Ekphrasis in the Alexiad

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The historical text of the Alexiad written by Anna Komnene in the mid-twelfth century constitutes the prime example of history-writing of the Komnenian period. Too much ink has been shed on the encomiastic nature of the work as well as on the author’s literary devices, such as the effective use of gender. Yet the major issue of characterization still invites attention. The purpose of this paper is to take a fresh look at the main characters’ construction through the rhetorical technique of ekphrasis. We will firstly examine how Anna uses ekphrasis to describe her characters’ appearance. Then I shall argue that this technique fulfills a powerful persuasive role and in the same time it shows off Anna’s artistic skills.

Physical appearance is significant for Anna’s characters since it is the mirror of their ethos. For almost every character, a shorter or longer description is given. The fact that Anna’s favourite people are beautiful can be justified on that her favorite figures represent the best ethos. Thus, the ideal personage combines inner and physical beauty. Men admire beauty whereas for women beauty leads to a good marriage. Beauty is defined by white skin, rosy cheeks, blond hair, symmetry of the body and high stature for men. Eyes have a prominent role, for they convey messages but there is not one colour specified as favourite. By contrast, unfavourable figures are usually ugly and they are defined by dark skin, a thin beard,

3 Barbara Hill, Imperial Women in Byzantium 1025-1204 (Harlow: Longman, 1999), 88-93. She explores the significance of women’s beauty in the Komnenian period.
4 Jakov Ljubarskij, Η Προσωπικότητα και το Έργο του Μιχαήλ Ψελλού (Athens: Kanaki, 2004), 332-333, demonstrates that these features derive from the classical prosopography. On Anna’s perception on beauty, see Georgina Buckler, Anna Comnena (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 57-61.
5 Sophia Antoniade, “Η Περιγραφική στην Αλεξιάδα,” Ελληνικά 5 (1932): 268, notes that the sparkling eyes and κυανοῦν do not necessarily mean blue eyes.
short height and asymmetry.\textsuperscript{6}

The technique with which Anna provides elaborate portraits of her main characters is known as ekphrasis. Ekphrasis belongs to progymnasmata, elementary rhetorical school exercises.\textsuperscript{7} It could be independent or embedded into a literary work. It could be a praise of a lifeless or a living viewing subject.\textsuperscript{8} Anna attains ekphrasis’s goal; she brings her characters ‘ἐναργῶς ὑπ’ οὖν’ (vividly before the eyes).\textsuperscript{9} Because of its encomiastic nature being also named in manuscripts as ‘ἠγκωμιαστικὴ ἔκφρασις’ (eulogizing ekphrasis), its subject is usually beautiful.\textsuperscript{10} Seven elaborate ekphrastic descriptions will be my focus; those of Alexios, Eirene, Maria, Konstantinos, Dalassene, Bohemund and Robert Guiscard.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{The ekphrastic technique}

According to Aphthonios’s and Nikolaos’s progymnasmata, a description has to start from the head and end with the torso and limbs.\textsuperscript{12} Albeit Anna delivers always a full ekphrasis, she inverts the traditional order without following it systematically.\textsuperscript{13} She

\textsuperscript{6} Antoniade, “Ἡ Περιγραφική στὴν Αλεξιάδα,” 266-267. On the description of Ioannes Komnenos, see Emilio D. Rolando, 	extit{Ana Commeno. La Alexiada} (Sevilla: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, 1989), 13-14.


\textsuperscript{8} Actions, seasons and times could also be elaborated in a single or compound ekphrastic description. On the subjects of ekphrasis, see Ruth Webb, Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 61-86.

\textsuperscript{9} See Theon’s progymnasma on ekphrasis in Webb, Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice, 199.


\textsuperscript{11} Anna Komnene, Alexiad, edited by Diether R. Reinsch and Athanasion Kambylis (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001). 1.10.4 (Robert’s), 3.1.3 (Konstantinos’s), 3.2.4 (Maria’s), 3.3.1-3.3.2 (Alexios’s), 3.3.3-3.3.4 (Eirene’s), 3.8.3 (Dalassene’s), 13.10.4-13.10.5 (Bohemund’s).

\textsuperscript{12} George Kennedy, Progymnasmata. Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 117.

\textsuperscript{13} Compare with Manasses’s Ἐκφρασις εἰκονισμάτων ἐν μαρμάρῳ κωστοπερὲ where he describes the personified Earth in the traditional order in Panagiotis Agapitos, Εἰκών καὶ Λόγος. Έξι Βυζαντινές Περιγραφές Έργων Τέχνης (Athens: Agra, 2006), 56-60.
frequently starts with an introductory sentence about the family, origins and a general statement regarding beauty. Robert is Norman from humble origins. Maria of Alania is an aristocrat and Eirene comes from the well-known Doukas family. She then normally describes the stature before the face and returns to the body. The body and stature emerge as more important for men in contrast to the face for women. \(^{14}\) She closes the ekphrasis with a general statement again.\(^ {15}\)

As ekphrasis requires, Anna maintains clarity and uses a plethora of tropes so as to create enargeia (vividness). \(^ {16}\) The rhetorical question in Maria’s ekphrasis emphasizes her beauty. \(^ {17}\)

14 Elizabeth C. Evans, “Roman Descriptions of Personal Appearance in History and Biography,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 46 (1935): 63-64, mentions that a well-proportioned stature was a sign of bravery according to physiognomy.

15 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 1.10.4: ‘Being gifted by fortune, nature and soul, it was natural for him –Robert Guiscard– not to be enslaved or to surrender to anyone’.

16 On tropes and schemes, see Jeffreys, “Rhetoric,” 833-835.

17 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.2.4: ‘Τὰς δὲ τῶν ὀμμάτων ἀνθρώπων ἐξείποι’; (‘Who would be able to describe the light of her eyes?’)

18 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.2.4: ‘She was tall like a cypress and white like snow’.

19 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.2.4: ‘She is a rose’.

20 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.3.2: ‘You would see immediately rhetoric sitting fiery on his lips’.

21 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 1.10.4: ‘The cry of this man turned thousands people to flee’.

22 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.2.4: ‘Her charming manners surpassed words and the power of art’.

23 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.3.2.

24 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.3.3.

25 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.3.3.

26 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.1.3.

27 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.3.2.

28 Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, 3.3.3: ‘Unrivalled in sight, unrivalled in hearing’.
statement and counter-statement (her face οὐ μὴν εἰς κύκλον ἀκριβῆ διαπέπλαστο κατὰ τὰς Ἀσσυρίους γυναῖκας οὐδ' ἄλλος ἐξεμηκύνετο κατὰ τὰς Σκυθίδας, ἄλλ' ὑπεχαλάτῳ μικρὸν ποιεῖ τῆς ἀκριβείας τοῦ κύκλου); 30 Vividness is also achieved through the emotions which the people described provoke. Kontantinos, the son of Maria of Alania, provokes delight. Alexios, Eirene and Dalassene provoke awe. By contrast, Robert and Bohemund arouse fear. Maria provokes desire.

Many tropes are kept within the conventions of classical ekphrasis such as the simile of the cypress, the rose and snow. 31 Eurhythmy, symmetry and allusions to mythology are also traditional concepts. 32 The antithesis in Bohemund’s ekphrasis of tenderness and cruelty as well as the twofold gaze of Alexios, Eirene and Dalassene are also a topos. 33 Robert’s and Bohemund’s ekphrasis lacks in tropes in comparison with the other characters’. Moreover Robert’s ekphrasis has asyndeton (Ὁ δὲ Ῥομπέρτος οὗτος Νορμάνος τὸ γένος, τὴν τύχην ἄσημος, τὴν γνώμην τυραννικός, τὴν ψυχὴν πανουργότατος, τὴν χεῖρα γενναῖος). 34 Conversely, Bohemund’s ekphrasis has polysyndeton (τὴν γαστέρα συνεσταλμένος καὶ τὰς λαγόνας, καὶ τοὺς ὤμους καὶ τὰ στέρνα πλατὺς καὶ τοὺς βραχίονας καρτερός, καὶ τὴν ὀλην ἔξιν τοῦ σώματος). 35

Anna also uses the technical language typical to the ekphrasis. It derives from the sector of painting and plastic art. 36 Maria, Eirene and Alexios are compared to

29 Anna Komnene, Alexiad, 3.3.1: ‘I mean the newly-crowned emperors’.
30 Anna Komnene, Alexiad, 3.3.3: ‘It was not completely round like the Assyrian women’s, neither long like the Scyths’, but somewhat longer than a perfect circle’.
31 Because of stereotypes in ekphrasis, Anna has many similarities with Psellus. On his ekphrasis of characters, see Ljubarskij, Η Προσωπικότητα καὶ το Έργο του Μιχαήλ Ψελλοῦ, 329-346. For a comparison with Libanios’s model exercise in beauty and statues, see Craig A. Gibson, Libanius’s Progymnasmata. Model exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 462-465, 502-507.
32 Byzantines stress explicitly the importance of symmetry whereas in classical prosopography it was implied. On its role in classical and byzantine ekphrasis, see Ljubarskij, H Προσωπικότητα καὶ το Έργο του Μιχαήλ Ψελλοῦ, 336-337.
33 The use of topos should not be criticized as making the portraits unreliable. The accurate adjustment of rhetorical conventions to the portraits would demonstrate Anna’s skills.
34 Anna Komnene, Alexiad, 1.10.4: ‘This Robert was of Norman origin, from a humble family, self-willed, brave.’ The asyndeton in his ekphrasis describing features of his personality demonstrates the combination of ethos and physical appearance.
35 Anna Komnene, Alexiad, 13.10.4: ‘In his belly and flanks he was thin, and in his shoulders and breast he was broad, and in his arms he was strong and in his whole body’.
36 The use of technical language is a common feature of ekphrasis. The statue is for first time encountered in Sappho. See Ljubarskij, Η Προσωπικότητα καὶ το Έργο του Μιχαήλ Ψελλοῦ, 338-339.
Verbs convey the imagery of ἀγαλματοποιεῖν (statue-making); Appeles and Pheidias could not produce (παρήγαγεν) as beautiful a statue as Maria. Anna plays further with the classical ekphrastic logos. Her characters remind of lifeless works of art; Konstantinos could be mistaken for a painting of Eros, and Eirene’s hands and fingers would be thought to have been turned from ivory by a craftsman. However they are concurrently like living statues, thus making perfect models for sculpture. An imagery of spectatorship enriches the profile of the described figures as statues and enhances their vividness; Alexios provoking admiration and delight to people around him is associated with an object of art, viewed and admired by spectators.

**Ekphrasis’s role in the Alexiad**

At this stage, we are confronted with the question of why Anna uses this technique. Belonging to the genre of rhetoric, ekphrasis can play a persuasive role in historiography. Undoubtedly, it is a device of characterization since many epithets convey inner features. A rounded profile of characters is presented which the audience can reconstruct imaginatively. In addition, it fits within the encomium of Anna’s favourite figures. More importantly characters are classified into a hierarchy; not all deserve an ekphrasis whereas by comparing the ekphrasis’s length, language, and creativity we understand characters’ significance. Maria’s eyes are bright and vivid but Eirene’s provoke emotion. Furthermore Maria is a desirable statue alluding to Knidian Aphrodite but Eirene is explicitly compared to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Inner beauty is superior to external, and this leads to Eirene becoming more inaccessible and respectable. Her ekphrasis is also much longer. Hence through

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37 Bohemund’s description (13.10.4) also reminds a statue, with his stable feet alluding to a statue’s base.

38 In the classical ekphrasis lifeless objects are like living statues, the most famous example being Myron’s cow which is mentioned also in Manasses’s ekphrasis, Agapitos, Εἰκών και Λόγος, 50-53. The duplex nature of Anna’s metaphors being both like lifeless art and living statues, resembles an epigrammatic poem of Myron’s cow (Anth.Pal.9.798): ‘When you see this heifer of Myron, you will perhaps shout: Either Nature is lifeless, or Art is alive’. See Simon Goldhill, “What is Ekphrasis for?” Classical Philology 102, no. 1 (2007): 18.

39 Goldhill, “What is Ekphrasis for?” 3-8, demonstrates the psychological impact of ekphrasis on the audience and readers and their manipulation through enargeia and phantasia.


42 Ljubarskij, *Η Προσωπικότητα και το Έργο του Μιχαήλ Ψελλού*, 341.
Ekphrasis Anna transmits the superiority of her mother over Maria. Similarly, Alexios’s beauty overshadows Polykleitos’s Canon which represents the prototype of symmetry of body in classical sculpture whereas Bohemund fits within it; Alexios’s beauty then—and consequently character—is superior.\(^{43}\) Anna Dalassene has a distinct ekphrasis.\(^{44}\) The symmetry of body and face are replaced by symmetry in philanthropy and morality. Dalassene becomes a spiritual character rather than feminine. Alexios’s, Dalassene’s, and Eirene’s twofold gaze being reminiscent of the Christ’s different sized eyes in iconography conveys their imperial authority, in the sense that it can transmit either fear or sympathy depending on the viewer’s inner values.\(^{45}\)

Let us now turn to the ekphrasis of Robert and Bohemund. Their portraits are surprising. Wouldn’t they also be to Anna’s audience?\(^{46}\) In contrast to other ugly enemies, Anna highlights the beauty of these two.\(^{47}\) Buckler’s argument that Anna confesses their beauty is misguided and not convincing;\(^{48}\) that both were extremely handsome tallying with Anna’s ideals, does not necessarily lead to a long description being granted to them. It is worth recalling that ekphrasis is given for Alexios’s greatest enemies. A long description would make the audience familiar with these enemies. Moreover they are an eternal threat to Alexios. By underestimating them, Anna would underestimate the victory or defeat of Alexios by them. She rather praises them and hence their physical appearance reflects their abilities. Nevertheless, our attention should be drawn not only to the fact that their beauty is expressed but to how this is done. According to the principles of progymnasmata, Anna adopts a different style for them so as to convey the appropriate image and feelings.\(^{49}\) The aforementioned lack of tropes makes their description wanting in harmony. Moreover

\(^{43}\) Alexios’s ekphrasis (3.3.1-3.3.2.) is a hero’s imagery; beauty with military and oratory skills make the ideal man. Anna could not hide his not very tall stature but the brightness of all the other features compensate for this lack.

\(^{44}\) Anna Komnene, \textit{Alexiad}, 3.8.3.


\(^{46}\) According to Goldhill, “What is Ekphrasis for?” 5, astonishment is a feature of the visualization which disorientates the reader from the facts.

\(^{47}\) As ugly are described internal enemies, involved in malicious heresies and beliefs. Ugliness coincides therefore with maliciousness of the inner self.

\(^{48}\) Buckler, \textit{Anna Comnena}, 57.

\(^{49}\) According to Theon, ‘next one should not recollect all useless details and should make the style reflect the subject’. See Kennedy, \textit{Progymnasmata. Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric}, 47.
the schemes of asyndeton and polysyndeton attract our attention. Through their blunt ekphrasis with their fierce characteristics –frightful voice, fierce eyes, strong limbs–their aforementioned beauty excites fear and invokes tension to the audience. These figures are full of passion, making them not merely beautiful but also formidable enemies, whereas the audience gets emotionally engaged.\textsuperscript{50} What Anna achieves is not theirs but Alexios’s praise for dealing with highly dangerous and awe-inspiring men. This is clearly demonstrated in the end of Bohemund’s ekphrasis: ‘Such an enemy only by the emperor could be defeated through fortune, eloquence and many other gifts given to him by nature.’\textsuperscript{51}

The praise of Alexios is made through Anna’s phraseology as well. Extracting vocabulary from plastic art, she achieves both the mobilization of image through a fluid language and the immobilization of the language through a static image.\textsuperscript{52} What finally becomes eternal is image in a given moment. Alexios’s image in a young age will be immortalized through his ekphrasis as his deeds are to be immortalized through his history.\textsuperscript{53}

The ekphrastic descriptions should be examined in their narrative frame as well. The portrait of Robert being placed in Michael’s VII and Botaneiates’s reign in his preparation against Byzantium would make the audience understand how dangerous the Norman enemy would be in future and would criticize Michael VII –and not Alexios– as responsible. The portrait of Bohemund elevates the treaty that Alexios achieved. The ekphrasis of Maria takes the attention far from Eudokia in the section about Botaneiates’s marriage. In fact, Maria overshadows Eudokia, who is bypassed. Similarly Konstantinos’s ekphrasis is placed when Maria has to be justified for staying in the palace. The ekphrasis functions within Maria’s apology. The audience’s attention shifts from Maria to Konstantinos through a transitional and intense idea: the boy was in danger. Through his ekphrasis the audience becomes favorably disposed towards the perfect child and thus they can sympathize with Maria’s desire to protect it. Regarding the ekphrasis of Eirene and Alexios, it shows their unity in opposing the gossip about Maria and Alexios and their public image as a newly married imperial couple. Finally, the ekphrasis of Anna Dalassene is embedded in her character’s broader description which aimed to justify the power given to her by Alexios via the

\textsuperscript{50} On the engagement of the audience through \textit{enargeia}, see Webb, \textit{Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice}, 98-100.

\textsuperscript{51} Anna Komnene, \textit{Alexiad}, 13.10.5.

\textsuperscript{52} Agapitos, \textit{Εικών καὶ Λόγος. Έξι Βυζαντινές Περιγραφές Έργων Έργης}, 19-20.

\textsuperscript{53} Pedro A. Agudelo, “Los Ojos de la Palabra. La Construccion del Concepto de Ecfrasis, de la Retorica Antigua a la Crítica Literaria,” \textit{Linguística y Literatura} 60 (2011): 86-87, refers to the absence of the viewing subject that the ekphrasis aims to cover.
Golden Bull.\textsuperscript{54} The spirituality deriving from her ekphrasis tallies with the masculine qualities that Anna Dalassene possesses in that excerpt (intelligence, wisdom, organization, rhetoric skills) constructing a portrait of a reliable female ruler and thus defending Alexios’ policy.\textsuperscript{55}

Finally the literary byzantine ekphraseis frequently compete with the art that they describe. Anna in a similar fashion uses words which have an ambiguous meaning; In Alexios’s and Eirene’s ekphrasis 'γραφεύς γράψειεν', instead of a painter, could be a writer —Anna— who upon seeing a beautiful subject wants to describe it.\textsuperscript{56} Such a meaning would also allude to writers writing encomia; in this context, there is no panegyric sufficient to praise them. Such a dialogue between image and writing elevates Anna’s work.\textsuperscript{57} It is not only that her writing is enhanced through poetic language; it competes with sculpture and painting on which art crystallizes more vividly imagery. This is more evident in the comparison of Eirene to Athena. In that section Eirene is not compared to Athena’s painting or statue but to her image as described by authors; there is a double competition. Firstly authors are selected by Anna as the transmitters of Athena’s image throughout the centuries and this makes them superior to visual artists. Secondly, Eirene competes with the written Athena through her description made by Anna. Thus it is Anna who competes with authors on who portrays a beautiful subject more skillfully.

Hopefully the aforementioned analysis demonstrates how the ekphrastic logos of Alexiad can be read as an integral part of the principal characters’ construction. It is primarily developed within the traditional conventions. With the \textit{enargeia} achieved through tropes, schemes and technical language, ekphrasis becomes a rhetorical device. It is used as a device of characterization from which Alexios and Eirene emerge as superior to male and feminine characters respectively, whereas the adopted style fluctuates according to the quality of persons. Moreover it achieves orientation or disorientation from facts. Finally, Anna participates in the ekphrastic process being she a spectator and her inspiration derives from nature; her models are true. All the ekphraseis ascribe the wholeness of the described people. What Anna also achieves is to make her historical account a literary piece showing off her artistic skills and putting her personal writing into a dialogue with other visual and literary arts; apart

\textsuperscript{54} Anna Komnene, \textit{Alexiad}, 3.7.

\textsuperscript{55} These masculine features should be juxtaposed with the feminine qualities of motherhood mentioned in Book 3.6.

\textsuperscript{56} Anna Komnene, \textit{Alexiad}, 3.3.1. My attention to this wordplay was drawn by Agapitos, \textit{Εικών και Λόγος}, 15-17.

\textsuperscript{57} See Agapitos, \textit{Εικών και Λόγος}, 15-38, for the competitive and collaborative relation between writing and image.
from being a passive spectator she takes the pen and creates in imitation of her viewing subject a fluid work of art in its own right.

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