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Plutarchus



Plutarchus ein natürlicher maister vnd außsprichender geschicklicher ein gepie
ter vñ amichtiger des kaisers Trayani ist zu dieser zeit an jnnem vmbfange vñ glawb
wirdigt er in fast großer achtung gewest. von dem Plutarates in seine vñsonen also sagt
Plutarchus der natürlich maister ist in dem heiligthumb schen der sitten ein so vber williter
gewest das er leichtlich ein gepieter des kaisers hat mügen er mit werden. Difer Plutar
chus tet sunden fleiß dem kaiser seinen unger vier ding eingepilten. nemlich vñes er vor
digt er sein selbs erfinder. der ambtelowt suchet vñ der vnderhanen lieb vñ vber
fuchen in kriechischen vñ lateinischen man gar vil bücher von mancherley materien vñnd
kapfcher bey Trayano angenamne begabung gelangt.

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UNIVERSITY OF MÁLAGA (SPAIN)
UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY, LOGAN, UTAH (U.S.A.)

The Interplay of Textual References in Plutarch's *Life of Phocion*

by

Maria do Céu Fialho
University of Coimbra
mcfialhofluc@gmail.com

Abstract

The pair of *Vitae Phocion/Cato* contains a kind of anticipated *synkrisis*. This anticipation has implications on the speech strategy. Signs that Plutarch prefers Phocion are to be understood – he highlights the text with clues which organize the interpretation of the macrotext. This is to be seen in the way he resorts to comparing with models or to playing with the same hypotexts differently in the case of Phocion or of Cato, both of them close to the Socrates' model. It is already said that the ostentatiousness of the Socratic model in the reading of *Phaedo* by Cato permits the reader to glimpse a misunderstood appropriation of it. But in the *Life of Phocion*, on the contrary, the reader must find out the hypotext and its paradigmatic dimension – either Herodotus (Solon before Croesus' treasure/Phocion before Alexander's treasures) or Plato (*Ap.*, *Phd.*, *Cri.*) in the placid and soft attitude of Phocion in his last moments, where some coincidences of episodes before his death and that of Socrates are to be seen, or in Phocion's behaviour throughout his life.

Key-Words: Plutarch, *Moralia*, Epithets.

Phocion is one of the great examples of longevity and *constantia* of character and behaviour that has lasted from Ancient times to the present. He lived during the turmoil of the 4th century B.C., in an Athens that was defeated and politically weakened and whose identity was badly shaken by a long civil war and by the impending loss of its freedom to

the kings of Macedonia, then builders of a new empire.

Although Phocion's political and private conduct was beyond reproach and in the interests of Athens, which both feared and respected him, he was condemned to death by ingestion of hemlock, in 318 B.C. This very same city, or rather, a crowd, manipulated by the representatives of the Macedonian

kings, condemned him to death at the age of eight-four, in an act that could not be further from the genuine democracy of the 5th century. A short time after, his death produced uncomfortable feelings of guilt and weighed heavily on the conscience of the city.

Unlike many of the heroes in Plutarch's biographies, Phocion does not represent the soul and the fate of the political community of the time, through *synecdoche*. On the contrary, he experiences the problems of his time and fights against them as much as he can by intervening and setting trends of collective behaviour regarding political ethics. His effort is consistent and energetic, but in vain, because he is surrounded by traitors, of which he is well aware.

Phocion's attitudes contrast greatly with the typical behaviour of the members of Athenian society at that time: he follows Socrates' model of conduct and is inspired by moderate

Stoicism. Therefore, Plutarch chooses another admirer of Socrates, an even greater enthusiast of stoicism, in Rome, to pair with him: Cato the Younger, from Utica. Although the link between the two is sometimes difficult to make and tenuous, which Plutarch himself acknowledges, we witness in both their lives, the Herculean struggle against the course of events and the reigning beliefs of that time¹, as if it were a struggle against a particularly powerful *Tyche*². And they almost defeated it in the echo of themselves which they left behind, after their deaths³.

This pair of lives is part of a small group of four pairs without a final *synkrisis*⁴. However, in the preface to the *Vitae* of Phocion and Cato there is a kind of anticipated *synkrisis* where the author presents his reasons for establishing a comparison between the two.

Plutarch's preference for Phocion is noticeable from the very beginning:

¹ This struggle of man against *Tyche*, even if *Tyche* means the circumstances and the historical environment was already analysed by PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ (1973) 103 sqq.

² SWAIN (1989) 282 asserts even that "The nations of both men were in a bad plight and it is made clear that their virtue was being rendered ineffectual by fortune". I think, specially in what concerns Phocion, his virtue has a special effect *post mortem*, when the city recognized, with bad conscience, that it judged unjustly this man.

³ This model of hero fighting against a *tyche* is very near to the concept of hero's life by C. Nepos. Plutarch searched inspiration for his Phocion in Nepos' Phocion:

⁴ The others are those of Themistocles/Camillus, Pyrrhus/Marius, Alexander/Caesar. See TRAPP (1999) 487-488. Trapp recognizes, in the case of Phocion/Cato how this strategy rendered the Platonizing analysis so important. 488: "A Platonizing analysis of the relationship between statesman and populace is thus established as central to understanding the resemblance between Plutarch's two subjects, and the figure of Socrates brought, if only hazily so far, into relationship with them".

Cato's *archaiotropia* appears in a period of corrupt and depraved customs and so, because it is unique, brings him *doxan... megalen kai kleos* (3.3). However, his virtue and nobility are historically out of context – the hardness and the scope of his virtue is *asymetron* and strange to the needs of the time. He lacks the sense of *kairos* that Plutarch mentions in a part of the text that is full of references to music. This inability to fit into his own historical era, which is revealed in the very way that Cato intervenes in events, distinguishes the Roman hero from the Greek one.

This type of anticipation of the *synkrisis* is much more than a mere process of *variatio* in the presentation of elements in the biographical discourse. On the contrary, it has very specific implications in the interaction between the reader and the text, not only in the way he or she interprets and understands it, but also in his or her comprehension of the profile of the two politicians.

The initial anticipated judgement comparing Phocion to Cato, as well as the general view given about each of the *Vitae*, lead the reader to examine the protagonists' lives for a kind of confirmation of their expectations. The way to that confirmation demands a global strategy which Plutarch performs. He highlights their *Vitae* with various signs through facts and different levels of discourse, like a kind

of 'Weigweiser' demanding a macrotextual level of reading.

Thus, the analysis of the text in the *Lives* of Phocion and Cato implies the acknowledgment of various weavings included in it.

The first and foremost obvious one is that of the final product: the macrotext which is open to an interpretative reading through the comparison and anticipated judgement established at the beginning between Phocion's and Cato's *Lives*.

The second level - the hypotext - is a diverse one, from which the coherence of the reading is built and shown through the indicators referred to. Moreover, it is the complex game of intertwining hypotexts which help to establish the connection and the contrast between Phocion and Cato. This effect is primarily due to the use of Platonic dialogues focused on the last moments of Socrates' life, as the *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Crito*, and some references to *Gorgias* and *The Banquet*. Much weaker is the hypotextual use of Sophoclean tragedy or of Herodotus' *Histories*.

Therefore, the model and example of Socrates' conduct towards death underlies the comparative discourse between Phocion and Cato. Interestingly, in Plutarch's, the more conscious and deliberately acknowledged and displayed this connection is to the Socratic model by those biographed, the more artificial it becomes. Such is the case of Cato.

In both Phocion and Cato, this model is very strongly coloured by Stoicism. Nevertheless, Cato's obsessive reading of *Phaedo* to his circle of friends in his last dinner contrasts with his behaviour afterwards. His attachment to the book and to theoretical culture are dissonant with the spontaneity of his conduct in real life. Cato's outburst of rage towards the loyal slave who does not bring him the sword reaches a climax when he physically attacks him in a brutal manner. Such behaviour is contrary to the *constantia animi* defended and practised by the Stoics. Cato's first attempt to commit suicide failed due to the weakness of his hand, which he had seriously injured when he attacked the slave, but the second attempt, which proved to be successful, was described by Plutarch with impressive visual effects, so as to convey the brutality with which Cato put an end to his life. Socrates' death, the author suggests, was very different, having been dictated by judges and carried out in a sweet and serene manner. The model was therefore wrongly assimilated, and probably also a reflection of Cato's own inability to adapt to his own time (*Phoc.* 3.1.).

The importance of the Socratic-Platonic model to Cato the Younger was already acknowledged in Ancient Rome, as J. Geiger⁵ reminds us. Trapp, and later A. Zadorojny⁶, pointed to and corroborated the thesis that Plutarch presented Cato as misinterpreting his Greek model. The key to this reading lies mainly in the interplay between the readings of *Phaedo* and the last night in the life of the Roman. Zadorojny explores the use of another hypotext: Sophocles' *Ajax*⁷. In fact, Cato shouts for his sword, and becomes angry on discovering that it had been hidden to prevent him from carrying out the fate that he had decided on for himself. When he finally held the sword in his hands and could fulfil his wishes, he identified with it saying '*num emos eimi*' (*Cato* 70.2). Such behaviour reminds us of Sophocles' protagonist when he spoke to the entities which he felt were part of his world and own fate, whether they were the darkness or his sword⁸.

In fact, the Sophoclean hypotext is not so perceptible in the *Life of Phocion*, since the inadequacy of the lonely Sophoclean protagonist in relation to his own world is not appropriate to

⁵ GEIGER (1999) 359-362.

⁶ TRAPP (1999) 493-494; ZADOROJNY'S paper is about to be published in *Hermathena* 182 (2007).

⁷ *Ibid.* This literary resource was already briefly pointed out by TRAPP (1999) 498, but ZADOROJNY analysed it further and derived more extensive conclusions from its use.

⁸ See SCHADEWALDT (1966) 55-93 on this connection with Sophocles' hero as a lonely man with body, sword and landscape linked to his fate.

suggest the context and the conduct of the Athenian.. I believe, however, that by comparing these two lives Plutarch aimed to appeal to the theatrical culture of the reader. His purpose was to draw the memory of the reader, however weakly, to a tragic Sophoclean theme from another angle which did not focus directly on Phocion. I am referring here to the prohibition on burying Phocion in Athens in an act of demagogical tyranny, and to the courage of his second wife (this passage cannot have any other reading⁹). Although weakened by old age, she took the remains of Phocion's body to her home and her speech, which Plutarch places in her mouth, expresses at the same time her civic courage, the bonds of affection and conjugal devotion, as well as the respect owed to the dead and her ties to her ancestors. She predicts that in a moment of regained *sophrosyne*, perhaps caused by future political misfortune, the city will grant the dead man his right to a proper burial (37.5).

It is very likely that the reader, like us, will remember *Antigone*. The logic behind the reading allows a retrospective comparison of data, given that it is possible to go back and re-read the text once more. Thus, it seems to me that Ajax's hypotext in the *Life of Cato* strengthens the thesis of the existence of a crossed reference with the blurred hypotext of *Antigone* in the *Life*

of Phocion. It is of great significance that Plutarch has used the latter with regards to the strong matrimonial relationship of his wife towards him, as well as the feelings of the City towards him, after his death.

In the first case, we are led to place great importance on the relationship between spouses by the polygraph of Chaeronea and to the acknowledged role of the wife. In fact, at the very beginning of the *Life of Phocion*, Plutarch rebuts Sophocles' words, which are put into the mouth of Ismene and said to Creon, in *Antigone* (vv. 563-564): 'Sir, even innate common sense fades away in the midst of misfortune and succumbs to it'. This weakening of virtue (1.5) in times of misfortune is not recognized by Plutarch in Phocion. The latter will not side with Ismene - and his wife's conduct will prolong the implicit evocation of Antigone's side.

This strategy allowed Plutarch to emphasize the divergence between Phocion and Cato. The moments before Cato's death were hard on his friends, family and slaves because his behaviour did reveal neither sweetness nor temperance (*Cato* 68 sqq), and contrasted with the purpose of his readings during the dinner.

The great force that tested courage, virtue and the coherence of behaviour in relation to the great paradigmatic

⁹ I agree with the analysis and reasons presented by FLACELIERE-CHAMBRY for considering *Megarikes* an interpolation (1976) 162.

master/model reference was *Tyche*. Indeed, it was an ever-present factor in the life of the protagonists, whether it was propitious or adverse, in the inglorious struggle waged against it or in the indiscriminate use of its favours. Their true character is revealed in their reaction to *Tyche*¹⁰.

Tyche was particularly adverse to Phocion and to Cato who ‘almost’ defeated it, but who, in a twist of fate, ended up losing to it. Their efforts and their *arete* were not duly recognized. Challenging situations and political crisis often trigger strictness and severity in honourable characters that can easily offend the masses.

There is a subtle difference between Phocion and Cato: historically, the former lived in a time of crisis with no return, and the latter in a crisis of the end of an era. The Roman Republic was close to its end, but Caesar’s tyranny would be followed by the Empire. Plutarch compares Cato to an out-of-season fruit (*Phoc.3.2 tois me kath’ horan... karpois*). This image would draw the reader’s attention to the differences that exist beyond their affinities.

Such a contrast is consolidated, as it was already mentioned, through the perception of the protagonists’ different

approach to the same paradigm, which is perceptible through the interplay of hypotexts, but it was prepared by the anticipated *synkrisis* of the initial chapters through the combination of two strategies. I am referring to the explicit use of texts, quoted or just briefly mentioned, as a source of credibility (as in the case of Cicero, for example¹¹). There are quotations from poets¹² (Sophocles, Archilochos, Homer) as a more powerful means of suggestion than simple statements, and a remarkable range of imagery reinforces the intended effect.

It is meaningful that this imagery profusion is condensed, mainly, in the initial chapters of the *Life of Phocion*, which will guide our reading like a prelude where the musical theme is presented. Let us see an example: Demades’ words are quoted in 1.1 so as to allow Plutarch to distinguish between the two sympathizers of the Macedonian cause. Such words subvert the traditional image of the ship of state and refer to it as shipwreck or the wreckage of one (*ta nauagia*). In times of crisis and in times of shipwreck, Demades was himself part of the wreckage. On the other hand, Phocion faced that same shipwreck with an undeniable *arete*, although the adverse

¹⁰ See PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ (1973) 101-110.

¹¹ E. g. *Phoc.* 3. 1: Cicero, *Ad Att.* 2. 1. 8.

¹² *Phoc.* 1.3: Sophocles, *Ant.* 563-564; *Phoc.* 7. 5: Archilochos, frg. 1 WEST; *Phoc.* 17. 1: *Od.* 9. 494 and in *Phoc.* 2.3. an indirect quotation of *Od.* 5. 165-166 is to be seen.

Tychai of the Hellas denied him both glory and recognition.

This misunderstood *arete* in Phocion is justified by the bitterness and impressionability of the crowd in difficult times, which cannot bear to hear harsh words from incorruptible and severe politicians who are little concerned with being liked by the people. And this theme is reinforced through a comparison taken from medical practice: that of the burning sensation that honey causes on wounds while at the same time cleaning them (2.3), and supported by a quotation from Homer (*Od.* 5. 165-166). Plutarch next focuses his attention on the phenomenon of an Athens that does not welcome the coarse, but well-intentioned, frankness of Phocion. Now, he resorts to a new comparison using the city and drawn from the area of ophthalmology (2.4) - ailing eyes find comfort in the contemplation of dark colours and avoid those that are bright and reflect light, just like a city overcome by adverse fortune can tolerate badly frankness and the pointing out of its mistakes.

The complex comparison that follows presents an initial distribution of elements similar to the previous one. It is taken from the field of astronomy and will extend, drawing near to that of music (2. 6-9). The movement of the sun does not coincide with that of the heavens, but neither is it against it nor does it contradict it. Its trajectory

is oblique and curved and its flexibility guarantees universal harmony.

This principle is the beginning of the opportune yielding that ought to govern political practice of those who face the will of the people. The systematic strictness and harshness, which never yield to anything at the right moment, and never learnt sweetness (*praiotes*) which creates bonds of reciprocity, are a dangerous path. Severity and kindness represent an alliance of rhythms similar to the divine ruling of the universe.

These words remind us of *Somnium Scipionis* and seem to be tacitly applied to Phocion, and explicitly to Cato. For the latter, Plutarch corroborates them with a passage from Cicero. Moreover, Plutarch, as previously mentioned, sees Cato an out-of-season fruit. With regards to Phocion, Plutarch will show, in the *anecdota* that testify the nature and specificity of the *ethos* and *praxis* of the Greek statesman, up to what point Phocion combined strictness and harshness with a profound *philanthropia*, which he exhibited right up to the end of his life. Philanthropia is indeed a reference word in the characterization of the Athenian.

I will now focus my attention on the relationship between the macrotext, and its anticipated *synkrisis*, and the hermeutical game between it and the hypotexts, which is strengthened by the poetical discourse of the first chapters. The reading leads us to sympathise

with Phocion who was a disciple of Plato and Xenocrates. It is never said or insinuated in an anticipated contrast with Cato that Phocion wants to impose himself like a second Platonic Socrates. His conduct incorporates the moral values and the behaviour of the chosen models, in accordance with his nature and the lessons that he took from them. And this seems to happen naturally in the eyes of his fellow citizens.

Phocion is still young and through sobriety and moderation has the power to correct the temperamental excesses of the *strategos* Chabrias. His detachment from material things was manifested in the austere lifestyle that he shared with his wife, which gave him a certain political credibility, since he was perceived as a man of integrity, disinterested in action. According to Plutarch (*Phoc.* 8.1), it was well known that his political conduct was guided by values of peace and tranquility (*eirenen kai hesychian*), concepts based upon the notion of universal harmony, mentioned in 2.9. Thus, the reader gradually realises that the criticism of intransigence and harshness in the preamble are aimed much more at Cato than at Phocion, whose *ethos* is qualified in 5.1 as *prosenestatos* e *philanthropotatos*, something that is difficult to divine from his somewhat austere and unsociable demeanour. Socrates' description of his rather uncouth appearance and satyr-like face in the

Platonic dialogues is also misleading, since his harmony of soul and strength to fight for Good are only revealed to those in his closest circle. Even the executioner acknowledges his tenderness (*praiotes*) and *arete* in *Phaedo* (116c).

Thus, we get some idea of the imposing personality of this man, who was elected *strategos* forty-five times in Athens during a time of crisis, and who was nicknamed "the Good" (*ho chrestos*) (10. 4-5). The discrepancy between his appearance, manners and nature is once again underlined with a comparison from the realm of wine: a wine that leaves a lingering aftertaste may be pleasing to the palate, while another, which perhaps seems sweet at first, may become sickly and harmful later on.

Phocion's ability to endure the hardships of winter and face them with minimal protection was proverbial in Athens. On military campaigns, he would wear light garments and fight barefoot, only donning warmer clothing when the cold became unbearable (4. 3-4). As has already been noted, this reference evokes the habits of Socrates, as mentioned by Plato (e. g. *Symp.* 220a-b)¹³. This natural proximity with Socrates is not made explicit by Plutarch. However, the passage also evokes the *Life of Cato* (44), who, as elected praetor, is shown going about his duties barefoot, and often

¹³ See also Aristophanes, *Nu.* 412-428.

without a tunic. Plutarch censures this behaviour, which, he believes, displays scorn and contempt for institutions. We understand that Cato distanced himself ostentatiously, and somewhat arrogantly, from the crowd with this attitude; but we also understand that Plutarch sees this as somewhat forced and out-of-step with reality. The Socratic paradigm is far from this and poorly assimilated, which is in keeping with the conclusions that may be drawn from the dissonant connection between the final reading of *Phaedo* and the scene with the sword and the two suicide attempts.

According to Plutarch, Phocion's coarseness and inexorability had a practical purpose (10.7), just like the energetic sobriety of his speeches - which Demosthenes described as "axes" that could cut through his opponents whenever he felt that the well-being of Athens was at stake. The definition that Phocion gives of the sycophant, Aristogiton, as "limping and cowardly" (10.3), though not directly quoted from Archilochus, would seem to correspond to a game of critical defilement of the portrait of the ideal general of that poet from Paros (frg. 114 West).

The manoeuvres of Polyperchon, regent of Macedonia, finally created the conditions for the elimination of Phocion (32 sqq.). With the old democratic regime apparently reinstated through a concession from the Macedonians, the Athens Assembly

was filled with a crowd of fugitives, foreigners and people deprived of civic rights through *atimia* (33.2). It was these men, manipulated by the Macedonians, who accused old Phocion and his companions of betraying their country, and condemned them to death by hemlock. But there was no opportunity at Phocion's trial for a beautiful speech before attentive judges, of the kind that Socrates had made in Plato's *Apology*. As Plutarch said, "there was no equity" (33.10). Polyperchon, the foreign dominator, interrupted Phocion whenever he began to speak, until the latter gave up trying.

For true citizens, the staged trial denounced the farsical democracy that was being acted out, making them aware of danger and demise — the 'shipwreck' of the city, in fact. Plutarch plays with the contrasting situations surrounding the deaths of Socrates and Phocion: both trials took place during religious festivals, but while Socrates' execution was postponed, according to *Crito* (43d) or *Phaedo* (58a), until the *theoria* returned to Athens, this did not happen in the case of Phocion. The foreign master and unscrupulous crowd fixed the date of the execution for the month of Mounichion, during the festivities in honour of Zeus (37.1). Like Socrates in *Phaedo*, Phocion only reveals his true nature to those around him at the very last moment – his clarity, sweetness, serenity and *philanthropia*, and the fact that he did not even have

enough money to pay for the hemlock that he was supposed to drink.

In the *Apology*, Socrates foresees the harsh punishment that will befall those that have condemned him – the trial they will undergo, which will be far more relentless than the one they were presiding over at that moment. When the disturbing voice of Socrates was silenced, other voices, even more disturbing and implacable, would be raised against them (*Ap.* 38 d-e). What Socrates foresaw for himself in fact happened to Phocion soon after his death; the city itself was stricken by the guilty conscience that had weighed upon it for a long time. Phocion's memory was rehabilitated. For the city saw its own demise projected onto that condemnation, to some extent like Creon at the end of *Antigone* – with the realisation coming too late, after disaster had befallen him for having left the dead unburied and innocents condemned.

Although the analogy with Socrates gains a certain life in the biography of Phocion through the interplay of hypotexts, Plutarch nevertheless takes steps to ensure that Phocion does not coincide with the figure of a Socrates

daimonios constructed by tradition. The biography instead leaves us with a perception of Phocion as a somewhat misunderstood figure, a sensible politician and sober man, devoted to the city and rich in *philanthropia*. Phocion remains the politician that lives in accordance with Athens' genuine values and tries to impose a political harmony that he believes might allow them to survive the 'shipwreck'. His efforts were almost rewarded. At least the Athenians retained a sense of guilt with regards to him, were burdened with the weight of remorse and the image of that man of sober speech and gestures that so fitted the profile of the great uncorrupted leaders of the past (such as Solon, who "would rarely remove his hands from inside his cloak" - 4.3¹⁴), and whose values were made clear in the account of his meeting with Croesus, as told in Herodotus¹⁵. A similar difference in perspective between an Athenian and a Barbarian is repeated, on the Solon model at the hypotext level, where we identify the presence of Herodotus, in Alexander's incomprehension at Phocion's irresponsiveness to the treasures that he specially tries to offer him (17-18).

¹⁴ That means: as statemen of ancient times, who used to speak with parsimony of gestures. See Aesch. *Contra Tim.* 25; Demosth. *De legat.* 251.

¹⁵ 1. 30-34.

¹⁶ ALCALDE MARTÍN (1999) 159-171 shows that this *Vita* is organized in very precise sections and that there it observes a strategy of progressive evidence of similarities between Phocion and Socrates. GEIGER (1988) 256: "The last sentence of the *Phocion* draws the parallel between the deaths of Phocion and Socrates".

This complex interplay of hypotextual suggestions, of initial images, which lead the comprehensive lecture of the *Vita*, of quotations of poets, that give consistency and life to the narrative or to descriptive passages, also contributes to the final impression that is specially underlined by the Platonic hypotext, as we have seen, more and more evident and natural when *Phocion's Life* goes near to its end¹⁶.

The weight on the Athenian conscience also seems to represent the very burden of conscience of an ancient identity, which, with the death of Phocion, was lost for ever.

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