

Anecdotes in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*: Aristotle and the End of *Parrhēsia*

Aristotle as a character in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* is probably best remembered as Alexander's tutor and the editor of Alexander's copy of the *Iliad*. Yet the overall impression that we get from Aristotle's occasional appearances throughout the life is rather mixed, if not largely negative. Thus we hear that Aristotle agreed to teach Alexander for a large sum of money (7), and that Alexander wanted to do Aristotle the favour of executing the latter's nephew Callisthenes in his presence (55). And it is probably fair to say that the anecdotal sequence culminates at the very end of the life in the scandalous suggestion that Aristotle may have been behind the (possible) poisoning of Alexander (77).

In so far as scholars have paid attention to the figure of Aristotle in the *Life*, they have primarily focused on Plutarch's text as one source that should be enlisted along with several others (Arrian, Diogenes Laertius, etc.) to get a finger behind the historical friendship between the two men (e.g. Microyannakis 2003). In this paper, I wish to explore the relation of Aristotle and Alexander from a literary, rather than a historical perspective. That is, I will study Aristotle as a literary character in the *Life*, and I am particularly interested in the (potentially) fictional yet meaningful nature of the anecdotes about Aristotle. It has recently been argued about anecdotes in writing that they form a nexus between the traditions that shaped them and the function they have in the text in which they have been written down in the form they have instantiated (cf. e.g. Goldhill 2009). Accordingly, my exploration will take two steps.

Firstly, I will argue that the scandalous anecdotal material should be understood as reflecting hostile biographical traditions of Aristotle that originated among philosophical rivals, possibly the Stoics. This comes to the fore especially in the report that Aristotle took on a big fee for teaching Alexander. We see for example that Aristotle's supposed love of money is brought

up in several other stories as well, such as when Aristocles of Messene denies believing reports of Aristotle's expensive tableware (F2 Chiesara). These anecdotes must have arisen among opponents who tried to show that a life according to the philosopher's doctrines would lead to a lifestyle that was generally (expected to be) considered unacceptable. The stories about money should be seen in the context of Aristotle's reserved but positive attitude towards money (e.g. *Pol.* 1), which was vigorously opposed by the Stoics (e.g. Diogenes of Babylon, see Long and Sedley 1987, nr. 58). Similarly so, the story about poisoning Alexander should be connected with Aristotle's mildly favouring attitude towards tyrannicide (cf. *Pol.* 10), which also had its staunch opponents. I suggest that Plutarch draws from a reservoir of anecdotes about Aristotle and embeds them in a larger-scale narrative about Alexander.

Secondly, as for Aristotle's role within the narrative of Plutarch's *Life*, I will argue that he should first and foremost be seen as a representative of philosophical life in the *polis* era in a time when this world order slowly collapsed. At first we hear that Aristotle gave Alexander a literary education and instilled such a love of reading in Alexander that the latter had books sent over as 'there were no books in Asia' (8). More importantly, Plutarch's text carries suggestions that Alexander cultivated the ideal of free speech (*parrhēsia*), which was not only a central element of the self-conception of Athenian democracy, but also for philosophers of that age (see e.g. 51). Yet as Alexander slowly takes on more monarchical characteristics in the course of the narrative, the relationship with Aristotle becomes more strained. The most dramatic point in this connection comes probably when Alexander kills the philosopher Callisthenes who invokes *parrhēsia* to object Alexander (51-55, see esp. 53 and 55), and who the text closely associates with Aristotle. Here, Plutarch seems to suggest that Alexander effectively killed philosophy as we knew it. As we hear at the end of the *Life*, Aristotle may have tried to counteract the course of

events by plotting Alexander's assassination, but the succession struggle shows that this must have been impossible in the eyes of the narrator. With Alexander, the world of philosophy irretrievably lost one of its defining characteristics.

Bibliography

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