

JOSEPH GEIGER

PLATO, PLUTARCH AND THE DEATH OF SOCRATES AND OF CATO¹

I

“Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend, who was, as we may say, of all those of his time whom we have known, the best and wisest and most righteous man” (ἀνδρός...ἀρίστου καὶ φρονιμωτάτου καὶ δικαιοτάτου)².

Plato's description of the death of Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo* is justly one of the most famous, and certainly one of the most moving scenes in all of Greek, perhaps all of European literature³. It is not my intention to subject this passage to a literary analysis though it seems worth the while to point out one or two facts concerning its literary framework. First, it is remarkable that an event of such momentous character – even if not quite as pivotal as considered by the young Nietzsche⁴ – has reached us in one version only⁵; secondly, it is a sobering fact

¹ I am indebted for various help to Werner ECK, Deborah GERA, Stephen HARRISON and Prof. Silvio PANCIERA. I first noticed the inscription discussed in the second half of this paper during a pleasant, and fruitful stay at the Collegio Cairolì in Pavia in February 1998. It is a pleasure to thank again the organisers, and especially Aurelio PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ, both for their hospitality and for the opportunity to learn about Plutarch. The papers of Michael TRAPP and Carlos ALCALDE MARTÍN deal with closely connected subjects to mine.

² Pl., *Phd.* 118A, LCL translation.

³ See e.g. A.E. TAYLOR, *Socrates*, New York, 1952, p. 124: “perhaps the greatest thing in the prose literature of Europe”.

⁴ F. NIETZSCHE, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* ch. 15, (Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Berlin, 1972, III.1, p. 96): “...Sokrates de[r] eine... Wendepunkt und Wirbel der sogenannten Weltgeschichte”.

⁵ Cf. the opening sentence of L.G. WESTERINK, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo I: Olympiodorus*, Amsterdam etc., 1976, Verh. Kgl. Ak. Wetensch., Afd. Letterk. 92, p. 7: “Plato's *Phaedo* must have been a classic from the moment of its appearance, since nobody ventured to write a rival account of Socrates' death”. It may be pointed out that Plato himself never returns, even in passing, to the scene. Reading the last chapter (4.8) of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* one gets the distinct impression, that the author is making a conscious effort not to describe the events of Socrates' last day. This ‘deficiency’ has been sensed by the author of the fourteenth Socratic Epistle, printed most recently in A.J. MALHERBE, *The Cynic Epistles*, SBL Sources for Biblical Study 12, Missoula, Montana, 1977, pp. 252-8; it is dated, *ibid.*, pp. 28-29, around A.D. 200.

to notice that the story seems to have been, with one significant exception, completely ignored in the hellenistic age.

The one exception is the often quoted epigram by Callimachus on Cleombrotus of Ambracia, who leapt to his death for the sole reason of having read Plato's *Phaedo*:

Εἶπας, "Ἦλιε χαῖρε", Κλεόμβροτος ὠμβρακιώτης
ἦλατ' ἀφ' ὑψηλοῦ τείχεος εἰς Αἴδην,
ἄξιον οὐδέν ἰδὼν θανάτου κακὸν, ἀλλὰ Πλάτωνος
ἐν τὸ περὶ ψυχῆς γράμμ' ἀναλεξάμενος⁶.

Though none of the literal quotations is earlier than Sextus Empiricus, the epigram is paraphrased closely by Cicero already in a speech of 54 (*Scaur.* 4) and referred to again in the *Tusculan Disputations* (1.84) just briefly after he expressly compares the death of Socrates and Cato (*ibid.* 74). However, the first extant literary text, where full use, and I should say intertextual use, is made of it, is in Plutarch's pair of biographies of Phocion and Cato the Younger. Before turning our attention to it it should be put on record, that despite his many quotations of Plato and references to Socrates, including in such works as the *Life of Alcibiades* and the *de genio Socratis*, Plutarch nowhere else discusses or describes his death. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the only literary treatment by Plutarch of the death of Socrates is in the context of the *Phocion-Cato*, thus lending the scene further prominence. In the literary structure of the biographical pair, moreover, it assumes a central position⁷. This is one of the four pairs of biographies lacking a formal σύγκρισις, and in it the comparison of the two heroes is carried out by the more subtle means of common motifs appearing in the two Lives. This comparison comes to a peak with the death of the heroes. The two parts of the book, the two Lives, are closely connected by μέν...δέ clauses; the first of these expressly compares Phocion and Socrates: 'But Phocion's fate reminded the Greeks anew of that of Socrates; they felt that the sin and misfortune of Athens were alike in both cases'⁸. It is left

⁶ AP 7.471; A.S.F. GOW & D.L. PAGE, *The Greek Anthology. Hellenistic Epigrams*, Cambridge, 1965, Callimachus no. 53, p. 70; PFEIFFER no. 23. Both editions provide full testimonia.

⁷ I have discussed this more extensively in 'Plutarch and Nepos, From Latin to Greek Political Biography', *ICS*, 13 (1988), pp. 254-6; *Plutarco, vite parallele, Focione*, introduzione, traduzione e note di C. BEARZOT, *Catone Minore*, introduzione di J. GEIGER, traduzione e note di L. GHILLI, testo greco a fronte, Milano, 1993, pp. 316-9.

⁸ *Phocio*, 38.5, LCL translation; see also the analysis by H.-J. GEHRKE, *Phokion. Studien zur Erfassung seiner historischen Gestalt*, *Zetemata* 64, München, 1976, pp. 139-140, 153, assembling other ancient parallels between Socrates and Phocion and L.A. TRITILE, *Phocion the Good*, London etc., 1988, pp. 30-33; at pp. 6-7 he draws attention to the earliest parallel drawn between Socrates and Phocion, by Nepos.

to the reader alluded to, σύγκρισις stopped explicit Lives and Brutus is called the *Gracchi* between the

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to the reader to draw the parallel between the deaths of Socrates and Cato, so often alluded to, but never expressly stated in the Life. Plutarch, whose technique of σύγκρισις in the *Parallel Lives* is one their most notable literary ingredients, never stopped experimenting with it, not contenting himself with the standard formula of two *Lives* and following formal comparison: one may think of the *Dio-Brutus*, where Brutus is constantly compared with Cassius, of the double pair *Agis, Cleomenes and the Gracchi*, or of the pairs lacking a formal σύγκρισις. The implied correspondence between the deaths of Cato and of Socrates is certainly such a literary device.

Nor is this correspondence difficult to grasp⁹. While it is the fate and general significance that establish the explicit parallel Plutarch draws between the execution of Phocion and that of Socrates, the events of Cato's last day closely recall those described in the *Phaedo*, without, however, expressly mentioning Socrates. The resemblance is very distinct indeed, and I shall content myself here with referring to some of its most prominent features.

The chief among these, perhaps, is Cato's spending his last evening with his friends discussing questions of philosophy, among them the most relevant to his present juncture in life – the Stoic paradox that only the good man is free (67.2-3). Thus the two deaths are distinguished and are made significant by the readiness to translate the philosophic precepts of a lifetime into irreversible action. But it is, of course, Cato's general attitude that immediately reminds one of Socrates: the quiet determination, fearless in the face of death, the friends and relatives, anxious over the fate of the hero, some of whom need active discouragement lest they follow his example. The friends weeping, the son present, the difficulty of death, as if reluctant, to take charge of its suitor, these and other details all call up the Athenian example. The last hint even the most unsensitive cannot ignore: Cato reads on his last night Plato's "On the Soul" – twice over.

I have shown elsewhere¹⁰ that in all probability the description of Cato's death ultimately derives from an eye-witness account of one of the friends present. From there it found its way into the account of Cato by Thrasea Paetus, Plutarch's main biographical source in the Life. Plutarch's account is only the best known and most detailed one in existence, but a comparison with the rest of the historiographical tradition¹¹ clearly demonstrates that the account was canonical and unequivocal with no divergent traditions to contend with.

⁹ For what follows see, in more detail, J. GEIGER, 1979, pp. 61-65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-7.

¹¹ This includes App., *b. c.* 2.99; Dio, 43.11.4-5; Flor., 2.13.71-2; Liv., *per.* 114; [Caes.], *b. Afr.* 88.3-4.

Almost immediately after the events in Utica Cato's life and death stood in the centre of a famous literary controversy¹². That this included a comparison between the deaths of Cato and of Socrates is guaranteed for us by the reference by Cicero mentioned above (*TD* 1.74) composed just a little over a year after Cato's suicide. When Cato's figure became an emblem of Republican *libertas* under the Empire, the most eager and determined could follow him to the ultimate consequence of their stance. Thrasea Paetus himself carefully arranged his death to recall that of his hero – and implicitly that of Socrates; his own death was described by his follower Arulenus Rusticus, whence the concluding, incomplete scene of the *Annales* of Tacitus as we have it. Also Seneca, who often couples in his writings the figures of Cato and of Socrates¹³, was mindful to pattern his own death scene in no uncertain terms on these, again reflected to us by Tacitus. Such, then, was the tradition, of life imitating literature, and literature life¹⁴, on which Plutarch was to draw when building the elaborate construct of parallels and allusions in his *Phocion-Cato*.

II

Until this point I have been reviewing fairly well known, and I believe fairly uncontroversial literary evidence, moreover evidence which I had occasion to discuss before now. In what follows I would like to focus on a little noticed text that to my knowledge has never been subjected to scholarly attention in the present context.

In 1926, during agricultural work carried out on the site of a *villa rustica* between the *Via Appia Antica* and *Via Appia Nova* a shaft of a herm with a verse inscription consisting of four hexametres and an elegiac distich has come to light. I bring here the text of the inscription as printed; no photograph or picture of the inscription have been made available, and unfortunately it is not possible to inspect it. I have been informed by the Soprintendenza Archeologica that it is under restoration and their Photographic Archive is not in possession of photographic material.

¹² J. GEIGER, 1979, pp. 48, 54-57, with literature.

¹³ See W.H. ALEXANDER, 'Cato of Utica in the Works of Seneca Philosophus', *Trans. Roy Soc. Canada*, 40 (1946), pp. 215ff.

¹⁴ J. GEIGER, 1979, pp. 61-65; on the entire issue see M. GRIFFIN, 'Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide', *G & R*, 33 (1986), pp. 64-77, pp. 192-202, who rightly stresses the theatrical arrangement of these suicides.

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Obviously the verses describe to the – it is to be hoped, duly impressed – visitor, the sights of a well-appointed country villa, where statuary and temple match the horticultural beauties: monuments of men worthy of the songs of poets, vines, groves and flowers, faces of Greeks and a temple¹⁶ of the Muses. One sees busts expressive with the features of Socrates – one wishes one knew what exactly is missing in the line – and the live countenance of Cato. The appearance of the couple Socrates and Cato¹⁷ in a Latin distich¹⁸, perhaps of the late second century, is anything but self-evident. I shall not attempt here a literary analysis and evaluation of the inscription¹⁹ and shall content myself with posing some questions pertaining to the pairing itself. It is difficult to imagine that the combination of two *prima facie* so diverse characters as that of the Greek philosopher and the Roman statesman should have occurred independently of literary models to the rather unassuming author of our verse inscription. The likelihood that this model was Thræsea Paetus, whose work is never mentioned except in Plutarch's *Life of Cato the Younger* seems to me definitely more far-fetched than the assumption of Plutarch's influence. Of course this influence is mainly to be expected on Greek literature, but the impact he made on Gellius,²⁰ presumably more or less contemporary with our inscription, is a

¹⁵ R. PARIBENI, "XI. Roma. Scoperte nel suburbio in seguito a lavori agricoli", *NSc* serie 6, 2 (1926), p. 284; V. USSANI, *ibid.*, p. 456; G.M. DE ROSSI, *Folt I.xv Bovillae*, Firenze, 1979, no. 222, no. 2, p. 260; J.W. ZARKER, *Studies in the Carmina Latina Epigraphica, diss.* Princeton, 1958, no. 36, p. 162; R. NEUDECKER, 1988, p. 68; E. COURTNEY, 1995, no. 50, p. 74.

¹⁶ Given the circumstances, this seems to me the plausible rendering of *templis*.

¹⁷ After all that has been said here it is hardly necessary to argue that Cato the Younger is meant; R. NEUDECKER, 1988, no. 17.1, p. 159 is unsure but thinks rather he than the Censor. USSANI, *loc. cit.* (n. 14), prefers the Censor because of the latter's interest in agriculture!

¹⁸ For surely we must regard the distich as somewhat distinct from the preceding four hexametres; it seems to me pedantic to describe the inscription as consisting of five hexametres and a pentametre, as R. NEUDECKER, 1988, no. 17.1, p. 159.

¹⁹ For which see E. COURTNEY, 1995, pp. 273-274.

²⁰ One may be reminded that Plutarch's name opens the first chapter of the *Attic Nights*; see also R. HIRZEL, *Plutarch, Das Erbe der Alten* 4, Leipzig 1912, pp. 74-75.

good indicator of the spread of his fame in the Latin speaking half of the empire²¹. What is of interest here is not the fact of Plutarch's influence, in the neighbourhood of Rome, directly or indirectly by channels not easily perceived by us, but rather the depth of the social and intellectual level penetrated by him.

Another question to be asked is that pertaining to the carrier of the inscription, the herm shaft. Without the benefit of autopsy conjecture is hazardous, but it immediately occurs to one that the shaft may have carried a double herm²². However, this possibility warrants careful consideration. It appears that double herms are fairly wide spread - the last count known to me amounts to 29 items²³ - but how many of these join a Greek and a Roman? The famous double herm of Socrates and Seneca in Berlin presently comes to mind²⁴, but it may be something of a shock to discover that this is the only safely attested pair. Moreover, this pair should not be discussed separately from the literary tradition of the death of the two philosophers, to which I have referred above. Again, it would be rash to assume that the busts were not made, and probably ordered, with the literary tradition of the death of Seneca, as modelled by Tacitus, in mind.

I may briefly mention here the double bust in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen²⁵: it has generated a good deal of literature and proposals for identification galore. I shall enumerate these briefly, without vouching for completeness of the list, and without indicating the degree of assuredness or tentativeness of the various authors. (Indeed, classical philologists who only rarely venture into the scholarly study of the plastic arts, are warned that they may derive some, admittedly unkind, satisfaction when encountering their art historian colleagues groping in the dark for the identification of an ancient work of art). They include Virgil and

²¹ This is one of the significant gaps in our knowledge of Plutarch's Nachleben. One may notice, for instance, the joining of the Elder Cato and Aristides in Amm. Marc., 30.4,21, perhaps also to be put down to the influence of Plutarch. *

²² I see this rather obvious possibility mentioned in passing only by E. COURTNEY, 1995, p. 273.

²³ See J.F. CROME, *Das Bildnis Vergils*, Mantova, 1935, pp. 5-13: all but two, Aischylus-Sophocles and Solon-Euripides are busts without shafts. Most of these busts are of poets, writers and philosophers and products of the empire, especially the second century, so Herodotus-Thucydides, Epicurus-Metrodorus and Socrates-Plato. For a general discussion see H. WREDE, *Die antike Herme, Trierer Beiträge zur Altertumskunde* 1, Mainz, 1985, pp. 52-54; his rejection of CROME's 'law' concerning double busts already in ID., *Beobachtungen an Doppelhermen*, Diss. Hamburg, 1969, p. 4.

²⁴ C. BLÜMEL, *Römische Bildnisse, Katalog der Sammlung antiker Skulpturen*, Berlin, 1933, Tafel 71, p. 44. The dating is third century, the identification by the inscription of the names - thus annihilating the claims of the famous pseudo-Seneca.

²⁵ F. JOHANSEN, *Katalog Græske Portrætter, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, Copenhagen, 1992, no. 54, p. 130 (pictures pp. 131-3).

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Hesiod²⁶, hellenistic poet, perhaps Philemon, and unknown²⁷, Virgil²⁸, Virgil and Greek poet²⁹, Hesiod and Roman poet³⁰, Theocritus and Apollonius of Rhodes³¹ and Ennius³². And this is not even including those who identify our 'Roman' with the most enigmatic, because most widespread, anonymous bust of them all, the pseudo-Seneca. In the event not only is there no generally accepted naming of the two heads, or anything approximating it, there is not even agreement as to whether in fact the double herm joins a Greek and a Roman.

The very rarity of such double herms, then, would make our double herm, if such it were, the more significant, and, incidentally, its identification a rare piece of good luck. Add to this another uncommon occurrence. It has been observed, that the busts decorating Italian villas portrayed almost without exception Greek poets, philosophers and the like. In fact, according to a full catalogue of these sculptural decorations, our Cato is the only specimen of a Roman statesman in such a context³³.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ F. POULSEN, *Catalogue of Ancient Sculpture in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek*, Copenhagen, 1951, no. 432, pp. 305-7 (I.N. 611); cf. E. SCHEFOLD, review of POULSEN, *Opus Nobile, Gnomon*, 35 (1963) 811-812.

²⁸ CROME (n. 23).

²⁹ V. POULSEN, *Les Portraits Romains I*, Publ. de la Glyptotek Ny Carlsberg no. 7, Copenhagen, 1962, no. 5, pp. 44-45; *id.*, 'Virgil', in H. v. HEINTZE, *Römische Porträts*, Darmstadt, 1974, pp. 425-432 [= *Opus Nobile, Meisterwerke der antiken Kunst*, Bremen, 1959, pp. 3-14]; cf. J. CH. BALTY, "Un nouveau portrait de César, aux Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire de Bruxelles", *Festoen ... A.N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta*, Groningen-Bossum, 1976, pp. 49-61; H. v. HEINTZE, "Neue Beiträge zu Poulsen's Vergil", *DAIRM*, 67 (1960) 103-110.

³⁰ E. BERGER, "Ein Vorläufer Pompejus' des Grossen in Basel", *Eikones... Festschr. Jucker*, Basel, 1980, pp. 64-75. Cf. also P. ZANKER, *Die Maske des Sokrates. Das Bild des Intellektuellen in der antiken Kunst*, München, 1995, p. 140.

³¹ U. HAUSMANN, "Zum Bildnis des Dichters Theokrit", *ΣΤΗΛΗ... ΝΙΚΟΛΑΟΥ ΚΟΝΤΟΛΕΟΝΤΟΣ*, Athens, 1980, 511-524.

³² G. HAFNER, *Das Bildnis des Q. Ennius*, Deutsche Beiträge z. Altertumswiss. 20, Baden-Baden, 1968; cf. H. v. HEINTZE, "Pseudo-Seneca = Hesiod oder Ennius?", *DAIRM*, 82 (1975) 143-163 and J.D. BRECKENRIDGE, "Origins of Roman Republican Portraiture. Relations with the Hellenistic World", *ANRW I.4*, 1973, p. 847.

³³ R. NEUDECKER, 1988, p. 64. One may note that the only securely identified bust of Cato is a bronze from Volubilis: R. THOUVENOT, "Bronzes d'art trouvés au Maroc", *CRAI*, 1945, pp. 592ff; GROSS, *RE* 22, col. 211ff; C. PICARD, "Le date du buste en bronze de Caton d'Utique trouvé à Volubilis", *Festschr. Schweitzer*, Stuttgart, 1954, pp. 334ff; but see also A. AGOSTINO, "Ritratti romani del Museo R. Arch. di Firenze", *BA*, 30 (1936-7), pp. 371ff, for an Italian marble probably depicting Cato. For small objects see E. ZWIERLEIN-DIEHL, "Gemmenbildnisse des M. Porcius Cato Uticensis", *AA*, 88 (1973), pp. 272ff; S. PANCIERA, "Catilina e Catone su due copette romane", *φιλίας χάριν, Misc. St. ... Manni*, Roma, 1979, 5., pp. 1637ff. I have dealt with the representation in art of the deaths of Socrates and Cato in "Giambettino Cignaroli's Deaths of Cato and of Socrates", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 59 (1996) 270-278.

Indeed, returning for a moment to the inscription, one notices that it speaks of *monumenta virorum*, then *Graiorum vultus* and enumerates in the event Socrates and Cato. It certainly is easy to harmonise this with the general observation concerning the statuary of Italian villas. This, of course, renders the specific literary derivation the more confident. Be this as it may, I wish to emphasise that the distich very clearly speaks of the visual encounter with the likenesses of Socrates and of Cato: if not a double herm it must have been two separate ones, probably displayed next to each other – really not making that much of a difference for our quest. Nevertheless, and despite the evident rarity of double herms joining a Greek and a Roman, it seems to me distinctly more likely that an inscription on a herm shaft referring to two men was placed under a double herm rather than under the bust of one only of the two persons mentioned. To resume: separately or sculpted in one block of marble, Socrates and Cato are joined, and joined in their death – for surely such is the pregnant meaning of *vivida corda*³⁴. This pairing is displayed to the visitor, casual or otherwise, who is expected to understand the meaningfulness of the coupling – one may say the σύγκρισις. The significance for us of the inscription lies in its declaring, that the awareness of the likeness of their deaths, due in all probability to Plutarch, was not necessarily restricted to the literary elite of the Empire. And it may be a measure of the influence of Plutarch, that perhaps some of the inhabitants of the Empire were familiar with the representation of Socrates' death via Plutarch rather than directly from Plato.

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³⁴ E. COURTNEY, 1995, pp. 273-274, adduces the parallel Livy 6.22.7, the *vividum pectus* of Camillus; surely uses contrasting the dead with their lifelike representation are much closer, e.g. Mart. 7.44.1-2: *Maximus ille tuus, Ovidi, Caesonius hic est, / cuius adhuc vultum vivida cera tenet*. One might think of a corresponding adjective for Socratis os, what with the ancients' attitude to repetition perhaps even *vivumque*, on which see NORDEN on Verg., *Aen.* 6.848.

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EDITORES

PLUTARCO, PLATÓN Y ARISTÓTELES

*ACTAS DEL V CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE LA
I.P.S. (MADRID-CUENCA, 4-7 DE MAYO DE 1999)*



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EDICIONES



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