is humble and respectful but his restraint is pretended (Hermogenes, *On Types of Style*, 348). It makes the attacks on the enemy more effective (Knox 1989: 86-87).

As at present, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, irony was an instrument of verbal aggression: it expressed mockery, resentment, and irritation of an author of the statement. Thus, the etymological rapprochement of irony (*ironia*) and anger (*ira*) seemed logical (Knox 1989: 79). At the same time, the ironic statement seemed more elegant and therefore more effective than straightforward attacks: among other things, it was a way to make the audience (or readers) more forgiving to a speaker (or an author).

E. Braounou points out that irony should not be regarded simply as a rhetorical device: it is a cultural phenomenon, a communicative process that has not only a linguistic, but also a social and psychological dimension (Braounou 2011: 295). Thus, for certain historical periods and social groups, irony and sarcasm may be more characteristic than for others. Apparently, the members of the Renaissance “academic community”, with its spirit of competition for fame, honour, and patronage, were more likely to develop such qualities as the ability to impress, a tendency to performative behaviour, and cruel sarcasm (O’Neil 2018: 292).

3. Irony and sarcasm in the commentary of Basilios Bessarion on George of Trebizond’s translation of *Laws*

Before the discussion of Bessarion’s commentary on George’s translation, that is, the fifth book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, it is worth noting that elements of humour can be found throughout the entire work. In the very first lines, Bessarion says that *Comparatio* was so full of clamour, insults, and angry arguments against Plato that it could be compared with “ancient comedy”; he even – in a rather ironic manner – adds that George’s work has surpassed “all comedies that have ever existed” and, in astonishment, he was taken aback by the “novelty of such a thing”⁴. While giving characteristics to the work of his opponent, Bessarion further uses such words as *jurgium*, *maledictum*, *reprehensio*, *calumnia*, *temerarius impetus*, *contumelia*, *fictum*, *fabula*, *somnia portentaque*, etc. Thus, *Comparatio* is full not only of shameless and unrestrained vituperation, but also of falsehood and fabrications. George himself vividly resembles an Aristotelian “boaster” (*ὁ ἀλαζών*). He “prepared for himself the glory among descendants and showed off his erudition and wisdom” (*sibi gloriam apud posteros compararet et doctrinam suam ingeniumque ostentaret*). His words go against the truth (*veritati*) and general opinion; however, he “not only is not ashamed of this, but rather boasts as if by some glorious discovery” (*non modo non crubesceret, sed potius quasi praeclaro quodam invento*

⁴ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 1r): “Jam vero, ubi perlecto libro, pro thesauris, quos sperabam, carbones (ut dici solet) inveni, et desiderio frustrates, nihil animadverti praeter convitia, et contumelias, et jurgia in Platonem. His enim dumtaxat erat liber ille refertus, instar veteris comoediae, immo, ut plane omnes, quae unquam fuerunt, comoedias excederet, obstupui vehementer tantae rei novitate attonitus”.

“Ancient comedy” was a genre associated primarily with the name of Aristophanes; it implied a discussion of topical issues and harsh criticism of contemporaries and sometimes contained rather rude attacks. The semantic field of the concept of “comedy” in the Middle Ages was quite broad and could include not only a well-known genre or work of this genre, but also satire, mockery, blasphemy, abuse, lies, censure, etc. (Puchner 2006: 86; Marciniak 2016: 355).

gloriaretur). Bessarion compares his “adversary” (*adversarius*)⁵ with a sick person who is not able to hold food in the stomach and “under the influence of some disease of shamelessness” belches forth invectives and curses⁶. Successfully, as it seems to him, proving that Aristotle, unlike Plato, taught about the divine creation of the world, George, according to his critic, “parades, victorious, decorated with a wreath” (*palmas adeptus coronatus incedat*) and does not notice his mistakes. Or, claiming that Plato called for sacrifices to “created gods” (*diis creatis*), George declares that there is nothing like this in the writings of Aristotle, who was free from the “fallacy of his time” (*errore suae aetatis*). In reply to this, Bessarion says sarcastically: “(...) as you can see, this philosopher thoughtlessly discusses such things in his political books! (...) he tells people to erect temples to gods and heroes, elect priests and quaestors, perform sacrifices and observe the ritual of the paternal faith”⁷.

There are also other rhetorical devices which create the comic effect: for example, parody and ironic repetition of the words of the opponent. E. g., in *Comparatio*, George begins his discussion of the *Phaedrus*, putting an accusatory speech against Plato into the mouth of Phaedrus himself and several times emphatically asking those who do not believe his accusations to read the dialogue and see everything with their own eyes: “Read, read the *Phaedrus* itself who do not believe, or ask around those who have read it, if they do not applaud Plato. (...) Read, read that I cannot say without anger (...) oh, lawlessness, oh, I say – lawlessness!”⁸. Bessarion makes fun of his opponent’s unwillingness to retell what provoked such indignation: “Of course, my excellent men, the one who sends you to read that he cannot retell since it is obscene, is much more respectable than you!”⁹ – and then several times in all kinds of ways repeats this outraged exclamation of George. In other instance, George claims that Plato’s words contain wickedness, as “shallow and slow waters hide rocks in plenty” (*in brevibus atque stagnis saxa plerumque latentia subsunt*). Bessarion replies to this: “It is lawless (*nefas*) – to condemn Plato in such a way, and if there are hidden rocks in them (the words of Plato. – *M.S.*), as the adversary is writing, you should first find them, and then reproach and exclaim: ‘Oh, lawlessness!’ After all, if there was no rock and the waters were safe, then you would exclaim: ‘Oh, lawfulness!’ – too fervently and to no avail; and, better to say, we should ridicule not Plato but he who exclaims like this”¹⁰.

Finally, in the last chapter of the fourth book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis*, Bessarion cites fragments from the letters which George sent to Pope Nicholas V, Francesco Barbaro, and Francesco Foscari (as well as a small excerpt from the preface to his translation of *Parmenides* addressed to Nikolas of Cusa): these letters accompanied George’s translation of

⁵ Bessarion calls George by name only in the sixth book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis*: in the first four books, he is an “adversary” and in the fifth — a “translator” (*interpres*). In the original Greek text, George is called *ὁ κατηγορὸς* — an “accuser”: this word can also be interpreted as a “traitor”. Apparently, Bessarion’s first readers understood very well who he was talking about.

⁶ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 5r): “Tot praeterea tam temere, inepte, inconstanter absque ullo ordine maledicta profert, ut quodam quasi morbo improbitatis evomere omnia videatur, instar eorum qui adversa valetudine laborantes, nihil cibi stomacho retinent”.

⁷ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 34r): “(...) scilicet per inscitiam quibusnam de rebus philosophus ille suis in libris politicis tractet. Jubet ille profecto his in libris, condi templa diis, atque heroibus constitui sacerdotes, et sacrae pecuniae quaestores adhiberi sacrificia, et ritum servari paternae religionis”.

⁸ George of Trebizond (1523: Nvi r-v): “Legite, legite ipsum Phaedrum, qui non creditis, aut ab eis, qui legerunt, nisi Platoni faveant, quaesitote (...) legite, legite quae ego sine stomacho lectitare non possum (...) Proh nefas, proh inquam nefas!”

⁹ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 64v): “Scilicet hic longe vobis honestior est optimi viri, quos ad ea legenda mittit, quae ipse referre, quia obscœna sunt, non potest”.

¹⁰ Basilios Bessarion (*ibid.*): “Sicque reprehendi Platonem nefas est, sin saxum in his latet, ut arversarius scribit, ostendum id primo est, post reprehendendum et exclamandum ‘proh nefas’, nam si non latet, et tuta omnia sunt, avide nimis. et frustra exclamatur ‘proh nefas’, et ipse potius, qui ita exclamat, quam Plato deridendus est”.

Laws (commissioned by Nicholas V) and introduced this work to a possible patron. Of course, George could not reproach Plato in these letters: instead, he admired the talent, doctrine, and divinity of the ancient philosopher¹¹, paid special attention to the unsurpassed persuasiveness, beauty, and laconism of his speech, and, last but not least, claimed that it was Plato's *Laws* that had laid the foundations for the Venetian legislation. In comparison with the angry invectives of the *Comparatio*, these laudations to Plato and his doctrine, undoubtedly, create a comic effect. Bessarion summarizes: "Here is this adversary of Plato: he praised Plato but now is scolding him, he approved Plato but now is reproaching him, he urged people to follow, imitate, and love Plato but now he is writing that they must abhor, boo, and banish him; such is his inconsistency, such is his depravity"¹².

Thus, the irony and sarcasm in the commentary on the translation are not something unusual. You could even say that Bessarion continues to use the successful rhetorical technique. For example, he continues to make poisonous remarks about George: in many cases, a description of the error and its explanation is followed by an ironic remark "extolling" the translator's knowledge and experience.

Oh, the brilliant talent of the translator: of course, in all fairness, Plato deserves condemnation from such a person!

O praeclarum interpretis ingenium: merito scilicet Plato reprehendi a tali homine meruit.

(Basilios Bessarion 1516: 94v)

Oh, amazing translator's insight, oh, his unsurpassed erudition!

O admirabilem peritiam interpretis; O doctrinam singularem!

(Basilios Bessarion 1516: 103v)

How excellently our translator comprehends all the thoughts of the author!

Quam magnifice Interpres noster haruit omnes sensus auctoris!

(Basilios Bessarion 1516: 105v)

Sometimes, the commentator admits that he does not quite understand what exactly the translator wanted to say¹³.

Bessarion directly calls some of the translator's decisions not only erroneous, but also ridiculous. For instance, at the very beginning of his translation, George decisively and unequivocally interprets an ambiguous fragment of text. While speaking about the basic principles of the Cretan legislation, Clinias says: "(...) by a law of nature, engaged perpetually in an informal war with every other State" (Plato, *Leges*: 626a); Bessarion interprets *πόλεμον ἀκήρυκτον* as an "undeclared war" (*bellum non caduceatore inductum*). However, the Greek *πόλεμον ἀκήρυκτον* could mean both "undeclared war" and "war in which the herald with peace offers is not accepted." Apparently, George had in mind precisely the second meaning when he translated this phrase as "a war that cannot be stopped by any efforts of the fetials" (*quam nullo feacialium officio tolli potest*). Bessarion believes that this translation is incorrect and explains why: "(...) if it were so and no efforts of the fetials could stop the war, then, during the war, every city would be destroyed and there would be no salvation from fighting. But this

¹¹ Though, such exaggerated and excessive praise can often be regarded as ironic or sarcastic (Knox 1989: 47-48; Hankins 1990: 182).

¹² Basilios Bessarion (1516: 88r): "Talis hic Platonis adversarius est, quem laudavit, vituperat, quem probavit, improbat, quem sequendum, imitandum amandumque proposuit, eundem detestandum, ejiciendum, exterminandum scribit, tanta est ejus inconstantia, tanta perversitas".

¹³ E.g. (Basilios Bessarion 1516: 91v): "Cur autem contrarium adversarius dixerit aut quid sibi tandem velit non satis intelligo".

is wrong and simply ridiculous!”¹⁴

A little further, he calls “ridiculous” (*rem plane ridiculam*) the translation of the statement that courage is a struggle not only with fear and suffering, but also with pleasure, for lowly desires soften even souls of the most decent people and melt them like wax (Plato, *Leges*: 633d). According to George’s interpretation, passions and pleasures lead to the situation when “it seems that anger is one of the virtues” (*quae faciunt ut ira de honestorum numero esse videatur*)¹⁵; outraged Bessarion asks rhetorically: “Is there a sane person who believes that lowly desires ennoble anger, while, in fact, when combined with voluptuousness, anger is much more shameful than without it?”¹⁶

A peculiar humorous effect occurs when the critic emphasizes an error or inaccuracy (sometimes rather insignificant). For example, in the fourth book of the dialogue (Plato, *Leges*: 705a), the characters discuss the most suitable place for the foundation of a city:

For the sea is, in very truth, “a right briny and bitter neighbour,” although there is sweetness in its proximity for the uses of daily life.

πρόσοικος γὰρ θάλαττα χώρα τὸ μὲν παρ’ ἐκάστην ἡμέραν ἡδύ, μάλα γε μὴν ὄντως ἀλμυρὸν καὶ πικρὸν γειτόνημα

(Plato, *Leges*: 705a)

George of Trebizond translates this fragment as follows:

For the sea, due to daily pleasure, usually turns out to be an extremely treacherous and bitter neighbour for the city.

Mare namque civitati proximum falsam nimium atque amaram ex quotidiana jucunditate solet vicinitatem affere.

(George of Trebizond 1453: 41r)

Bessarion accompanies his translation with the following comment: “It is not because of daily pleasure (*ex quotidiana jucunditate*) that vices strike the neighbourhood, oh good translator! After all, citizens are corrupted not by the pleasant sight or profitability of the sea but by the disgusting and vicious habits of foreigners”¹⁷.

It should be noted that George can be consistent in choosing a translation that is not quite suitable. For instance, the Athenian demonstrates to his companions how to conduct reasoning properly on the example of a discussion about the benefits and burdens of goat breeding:

Suppose that a man were to praise the rearing of goats, and the goat itself as a fine thing to own.

εἴ τις αἰγῶν τροφήν, καὶ τὸ ζῷον αὐτὸ κτῆμα ὡς ἔστιν καλόν, ἐπαινοῖ

(Plato, *Leges*: 639a)

George translates these words as follows:

Suppose someone praises goat milk and the animal itself as beautiful.

¹⁴ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 88v-89r): “(...) si ita esset, et nullo facialium officio id bellum tolli potest, sequeretur unamquamque civitatem belligerando tempus omne consumer, nullamque ab armis vacationem habere. Hoc vero falsum est, et planem ridiculum”.

¹⁵ It seems, the mistake is done because of the ambiguity of the Greek word *θῆμός* — it can be translated both as “anger” and “soul”. George chooses the first option.

¹⁶ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 89v): “Quis non mentis compos voluptate effici putet, ut ira honestetur, quae longe turpior cum libidine quam sine libidine habenda est?”

¹⁷ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 95v): “Non ex quotidiana jucunditate prava affertur vicinitas, bone interpretes. Non enim jucundus aspectus, aut commodus usus mareis cives depravat, sed inhonesti ac vitiosi peregrinorum mores”.

Siquis carparum lac animalque ipsum quasi bonum laudet.

(George of Trebizond 1453: 9r)

“Here you can easily see how wonderful is erudition of the translator” (*notari hinc facile potest quanta sit erudition interpretis*) – Bessarion notes and explains the reason for the error: the word τροφή, which, when applied to people, means both “nutrition” (*alimentum*) and “education” (*educatione*), and when applied to other living beings – “care” (*cultum*), the translator interprets as “nutrition”; therefore, we have “milk” instead of “rearing”.

Later, characters discuss education and child-rearing:

(...) education, we say, consists in that right nurture which most strongly draws the soul of the child when at play to a love for that pursuit of which, when he becomes a man, he must possess a perfect mastery.

κεφάλαιον δὴ παιδείας λέγομεν τὴν ὀρθὴν τροφήν, ἣ τοῦ παίζοντος τὴν ψυχὴν εἰς ἔρωτα μάλιστα ἄξει τούτου ὃ δεήσει γινόμενον ἄνδρ' αὐτὸν τέλειον εἶναι τῆς τοῦ πράγματος ἀρετῆς

(Plato, *Leges*: 643d)

Here, George again translates the Greek τροφήν with the Latin word *alimentum*:

And the essence of children’s education is nutrition, which encourages playing souls to desire what, as we decided, they will be engaged in adulthood.

Caput autem doctrinae infantium alimentum est, quod ludentium animum ad expetendum illud adducet, quo in virile aetate ipsos uti decrevimus.

(George of Trebizond 1453: 11r-11v)

Bessarion emphasizes this ill-considered decision: “What kind of food is it that has such power to make a person outstanding regarding his talent, I do not understand; in particular, as the translator says, the nutrition of children, that is, milk”. And then, he sums up: “After all, one should not ask what he added in this place and what he took away. It seems that the Translator has every reason to condemn Plato when, changing everything [what Plato said], he makes everything wiser and more adorned”¹⁸.

Bessarion never mentions the name of his hapless adversary. However, there is a case of a quite transparent allusion to George’s origin. In the second book of *Laws*, the characters discuss unpleasantness and insalubrity of an unjust person *modus vivendi*, and the Athenian says:

In my opinion, these facts are quite indisputable even more plainly so, my dear Clinias, than the fact that Crete is an island; and were I a legislator, I should endeavour to compel the poets and all the citizens to speak in this sense.

ἐμοὶ γὰρ δὴ φαίνεται ταῦτα οὕτως ἀναγκαῖα, ὡς οὐδέ, ὃ φίλε Κλεινία, Κρήτη νῆσος σαφῶς: καὶ νομοθέτης ὢν ταύτη πειρώμην ἂν τοὺς τε ποιητὰς ἀναγκάζειν φθέγγεσθαι καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῇ πόλει

(Plato, *Leges*: 662b)

George of Trebizond, a native of Crete, makes the Athenians say that he would force citizens to act in a certain way, “if he himself established the laws for the Cretans”:

Nam mihi quidem o Clinia ita haec necessaria videntur, ut si leges ipse cretensibus conderem, tam poetas quam caeteros omnes cives sic dicere compellerem.

(George of Trebizond 1453: 20r)

¹⁸ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 91v): “Quid istud alimenti sit, quod vim tantam habeat, ut hominem virtute praestantem efficiat, non video, praesertim infantium, ut interpres dicit, alimentum, quod lac est. nam quid addiderit hoc loco, quid demserit non est opus quaerere. Merito reprehendere videtur Platonem Interpres, quando omnia mutans, sapientius ornatusque cuncta exponit”.

Here, Bessarion finds yet another opportunity to sneer: “Here is the really good translator who missed the name of his motherland, made the words meaningless, and kept silent about the little detail – that Crete is an island”¹⁹.

Finally, the contrast between the meaning and context of the statement is created by Bessarion’s allusions to the aforementioned letters addressed to Pope Nicholas V, Francesco Barbaro, and Francesco Foscari. For example, discussing the incorrect translation of a fragment (Plato, *Leges*: 653d) about Apollo and the muses, who participate in human feasts in order to correct the shortcomings of upbringing (where, among other things, *τροφήν* is once again translated as *alimentum*), Bessarion adds: “This is enough for the Latins to form an opinion about this beautiful translation of Plato. Here are these wonderful gifts, which the translator dedicated first to the Pope and then to the Venetian Republic. Of course, he maintains neither the words of Plato, nor [their] disposition and meaning, and he is absolutely nothing like Plato”²⁰. Such references not only sustain the stylistic unity, but also make it possible to more firmly incorporate into the philosophical treatise on Platonism these fragments which have been written with more practical goals.

Probably, these examples are enough to demonstrate the ironic character of the commentary on George of Trebizond’s translation of *Laws*. The very deliberation on this irony suggests that Bessarion (or Theodore Gaza) is by no means impartial. It should be noted that a comparison between George’s translation and the corresponding passages of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* demonstrates that critical statements are almost always justified, although, in some cases, the commentator accentuates apparently insignificant mistakes and presents them as unforgivable errors. It should also be noted that, according to the commentator, he enumerates only the most striking errors and the translation is even worse than it appears in his critique. Bearing in mind that irony is primarily a way to express verbal aggression (and Bessarion’s commentary is obviously a vigorous attack), it is worth asking: What exactly urged the eminent scholar, philanthropist, and church dignitary to ridicule a person of much lower social status on almost every page of his very learned and scrupulous work? It seems that the answer can be found, on the one hand, in the biography of George the translator and, on the other, in the historical circumstances of the publication of Bessarion’s treatise.

4. George of Trebizond as a translator

Latin humanists saw Byzantine scholars, who eagerly or reluctantly left their homeland and moved to the West, fleeing from Turkish conquerors, as guardians of ancient heritage, able to share hitherto inaccessible riches of Hellenic wisdom: they taught Greek, thus allowing their western colleagues to study the works of ancient authors directly, and most actively engaged in the translation from Greek into Latin. The work of many translators, often competing with each other, required the establishment of some professional standards, a kind of theory of translation, which was quite naturally attributed to the ancient writers.

The Greeks themselves did not attach much importance to the accuracy of translations and quotations: everything taken from foreigners became the part of general literary “corpus” and, in the words of Plato, “turned into something nobler” (Plato, *Epinomis*: 988a). All these writings became, in effect, Greek. The same was Cicero’s approach to the borrowed foreign

¹⁹ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 93r): “Profecto bonus Interpres ut nomen patriae suae praeteriret, vim ademit orationi subticuitque particulam illam ut Creta insula est”.

²⁰ Basilios Bessarion (1516: 92r-v): “(...) satis hinc habent homines latini quid de praeclaro hoc Platonis interprete iudicent. Haec sunt praeclara illa interpretationis munera, quae primo Pontifici romano, mox Republicem Venetorum dicata sunt. Hic certe neque Platonis verba servantur, nec ordo, nec sensus, nec est ulla cum his prorsus similitudo”.

wisdom. In *Tusculan Disputations*, he wrote: “(...) our countrymen have, in some instances, made wiser discoveries than the Greeks, with reference to those subjects which they have considered worthy of devoting their attention to, and, in others, have improved upon their discoveries, so that, in one way or another, we surpass them on every point” (Cicero, *Tusc.* I, 1, 1). In the preface to the translation of the speeches of Aeschin and Demosthenes, he noted: “I translated them, however, not as an interpreter but as an orator: I preserved both thoughts and their order – their physiognomy, shall we say – but, in choice of words, I was guided by the rule of our language. Having that in mind, it was not necessary to translate word for word: I only reproduced general ideas and the power of individual words” (Cicero, *De Optimo Genere Oratorum*: V, 14). Thus, the translation turns out to be a literary competition (*aemulatio*) with the original, in which a translator and his author are rivals. There is no gap between the original and translated literature: on the one hand, the verbal translation does not follow the original and, on the other, the original itself is not so important, the text of the translation is more significant (Flashar 1968: 137). Centuries later, Jerome, who followed Cicero, insisted that one should translate “sense for sense and not word for word” (Jerome 1893: 113) and cited the experience of Hilary the Confessor who “has not bound himself to the drowsiness of the letter or fettered himself by the stale literalism of inadequate culture. Like a conqueror, he has led away captive into his own tongue the meaning of his originals” (Jerome 1893: 114-115). Then, he cited the preface to the life of St. Anthony and observed that “a literal translation from one language into another obscures the sense; the exuberance of the growth lessens the yield (...) Leave others to catch at syllables and letters, do you for your part look for the meaning” (Jerome 1893: 114). He added that “the translators of the Septuagint, the evangelists, and the apostles” (Jerome 1893: 115) had also renounced verbal translation.

During the Middle Ages, another method of translation has been elaborated: precise and literal. For example, Boethius used this approach, though, in the preface to his translation of Porphyrius’s introduction to *Categories (Isagoge)*, he expressed fear: “(...) that I have laid myself open to the sort of reproach that people level at any faithful translator (*fidus interpres*) because I have delivered a word-by-word rendition” (Cit. by Ebbesen 2009: 39). However, he translated from Greek into Latin verbally and sometimes even compromised on good Latin grammar, as his goal was to separate his interpretation and basic texts (Ebbesen 2009: 39). In some measure, it was Arabic influence (Flashar 1968: 141-143; Kelly 2009: 480-481): Arabic translators first translated Greek medical writings and then works of philosophers, which were essential for the comprehension of the views of Greek physicians. This kind of “scholarly” translation required accuracy, order, and uniformity, and, since, thanks to the Arabic tradition, the medieval West mostly obtained scholarly writings of Greek authors, it also adopted the Arabic approach to translation with the rule *verbum de verbo reddere*. To a certain degree, this meant literalism without understanding but, at the same time, presumed a very scrupulous attitude to the original text. For instance, William of Mörbeke, a friend of Thomas Aquinas who translated Proclus and Aristotle from Greek, adopted this approach. Thus, new methods made it possible to solve specific problems occurring in the process of translation, and translated texts acquired stylistic uniformity (Flashar 1968: 143).

With the beginning of the Renaissance, both traditions – verbal translation and free paraphrase or imitation, *translatio* and *imitatio* – have come in demand and existed side by side in a continuous dialogue. Translators had to either make a choice in favour of one of the approaches or combine them. This gave rise to a wide discussion about the theory of translation. George of Trebizond actively participated in this polemic.

George of Trebizond was born on April 3, 1395, in Crete, and moved to Italy around 1416. There he studied Latin with Vittorino da Feltre, and already in 1427 (perhaps even earlier: the first mention of private lessons dates back to 1422) taught the art of rhetoric, Latin, and Greek in Venice. He was especially well-versed in Latin eloquence and became a renowned educator,

writer, and translator. As he himself wrote, after several years of studying Latin, he spoke this language so well that could simultaneously dictate two speeches on different topics to two quick scribes. In 1433 or 1434, he published his opus magnum: *Rhetoricorum Libri V*, the first introduction of the Byzantine rhetorical tradition to the West. His, probably, the most popular work (the grammar textbook *De partibus orationis ex Prisciano compendium*) belongs to the same period: it was widely used in Italian schools in the XV century. In 1439-1440, he compiled the first “humanistic” textbook of logic: *Isagoge Dialectica*. Apparently, in the summer of 1440, George became the secretary of the curia, and here his career of translator began: in December 1440, Basilios Bessarion asked him to translate *Against Eunomius* of Basil the Great. The first experience was successful and Bessarion recommended George to Pope Eugene IV as an exceptionally capable translator. For Eugene IV, and especially Nicholas V with his “factory of translations” (Flashar 1968: 144), George translated many works of Greek authors: in five years which he spent in Nicholas V service (1447-1452), he translated eleven quite voluminous texts, including Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, the homilies of John Chrysostom, *Praeparatio Evangelica* by Eusebius of Caesarea, the works of Cyril of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Aristotle. In the period from April 1450 and March 1451, he translated Plato’s *Laws* (Castellani 1896; Labowsky 1967; Monfasani 1976; Viti 2001). At that time, there were no doubts in talent and competence: for example, it is known that Poggio Bracciolini asked him to help with the translation of Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* and *Bibliotheca historica* by Diodorus of Sicily (Monfasani 1976: 70). He worked in a great hurry and surely made mistakes, but probably not much more often than other translators of that time.

Like all translators of his time, George faced the dilemma whether to translate literally or imitate the original and developed his own method, which he outlined in letters and polemical writings (Hankins 1990: 186-188; Monfasani 1976: 152-154; Monfasani 2006; Linde 2018). In *Adversus Theodorum Gazam* (1453/54), he reproached the opponent for an incorrect translation of Aristotle’s *Problemata* (which George himself had already translated for Nicholas V) and explained what was the task of a good translator (*fidus interpres*): “The faithful translator will render clearly what Aristotle has written clearly. And what Aristotle has written ambiguously or obscurely he will render in a similar fashion. Thus, each one will balance out each matter in proportion to his own intelligence. If you think some obscure passages are clear to you, or if you feel sure of the meaning of an ambiguous passage, write what you think in the margins (as I do as a rule); don’t mix up your own opinions with those of others. Thus, Aristotle will be whole and entire, and your own opinion not unknown” (Georgius Trapezuntius 1942: 298-299; Hankins 1990: 188). He goes on to list his complaints about Gaza’s translation and his intonation is rather similar to that of Bessarions (or, maybe, Theodore Gaza himself): “You don’t know, you don’t know, oh Cages, what is the duty of a translator... you in the most ignorant fashion reduce Aristotle’s sentence to that of Celsus and dare to turn his philosophy into yours, and strive to make us read your words and not those of Aristotle!”²¹ It is worth noting that *Problemata* is a scholarly and stylistically uniform text.

However, verbal translation with glosses and commentaries was not the only possible method. In the 1444/1446, George translated Demosthenes’ speech *De Corona*; in the preface, he wrote that the choice of a translation method should depend on the genre of the translated work. The first method (verbal translation) was reserved for the obscure and ambiguous fragments which the author himself not always could fully comprehend: such a method prevented the loss of some important points. According to George, it was the method suitable for the translation of the Holy Scriptures and the works of Aristotle. Thus, during the period of

²¹ Georgius Trapezuntius (1942: 288): “Ignoras, ignoras, o Cages, quid officium interpretis sit... Tu Aristotelem ad Celsi sententiam ignorantissime trahis et philosophiam ejus in tuam vertere conaris et tua non Aristotelis legi efficere studes”.

his most active engagement in translation, George was fairly consistent in his views on how to translate scholarly works (and, in particular, Aristotle). However, there was another method: “And if anyone translates the historian, he should not care about words, but when he understands the entire subject, in more detail or terser, as long as he uses the historical kind of speech, he should translate it in his own way (*suo modo*) into Latin. And if anyone wants to translate the speech of a Greek orator into Latin, he should not neglect either the words or their meaning; he should follow the author closely and do his best to reproduce in Latin his manner of speech (*genus*) and the variety of style (*varietate*)” (in Monfasani 1983: 94; Hankins 1990: 187). In this case, on the one hand, a very free translation (even paraphrase) is possible, while, on the other, the translator should be faithful and even congenial to the author of the original.

Then, not long before losing the position in the curia, George translated *Laws* of Plato. He performed this translation without great pleasure: in the manuscript containing his notes to *Laws*, he made angry notes about the stupidity, absurdity, and immorality of Plato’s work (Hankins 1990: 180-181, n. 30).

While analysing George’s translation, Bessarion finds dozens of errors and faults in almost every book: these are mostly omitted words and phrases (including those important for the meaning); sometimes the words of different characters are put into the mouth of only one of them (or vice versa – one sentence is divided into two); sometimes the modality of a statement changes: doubt instead of confidence or affirmation instead of question. Of course, one cannot fail to mention that Bessarion had some bias against George: there are even a few cases of incorrect quotations from George’s translation (however, they are so rare that can be regarded as exceptions).

Nevertheless, all these are not so much mistakes as a violation of the rules of translation established by George himself: they are exactly these liberties which he rebukes in Gaza’s work. It is also worth saying that in 1459, shortly after *Comparatio* was published (Monfasani 1983: 303; Klibansky 1981a: 9-21), George translated *Parmenides*: in the preface to this dialogue, he claimed that, in this case, he had proceeded in accordance with his method of scholarly translation²². According to James Hankins, George could consider two dialogues to be the works of different genres: scholarly method suited *Parmenides*, while *Laws* allowed more freedom of interpretation. He also believes that George deliberately ruined his translation in order to portray Plato in a bad light (Hankins 1990: 191-92).

However, maybe George had a slightly different motivation and the word “spoil” is not quite suitable here.

In the aforementioned quotation from *Tusculan Disputations*, the translation from Greek into Latin is characterized as adoption and improvement. This is not the only way to describe the process of translation from one language to another: in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, there was a whole range of metaphors for the description of both the process and the results of a translator’s work (Hermans 1985: 105). We have already mentioned one of them: Jerome describes the translator as a conqueror who, “by the right of the winner, drives captured ideas into the realm of his mother tongue”. One could say that a translator “follows in his author’s footsteps” or calls him “a slave working for the master”. The translation could be compared with a fake pearl or a piece of glass in comparison with the diamond of the original. This series can be continued: the magnificent robes of an original and the homespun canvas and rags of the translation; the sun and a pale star or a candle; a body and its shadow. The translator could be an alchemist, pouring the water from a vessel of one language to another; or a miner mining for the precious stones of meaning; a cannibal devouring and “digesting” the flesh of his author (that is, his thoughts and style); even a new incarnation of the author

²² Il. Ruocco notes that George’s translation of *Parmenides* is not always coherent with this claim: in many cases, he translates rather loosely and, for example, desists of using transliterations (Ruocco 2003: 29).

who suddenly has been resurrected speaking the foreign language (Hermans 1985: 113-127). Finally, as we have already seen, the translator could understand the original idea more accurately, fully, and better than the author himself: as Plato said, “let us note that whatever Greeks acquire from foreigners is finally turned by them into something nobler” (Plato, *Epinomis*: 987d-e). There is a lot of evidence that George of Trebizond was proud of his talents and ranked himself among the best translators of his time; his pride surely was not ungrounded. It can be assumed (cautiously and, probably, with some reservations) that his chosen method of translation – lacunae, additions, small inaccuracies, a strange choice of words when the original left room for the interpretation – may be not an attempt to “take Plato away” from the reader, not a *tradimento* instead of *traduzione*, but rather the striving of a scrupulous (*fidus*) if not quite unbiassed translator to do his work as accurately as possible and do justice to the original, which he sincerely considered stupid, absurd, and immoral.

5. The circumstances of *In Calumniatorem Platonis*’ publication

In February 1468, several members of the humanist circle formed in 1465 (the so-called Roman Academy) by Giulio Pomponio Leto (Palermi 1980) were arrested in Rome on the orders of Pope Paul II (who was once a disciple of George of Trebizond). One of the “academics”, Filippo Buonaccorsi, nicknamed Callimachus, was accused of plotting against the pope: he managed to escape abroad with some friends but the remaining members of the circle were captured, imprisoned, and tortured. They were charged not only with conspiracy, but also with paganism, heresy, and immoral behaviour. According to one of the accused, Bartolomeo Platina, Paul “most of all accused [academics] of that (...) [they] were arguing about the immortality of the soul and adhered to Plato’s theory” (Bartolomeo Platina 1963: 250). Some of the arrested members of the Roman Academy were frequent guests in the house of Basilios Bessarion, the eminent Platonist and student of the famous Georgius Gemistus Plethon; moreover, the “academics” had been directly influenced by Plethon himself (Klibansky 1981b: 21). Thus, his views endangered Bessarion and his *familiars*: if there was no direct danger to the cardinal, then his position in the curia could become very precarious. Under these conditions, George of Trebizond’s *Comparatio*, in combination with his translation of *Laws*, could well be used by Bessarion’s enemies, especially since, in the final chapters of his treatise, George very transparently hinted that in a series of different “Platos” (“multiplied”, as it could happen in a piece of eschatological literature with the figure of the Antichrist), “the fourth Plato” (who has come after the second Plato – Mohammed, and the third – Plethon) is Basilios Bessarion.

In February 1469, Giovanni Andrea de Bussi, who apparently edited the “scholastic” Latin in the third part of *In calumniatorem Platonis* (Monfasani 1976: 215; Hankins 1990: 214-215)²³, presented to Paul II the edition of Apuleius’ *De Platone et eius dogmate*. In the preface to this book, de Bussi mentioned that the reader will soon be presented with a new treatise, which will give a proper exposition of Plato’s doctrine. He surely meant the book of Basilios Bessarion, which, therefore, was something more than a replica in an academic discussion: Bessarion and his supporters defended not only Plato, but also themselves. In October 1469, Perotti, in his *Refutatio Deliramentorum Georgii Trapezuntii Cretensis*, made it clear that the real crusade against George was in full swing, claiming that “many of the most learned and eloquent men are ready to demonstrate his stupidity partly in public debates, and partly in the most excellent writings, so that he would receive a well-deserved retribution for his arrogance

²³ Most likely, de Bussi was the first humanist who became a professional editor: under his guidance from 1468 to 1472, thirty-three books were printed in Rome. He has no predecessors in the history of printing (Feld 1982: 289-290).

and recklessness not only from the contemporaries, but also from the descendants”²⁴. Thus, critical analysis of George of Trebizond’s translation of *Laws* became an element of the campaign, “first in the history of printing”, which aimed to spread Platonism and strengthen Plato’s authority (Hankins 1990: 214).

6. Conclusion

It seems that making a decision to add the work containing a detailed analysis of the mistakes made by George of Trebizond in his translation of Plato’s *Laws* to their polemical work, Bessarion and his associates solved several problems at once. First of all, they made a contribution to the discussion about the principles of translation. At the time when the non-Greek readers had only begun their acquaintance with previously unavailable writings of ancient authors (including Plato’s dialogues), the accuracy of the translation was surely of the greatest importance. George of Trebizond himself participated in this discussion, as well as his adversary Theodore Gaza. As *In Calumniatorem Platonis* aimed to promote Platonism, this purely “academic” goal of publication should not be omitted.

However, the commentary is so peculiar in its style that we can safely assume that its author or authors also pursued other goals. On the one hand, it seems quite obvious that ironic comments were fuelled by personal hostility and resentment: Bessarion casually mentions his hard feelings towards the “adversary” at the beginning of *In Calumniatorem Platonis*²⁵, and many members of his circle had all the reasons to consider George an enemy. Such a manifestation of personal attitude in press may seem inappropriate to a contemporary reader, but we should not forget that, at that time, the borders between private correspondence and public discussion, personal letters and scholarly treatises were rather penetrable. For example, Byzantine epistolography gives a lot of cases of irony, sarcasm, and satire: it seems that further study of use of humour in correspondence between George of Trebizond, Basilios Bessarion, and other intellectuals of his circle may further contextualize the discussion of the role of humour in the history of Plato-Aristotelian controversy of the 15th century.

On the other hand, there is a long tradition of usage of laughter in public scholarly discourse dating back to Socrates and Plato themselves. In particular, humour played an important role in the social life of the Byzantine intellectuals, helping to emphasize essential points and making the arguments more persuasive (e. g., Kazhdan 2000; Kushch 2017: 208-218). We have seen that the irony in *In Calumniatorem Platonis* is used as a powerful rhetorical device allowing to achieve some important political goals: it strengthens the position of Bessarion and his fellows, helps to win the favour of readers (including Pope Paul II, who was not very fond of Plato and Platonic philosophy), and ridicules a well-known rhetorician and translator, turning him into a weak-headed man who unreasonably considers himself to be wise

²⁴ Perotti (1942: 345): “(...) scio plerosque doctissimos et eloquentissimos viros accingere sese, ut hominis hujus inscitiam partim publicis disputationibus, partim praeclarissimis scriptis ostendant, quo meritum arrogantiae et temeritatis suae praemium non modo apud praesentes, sed etiam apud posteros consequatur”.

²⁵ This hostility is all the more understandable if the commentary was actually written by Theodore Gaza, a longtime rival of George of Trebizond. It seems worth to note that, in his commentary on Gaza’s translation of *Problemata*, George of Trebizond without hesitation also makes fun of his opponent and vehemently emphasizes his errors. In this regard, some of Perotti’s remarks in *Refutatio* seem very interesting: he several times repeats that Bessarion is far too respectable and venerable a man to concern himself with George’s defamation, that he pities George, and does not want to counter-charge him (e. g., Perotti 1942: 345, 354, 359, 372); therefore, he, Nicollo Perotti, believes that it is his duty to answer George’s accusations. Perhaps irony and sarcasm in the fifth book of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* are so persistent and, one can say, even obtrusive precisely because this part of the treatise was written by Theodore Gaza, who was George’s peer, worked in the same field, and wished to retaliate against the adversary, bringing his failures into sharp focus.

and well-educated, and claims the right to pass judgment on the things that are actually beyond his understanding. Thus, George was presented as an unreliable witness for the prosecution, who “understands neither Plato’s words nor his own blather” (*nec quid Plato dicat, nec quid ipse loquatur*) and whose opinions should not be taken seriously. This allowed the authors of *In Calumniatorem Platonis* to make a distinction between genuine Plato and his opaque and distorted reflection in the mirror of George’s translation.

Notes

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