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Plutarch's Rhetorical World

The primary goal of this paper will be to examine the manner in which rhetorical thinking is variously expressed in Plutarch's works. I will also undertake to account for such thinking and its expression by describing the connection between the rhetorical element in Plutarch's writings and the (rhetorically imbued) academic syllabus that all educated men of Plutarch's day would have followed.

I shall begin, inductively, with an example, the *syncrisis* of Aristides and Cato the Elder, in which, working in a declamatory fashion, Plutarch, in effect, poses the question "Was Aristides or Cato the greater man?" and then vigorously argues either side without offering his readers a final answer. An anecdote recounted at *Alexander* 53 will reveal the antiquity of such rhetorical versatility: the sophist Callisthenes, instructed first to eulogize the Macedonians and then to denounce them, is grandly successful with his first speech, but to his misfortune, even more successful with the second. The Aristides-Cato *syncrisis*, which has a serious literary purpose and appears to indicate a quandary within Plutarch's own mind, will turn us toward those of the *Moralia* which, contrarily, are obviously rhetorical display pieces: the orations *De gloria Atheniensium*, *De fortuna Romanorum*, and *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute*. In the last, for example, Plutarch makes the extravagant claim that Alexander was in fact the greatest of the philosophers! These orations will lead us to recognize a Plutarch the Sophist as against the better known Plutarch, the Biographer and Man of Letters.

I will next suggest that we should attribute *De Herodoti malignitate* to Plutarch the Sophist, and will trace the sophistic strand that we have detected in Plutarch's works to the rhetorical nature of his education. My description of this education will stress those features that have the most importance for our understanding of Plutarch as a writer: his training in memorization and his delivery of practice speeches (*progymnasmata*) in the areas of narration, presentation of anecdotal material, encomium and invective, comparison, and arguing a thesis in response to a question such as "Should an old man engage in public affairs?" (Mor. 783B-797F).

The final section of the paper will focus on Plutarch the Biographer and Man of Letters. The difference between the two Plutarchs will first be illustrated by a comparison between the Alexander eulogies and the biographically balanced *Life* of Alexander. I will then examine a selection of material from Plutarch's mature works to illustrate the manner in which rhetorical thinking permeated virtually everything he wrote. A literary defense of the *syncrises*, so often denounced by moderns, will bring the paper to conclusion.