The Greeks were nothing if not agonistic, and whether philosophy was born of rhetoric or rhetoric of philosophy, any argument—philosophical or otherwise—addresses a previously existing argument (real or implied) and hence an interlocutor, an antagonist, possibly a straw man, possibly a more substantial and tangible presence. Many—perhaps most—philosophical opponents are in the second category. They are named, and the positions attacked or questioned are attributed (rightly or not) to a historical individual, but there are many reasons for hiding the identity of the interlocutor. If we believe the standard histories of Greek philosophy, the “invisible adversary” of my title is no stranger to the philosophical discourse of the Greeks, and his history is a long one. One thinks first, perhaps, of Aristotle. The arguments of the Poetics, and particularly the peculiarly underargued notion of catharsis, look like answers to a counterposition, but this is never identified, much less described or addressed directly. If, as I think we would all agree, this figure who needed to be answered but not named was Plato, then the adversarial nature of Aristotle’s argument is restored, and the motivation of his decision to keep his adversary anonymous can be plausibly explained.

Some 800 years after Aristotle’s one-sided exchange, Proclus, one of the last “successors” to the chair of Platonic philosophy in Athens, engaged in a one-sided polemic of a very different sort.¹ One way to characterize this debate would be to say that it was an exchange with the elephant in the room. If that familiar metaphor refers primarily to the size and obtrusiveness of the unnamed presence in question, the elephant has another quality that is perhaps just as relevant here: his potential destructiveness. Had Proclus confronted him directly, we might well be reading today not what Proclus wrote but at best the equivalent of what (to cite an earlier example) Origen the Christian

¹ Cf. Saffrey, “Allusions antichrétiennes,” 553–54. Saffrey’s article, which forms the basis of much of this article, opens with this observation: “On chercherait en vain dans ses [i.e., Proclus’s] écrits une réaction ouverte au christianisme.” Sincere thanks are due to the two anonymous readers who commented on the text and pointed out several errors. I am especially indebted to “Reviewer 1” for the reference to P. Hoffmann, “Un grief antichrétien chez Proclus,” which I was unfortunately unable to incorporate here.
claimed that Celsus said, perhaps accompanied by some excerpts selectively culled from his writings by an unsympathetic excerptor. And the elephant had another destructive trick or two up his sleeve. Proclus never mentions Hypatia (who met her end at the hands of a Christian mob in Alexandria when Proclus was an infant), but one might imagine that he thought about her a good deal.

My initial sketch of the motivations behind Proclus’s rhetorical strategy in his *Republic* commentary may be flippant, but I have made it so primarily to problematize that strategy. Proclus unquestionably characterizes those who oppose his position (and from whom, he insists, much of the specifics of his argumentation must be kept secret), but the manner in which he does this raises interesting questions. First of all (like the elephant himself), the polemic both is and is not obvious, or to put it differently, it can easily be ignored. Of course, it is difficult to recreate the experience of native speakers remote in time, but I can at least report my own experience in dealing with this text: the characterization of Proclus’s Christian opponents is something that can easily be overlooked in the *Republic* commentary, but it becomes louder and louder with repeated readings. This is in part a matter of conventional signals, used not just by Proclus but by generations of polytheists to refer to the growing Christian threat. This cryptic language gives us precious information about Proclus’s notion of his audience. He seems to be writing in a deeply coded language, where the polemic is readily accessible to those who share his views, but just as easily ignored by the elephant and his friends: a sort of double rhetoric, designed to be read and understood differently by two classes of readers. It is striking that Proclus’s explicit analysis of Homeric poetry in this essay mirrors the rhetorical strategy of the essay itself.

Let me turn briefly to the specifics of the argument in question in order to situate what I have called its polemical aspect within its other rhetorical strategies. The sixth essay of Proclus’s *Commentary on the Republic* is largely self-contained, and its concerns might be approached from various points of view: religious, literary, and finally (and most obviously) philosophical. The explicit goal of the essay is to defend Homer against Socrates’s criticisms in books 2, 3, and 10 of the *Republic* and at the same time to show that Plato is in fact not self-contradictory in sometimes praising and sometimes (apparently) condemning Homer. The essay originated, as Proclus tells us, in a speech on the occasion of

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2 Cf. Lamberton, *Proclus the Successor on Poetics and the Homeric Poems*. Over the years during which I worked on this text, translation, and commentary, the polemical nature of Proclus’s arguments became increasingly unavoidable.

3 Saffrey, “Allusions antichrétiennes,” made a preliminary catalogue of these expressions in Proclus and in his biographer, Marinus.