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PLUTARCH, ARISTOTLE, AND THE *CHARACTERS* OF THEOPHRASTUS

There is no real need to rehearse the connection between Aristotle and Plutarch. The *Nicomachean Ethics*, in particular, form a bridge between old Comedy and Plutarch's biographies in terms of "types". Many of the *Moralia* titles lend support to the idea that Plutarch is interested in character types and behavior, for instance "How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend", "On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander the Great," "Concerning Virtue or Vice," as well as superstition, loquaciousness, curiosity, and greed. Even in the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch is concerned to show "character through action". It is not surprising, then, that there is also a strong connection between the work of one of Aristotle's pupils, Theophrastus, and Plutarch's work. Plutarch is a great admirer of Theophrastus whom he calls ἀνδρὶ φιληκόῳ καὶ ἱστορικῷ παρ' ὀντινοῦν τῶν φιλοσόφων (*Alc.* 10.4), "of all the philosophers, the man most easy to listen to and most learned"[1]. Yet despite the obvious connection between Menandrean stock characters and the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch does not cite the *Characters* at all; his eponymous citations of Theophrastus are limited to *De Causis Plantarum, Historia Plantarum*, and some fragments. Theophrastus' *Characters* should have appealed to Plutarch in light of his interest in personality and human nature, or, if the *Characters* is indeed a rhetoricians' handbook of examples, in light of Plutarch's interest in oratory, not to mention his general enthusiasm for the philosopher. It is likely, as Ussher has argued, that Plutarch and Aristotle share a dislike for Aristophanes, and perhaps Plutarch dislikes the *Characters* for the same reason he dislikes Aristophanes, although it seems unlikely. The essay begins (insofar as we actually have the beginning) with a denunciation of Aristophanes' coarseness, vulgarity and ribaldry (*phortikon*; *thymelikon*; *banau-*

[1] All translations from the Loeb Classical library

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son), but quickly gets very literary. I suspect it is a grief to many participants at this very conference that Plutarch has such antipathy toward puns! Plutarch also does not like the fact that Aristophanes' characters don't speak in words appropriate to their respective stations.

Despite the lack of citations attributed to Theophrastus' *Characters*, I wish to suggest that Plutarch may indeed have been familiar with that work, and offer some examples from the Life of Nicias in support. In some cases, Plutarch describes Nicias in Theophrastan Character style. For instance, when the ill-fated Athenian fleet sailed for Sicily, Nicias continued to sigh and fret and delay rather than face reality and get on with business. Plutarch acknowledged that Nicias' general viewpoint has some merit:

> "Now, that Nicias should oppose the voting of the expedition, and should not be so buoyed up by vain hopes nor so crazed by the magnitude of his command as to change his real opinion–this marked him as a man of honesty and discretion" (*Nicias* 14.1).

However, there is a time and place for everything, and once the expedition was under way, "it was no longer a time for the exceeding caution and hesitation which he displayed, gazing back homewards from his ship like a child" (14.2).

Although it is inviting to note that the Theophrastus' Coward's antics take place mostly on board ship, this description of Nicias is more like the Man with Bad Timing, to quote the Muppets: "one of these things is not like the other; one of these things just doesn't belong". The Man with Bad Timing "shows up to give testimony after the case has already been decided, launches into a tirade against women when a guest at a wedding, invites a man just returned from a long journey to go for a walk, and brings in a buyer who will pay more after a sale is completed".

Nicias' confusing relationship with Hiero, his factotum, gives Plutarch another opportunity to treat Nicias and Hiero, the managing slave, in (stock) Character-terms. We even have dramatic references in a description of Nicias' continued preoccupation with the public business: "The man who most aided [Nicias] in playing this role, and helped him to assume his costume of pompous dignity, was Hiero". Here is Hiero on Nicias: "Why! said he, "even when he takes his bath and when he eats his dinner, some public business or other is sure to confront him; he neglects his private interests in his anxiety for the common good, and scarcely gets to sleep till others wake." It makes one wonder if there is a missing Character known as "The Busy Man".

It is also interesting to note that Nicias is enough of a "type" to provide the old comedians with one sure-fire identifying characteristic: his caution.

> "For he gave [money] to those who could work him harm no less than to those who deserved his favours, and in general his cowardice was a source of revenue to the base, as his liberality was to the good. Witness to this can be had from the comic poets" (*Nicias* 4.3-6).

Plutarch cites first Aristophanes *Knights* (358):

> "And the Cleon of Aristophanes blusteringly says "I'll bellow down the orators and Nicias I'll rattle" and Phrynichus plainly hints at his lack of courage and his panic-stricken air in these verses 'He was a right good citizen, and I know it well; He wouldn't cringe and creep as Nicias always does." (Kock, *Com.Att. Frag.* i p. 385.

Later (*Nicias* 8.1-2) Plutarch denounces Nicias again for his cowardice, this time citing Aristophanes in *Birds* and *Farmers*:

> "Aristophanes against scoffs at him in his *Birds*, inventing a term for "hesitate like Nicias" (*mellonikian*):
> "And lo, by Zeus, we can no longer doze about
> We have no time, nor shilly-shally nicias-wise"
> and in his *Farmers* where he writes:
> "I want to be a farmer". "Who's stopping you?" "You people do. Come! Let me give a thousand drachms if you'll release me from my offices."
> "Tis done! Yours make two thousand, counting those that Nicias gave."

The Old Comedy/*Nicomachean Ethics*/Theophrastus' *Characters*/Plutarchan biography chain is complete. In Plutarch's introduction to the *Life of Nicias*, he discusses his sources, Thucydides, Philistus, and Timaeus, but he is not practicing source criticism as we might expect. Rather, he tries to forestall evidently expected criticism over his covering territory already harrowed by Thucydides. He uses Timaeus as an example of an author who does what Plutarch wishes to avoid, which is to try (and fail) to show Thucydides up by writing a "better" narrative. Plutarch uses the terms *opsimathia* and *meirakiodes* to describe Timaeus and his failed attempt. In Theophrastus' "Opsimath, or Latelearner", we meet a character who, having acquired a minimum of learning at an age long past appropriate, proceeds to show it off in an obnoxious way. He is insensitive to propriety, and oblivious to the ludicrous nature of his situation, even offering to teach the master, as if the master himself were ignorant (27.17), which is surely the point of the comparison. *Meirakiodes*, juvenile or naive, points up the late-learner's attempts to parallel the educational experience of a young man. In fairness, Polybius uses the words *opsimathia* (12.4.1) and *meirakiodes*, (12.25.5) about Timaeus' treatment of Aristotle (1.4.a; Walbank, *A Historical Commentary on Polybius*, vol. 2, p. 328), and Plu-

tarch may have been equally influenced by that author.

Other individuals receive the "Character" treatment in the *Life of Nicias*, notably Cleon. Being an "obnoxious man" (*bdelyrós*) was a charge leveled against Cleon more than once by Plutarch (*Nic.* 1.2; *TG* 2.27; *Demetr.* 11.2.2). In the *Life of Demetrius*, one Stratocles is compared to Cleon in terms of obnoxiousness, and the following example given:

> "Again, when the Athenians suffered their naval defeat near Amorgus, before the tidings of the disaster could reach the city he put a garland on his head and rode through the Cerameicus, and after announcing that the Athenians were victorious, moved a sacrifice of glad tidings and made a generous distribution of meat to the people by tribes" (*Demetrius* 11.2).

This sounds very much like Theophrastus' Obnoxious Man, who "goes up to a man who has lost an important case and is leaving the court, and congratulates him" (11.6), or even the "Man with Bad Timing" who "goes up to a man who has just had to forfeit a security deposit in court and asks him to stand bail for him" (12.4). Plutach uses the term 'bdeluria' in connection also with P. Clodius Pulcher, specifically in reference to the Bona Dea scandal (*Caesar* 9.1-2). Twice in *Quomodo Adulator* Plutarch uses "bdeluria" about flatterers (50D and 57F), and a third time in *Quomodo Adulator* to describe the element he so dislikes in the Old Comedians and which spoils the humor:

> "It is true that the comic poets addressed to their audiences many stern rebukes of value to the citizens; but the admixture of drollery and scurrility in them, like a vile dressing with food, made their frankness ineffective and useless, so that there was nothing left for the authors but a name of malice and coarseness (bdelurias), and no profit for the hearers from their words (68C)."

Aristophanes defends his brand of humor against the charge of being *agoraios* (*Peace* 750; fr. 471, *Seat- Savers*, Kock 1 p. 513), and in *Frogs*, he makes Aeschylus say proudly that none of his heroes were agoraioi (1015). Theophrastus' *Agoraios*, or Thoughtless Man (6.2) is capable of any vulgarity, and Aristophanes' scurrilous Sausage-Seller is congratulated on being the perfect proto-politician because he is *agoraios* (*Knights* 218). The word does have a less pejorative meaning drawn from its root sense, simply "clever at speaking in the market-place" (*Per.* 11.2, *CG* 4.1, *Ant.* 24.7, *Fab.* 1.8, *Mor.* 532b, 785d, 853d; Arist. *Pol.* 1291a5; *cf. forensis*, Hor., *AP* 245; Livy, 9.46.14), but still implies pandering to the crowd.

Another *agoraios* aspect to Plutarch's description of the way Cleon appears dressed in the assembly; the Greeks attached considerable significance to knowing

how to dress properly, that is how to drape one's cloak gracefully over the right shoulder. Those who did not dress properly were considered to be rustic boors, or uneducated at the very least (Ath., 21b-e; Pl., *Theaet.* 175e; Philetaerus, fr. 19 = Kock 2 p. 235; Theophrastus, *Characteres* 4.9-11). Orators before Cleon (and after, *cf. Phoc.* 4.2 and *TG* 2.2) spoke "with the hand inside" the draped cloak (*cf. Mor.* 800c; Aesch., I *Tim.* 25-26; D. *de f. leg.* 281; Quint., *Inst.Or.* 11.3.89-117). Cleon fastened rather than draped his garment not from ignorance but rather to free his hands for gesticulation. This style was later copied by Gaius Gracchus and described in almost the same words by Plutarch as used here (*TG* 2.2).

It is particularly surprising, if Plutarch was familiar with the *Characters*, that he makes no reference to "The Superstitious Man" (#16, Ussher) in the *Life of Nicias* or in *De Superstitione*. The Superstitious Man is very concerned with taking precautions: "If a weasel crosses his path he goes no further until someone passes between them, or he throws three stones over the road". The S.M. is always taking precautions, consulting seers, and interpreting his dreams. There is plenty of that in *Nicias*, particularly the episode where he delays the retreat of Athenian forces because of an eclipse. Plutarch goes into some detail about the fact that educated persons of Nicias' class should have known about eclipses and not been afraid. It is in *De Superstitione* that Plutarch gets more "heated up" on the subject. Nicias is presented here as a horrible example, and in much stronger language than the biography:

> "It would perhaps have been the best thing in the world for Nicias, general of the Athenians, to have got rid of his superstition in the same way as Midas and Aristodemus [my note: i.e. suicide] rather than to be affrighted at the shadow on the moon in eclipse and sit inactive while the enemy's wall was being built around him, and later to fall into their hands together with forty thousand men, who were either slain or captured alive, and himself meet an inglorious end. For the obstruction of light caused by the earth's coming between sun and moon is nothing frightful. . . but frightful is the darkness of superstition falling upon man, and confounding and blinding his power to reason in circumstances that most loudly demand the power to reason" (169A-B).

The corresponding passage in Nicias describes the eclipse and Nicias' reaction: "T[he eclipse] was a great terror to Nicias and all those who were ignorant or superstitious enough to quake at such a sight." Plutarch then offers a much more scientific description of eclipse phenomena; he then says that Nicias' real problem was that he had no full-time seer on his staff, his old Stilbides "who used to set him free from most of his superstition" had recently died. Theophrastus' *deisidaimon* also

does a great deal of consulting: he consults the seer when a mouse eats a hole in his barley sack, he "vists the dream analysts or the prophets or the omen-readers" whenever he has a dream, he is initiated monthly into the cult of Orpheus, and has himself purified if he sees "someone at the crossroads wreathed in garlic." The lack of ability to act as an individual, the delays involved in consulting others, and the obsession with carrying out the proper ritual sound very much like Nicias.

And finally, let me turn to the *Hyperephanios* or Arrogant Man, who "if elected to office, takes an oath to avoid serving, claiming lack of time" and "when [entertaining] his friends, he doesn't join them at dinner himself but orders one of his subordinates to see to them." Nicias is more timid than arrogant, but he illustrates those examples nicely. For instance, Plutarch tells us that when Nicias did not have any public business, he saw no reason to leave home (*oikoroun*). Although *oikouron* can be used neutrally in the sense of "watch over," it often refers to women and can have contemptuous force, implying that the subject "stays home" out of cowardice (cf. *Per.* 11.2, 12.5, 34.4; *Mor.* 165d; Pl. *R.* 451d; *Ach.* 1058-60; *V.* 970; *Agamem.* 1625-26; *Her.* 699-701). Coming immediately after two dys-compounds (*dysprosodos* and *dysenteuktos*) the participle helps add a negative tone to the description, especially since this reclusiveness was unpopular as a rule and considered arrogant. In *Praecepta Gerendae Reipublicae* Plutarch expresses his disapproval of such a secretive lifestyle and applauds men like Drusus, who had his house remodelled so that he would be observable at all times by the populace (*Mor.* 800f). Plutarch further says that the good man kept his house unlocked, not barred as did Nicias, and was easy to approach (*euprosegoras*), not reclusive (*dysprosodos*) (*Mor.* 823a).

In conclusion, we can see that Plutarch's Nicias is described in terms associated with the Arrogant Man, the Boorish Man, the Superstitious Man, the Obnoxious Man, the Late-Learner, the Coward, and the Man with Bad Timing. I make no claim to have proven that Plutarch used Theophrastus' *Characters*, but I would like to make a strong suggestion that he was aware of this work and, although relegating it with distaste to the Aristophanic category, drew on it for illustration and examples with considerable good effect.

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PLUTARCO, PLATÓN Y ARISTÓTELES

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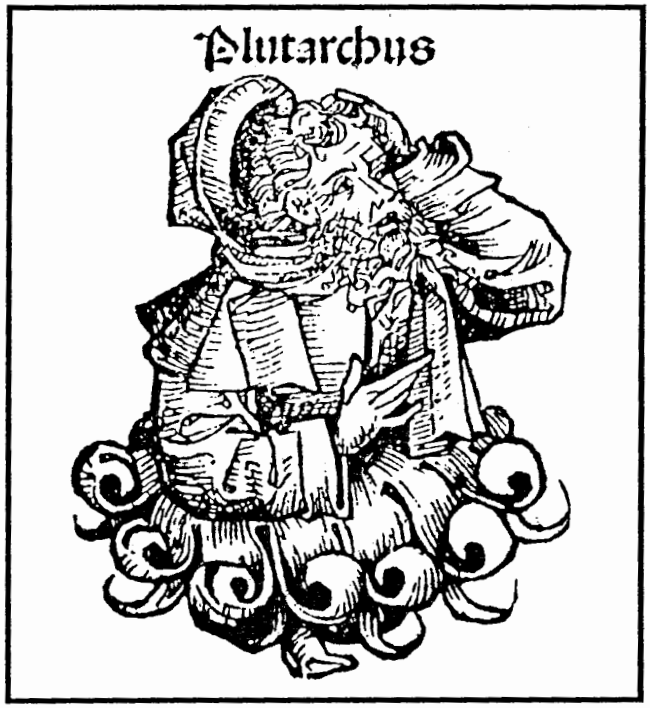

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