

## Exegesis and Intellectual Authority:

### The Strange Case of Porphyry's *Commentary on Ptolemy's Harmonics*

The “Commentary on Ptolemy's *Harmonics*” is the longest extant work written by Porphyry and, for a long time, also the most neglected. This situation partially changed thanks to the recent publication of two translations and commentaries (Barker 2016 in English; Raffa 2016 in Italian), and it is now time to properly reassess its significance within Porphyry's exegetical activity. This paper will try to shed light on the idiosyncratic way in which Porphyry establishes his own intellectual authority as a commentator in this text.

Sluiter 2000 has pointed out how ancient meta-literary works consistently reflect a tension concerning the issue of intellectual authority: on the one hand, the commentator needs to justify his hermeneutic endeavor by presenting the text he is striving to clarify as authoritative; on the other hand, he needs to find a way to carve out a position for his own intellectual independence. In Sluiter's view, the balance between these two opposite needs can be found in the way commentators dialectally engage with previous interpreters, who often become the targets of harsh criticisms. The “Commentary on Ptolemy's *Harmonics*” does not fit within this model, because Porphyry is the first interpreter to engage with Ptolemy's text. Instead, I argue that Porphyry establishes his own authority by carrying on a subtle battle against his source-text itself.

In the first part of the paper I look at how the tension between commentator and source-text emerge in the prologue to the *Commentary*. More specifically, I will show that Porphyry, without openly undermining the epistemic value of Ptolemy, subtly accuses him of lacking originality, clarity, and what we may call today “academic integrity”. Thus, Porphyry tries to establish his own credential and his own intellectual authority by writing a commentary that aims at correcting the flaws of its source-text.

In the second part of the paper I consider the prologues of other exegetical works by Porphyry in order to better appreciate how Porphyry's approach to exegesis is deeply influenced by the nature of the text he is commenting on. More specifically, I will consider the preface to the "Introduction to Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblum*", and a fragment from the lost treatise "On the Styx" (Porph. fr. 372 Smith= Stob. II.1,32), dealing with Homeric exegesis. I will point out that, when commenting on Ptolemy's astrological treatise, Porphyry assumes an agonistic attitude toward the text, which partially resembles what he does at the beginning of the "Commentary on the *Harmonics*". On the contrary, the fragment from "On the Styx" shows how different Porphyry's approach is towards a text that he unquestionably considers authoritative, namely the Homeric poems. Indeed, he does not express any open or subtle criticism toward the source-text. Rather, he builds his own intellectual authority by attacking direct competitors who have previously engaged in the exegesis of the poems.

If my analysis is correct, the strife for the establishment of intellectual authority in ancient commentaries can play out in very different ways that depend on the nature and the perceived value of the source-text. The picture, therefore, is much more nuanced than the one proposed by Sluiter.

#### Bibliography

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