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Dreams and moral reflection in Plutarch's *Lives**

Plutarch's treatment of dreams constitutes a complicated and contested area of research: in the *Moralia* they serve as an index of philosophical underpinnings,¹ while in the *Lives* they are presented in a variety of narrative forms, delivering different effects at different times. Though it is certainly rewarding to pursue a comparative reading of Plutarch's theory on dreams and dreaming in the *Moralia* and its narrative application and functioning in the *Lives* –something which remains a major desideratum in Plutarchean studies²– considerations of space and emphasis within the framework of the present paper have led me to limit my enquiry to some representative examples from the *Parallel Lives* that illuminate Plutarch's employment of dreams as a notable vehicle of characterisation and moralising.³ In particular, this

* The present paper is a tribute to Prof. Andreas Voskos, a former tutor of mine during my undergraduate studies at the University of Athens. I find it most appropriate to express my heartfelt gratitude to him with a paper on Plutarch, an ancient philosopher and philologist whom Prof. Voskos resembles in many respects, particularly in his φιλανθρωπία, πολυμάθεια, and his cordial φιλοπατρία.

1. See e.g. *De Superstit.* 165e-166a (against the dreams of the superstitious); *De Defect. Orac.* 432b-c (dreams as the highest form of divination); *De Defect. Orac.* 437e-f and *De Is. et Osir.* 383e-384b (deceptive dreams and the body's constitution); *De Sera Num.* 555a-b (dreams associated with disturbed psychological states and guilt); *De Sera Num.* 566c and *De Gen. Soc.* 587a-c (dubious and deceptive dreams); *Ques. Conv.* 734d-736b ("why we trust our dreams least in the autumn"); *Amat.* 764e-765a (dreams ~ erotic exhilaration / inspiration). See (F.) BRENK (1977), pp. 16-27; (J.) HARRISSON (2013), pp. 32-3.

2. On dreams and dreaming in Plutarch's work, see esp. (F.) BRENK, (1975): 214-36; (F.) BRENK (1977), pp. 16-27, 214-35; (C.) PELLING, (1997): 23-6; (C.) PELLING (2010); (P.) BOSMAN, (2011): 98-104; (J.) HARRISSON (2013), pp. 101-4, 266; (C.) KING (2013); (E.) FOURNEL (2016); (F.) BRENK (2017), 103-9.

3. On Plutarch's use of dreams as tools for revealing one's character and personality, see (F.) BRENK, (1975): 346-9; (F.) BRENK (1977), 234; (C.) PELLING (2010), 317-9; (F.)

paper will show that dreams and dreaming in Plutarch's *Lives* are designed to work in tandem with other creative narrative devices in order to provoke the readers to engage in an active inquiry into the character and morality of the great men of history.

In Plutarch's *Lives*, dreams can be 'external' and prophetic, coming from outside to give insight into the unknowable present or future. In the *Life of Cicero*, for example, Cicero dreams of a strange young man who was divinely destined to become a great leader, and the next day he (as Plutarch relates) meets someone with the same features, who turns out to be the young Octavian (*Cic.* 44). Dreams can also be 'internal', coming from within, being influenced by one's experiences and psychology and dramatising an internal conflict or anxiety. Marcellus, for example, is so obsessed with the thought of fighting Hannibal that he dreams about it (*Marc.* 28). In some scenarios dreams may come both from within and without, revealing an individual's existing psychology and having an external source or motivation.⁴ For example, in the *Life of Demetrius*, Medius, a friend of Antigonos, dreams about the hard time that his king will face in his expedition against Ptolemy (*Demetr.* 19).⁵

Overall, dreams in Plutarch's *Lives* signal a dramatic and memorable highpoint of the life of an individual or his city, and it is hardly surprising that most of them precede the dreamer's *death* or a *great battle*.⁶ In his seminal article, "The Dreams of Plutarch's *Lives*", Fred-

BRENK (2017), 105-6.

4. On the distinction of Plutarch's dreams in the *Lives* between 'external', 'internal', and 'external-internal', see (C.) PELLING, (1997): 199-201, 211 nn. 17-19, 211-2 n. 20; (C.) PELLING (1999), 24-5; (C.) PELLING (2010), 317-20.

5. Cf. other examples such as *Pyrrh.* 29.1-4; *Rom.* 2.5; *Them.* 26.3; *Tim.* 8 (external dreams); *Thes.* 6.9; *Brut.* 13.2 (internal dreams); *Pomp.* 32; *Sulla* 37.3; *Cim.* 18 (external/internal dreams), with (F.) BRENK (1977), p. 222 and (C.) PELLING, (1997): 199-200 with nn. 17-18 on p. 211. On 'internal' and 'external' dreams, see *Artem.* 1.1, who distinguishes between *oneiros*, which is prophetic and concerns the future, and *enhyption*, which is significant of the dreamer's present and springs from his/her current preoccupations. On this point, see (F.) BRENK (1977), pp. 215-7, 227; (C.) PELLING, (1997): 197-8, 200; (C.) PELLING (1999), pp. 15-7; (D.) HARRIS-McCOY (2012), pp. 13-5; (J.) HARRISSON (2013), pp. 62-5. Cf. *Hdt.* 7.16; *Cic. Div.* 1.30.64; *Lucr.* 4.962-72 with (C.) KING, (2013): 88 and (J.) HARRISSON (2013), pp. 29-32.

6. Before death: *Alex.* 50.6; *Arist.* 19.2; *Cim.* 18.2-3; *Dem.* 29.2-3; *Caes.* 63.9; 68.3; *Brut.* 20.9; *Mar.* 45.5; *Sulla* 37.3; before great battles: *Ages.* 6.6-7; *Alex.* 18.6-8; 24.5; *Arist.* 11.5; *Caes.* 32.9; 42.1; *Pomp.* 68.2-3; *Demetr.* 19.2; *Eum.* 6.8; *Pel.* 21.1; *Pyrrh.* 11.4-5; 29.1-4; *Sulla* 9.7; *Tim.* 8.1. See (F.) BRENK, (1975): 338-9 n. 6; (F.) BRENK (1977), pp. 228 n. 15, 233; (E.) FOURNEL (2016), pp. 204-6; (F.) BRENK (2017), pp. 104-6.

erick Brenk has argued that Plutarch's placement of dreams in the *Lives* exemplifies the theory which was developed by Lamprias in the *De defectu oraculorum* 432b-c, in which dreaming is shown to be most accurate as a highest form of divination as one approaches death, since it is at that time that the soul comes closest to purification.⁷ All that is true: the dreams that occur in the *Lives* before the death of an individual, whether they come from outside and/or inside, do shed light on, and often vividly presage, near-future events.⁸ Still, as I will show below, they can go further than this: they open the ground for reflection on morals of wide-ranging significance that transcend the spatio-temporal limits of a specific biography; and they encourage, and demand, a heightened degree of participation on the reader's part in the rather complex process of moral evaluation.⁹

I. *Alcibiades*

In the closing chapter of the *Alcibiades* Plutarch tells us that, during the last years of his life, Alcibiades was living in a certain village of Phrygia together with Timandra, a courtesan, and that in his sleep he had the following vision:

ἔδόκει περικεῖσθαι μὲν αὐτὸς τὴν ἐσθῆτα τῆς ἑταίρας, ἐκείνην δὲ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐν ταῖς ἀγκάλαις ἔχουσαν αὐτοῦ κοσμεῖν τὸ πρόσωπον ὥσπερ γυναικὸς ὑπογράφουσαν καὶ ψιμυθιοῦσαν. ἕτεροι δὲ φασιν ἰδεῖν τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποτέμοντας αὐτοῦ τοὺς περὶ τὸν Βαγαῖον ἐν τοῖς ὕπνοις καὶ τὸ σῶμα καιόμενον. ἀλλὰ τὴν μὲν ὄψιν οὐ πολὺ γενέσθαι λέγουσι πρὸ τῆς τελευτῆς. (*Alc.* 39.2-3)

He thought he had the courtesan's garments upon him, and that she was holding his head in her arms while she adorned his face like a woman's with paints and pigments. Others say that in his sleep he saw Magaeus' followers cutting off his head and his body burning. But they all agree in saying that he had the vision not long before his death.¹⁰

7. (F.) BRENK, (1975): 338, 347. Cf. (F.) BRENK (1977), pp. 233-4.

8. See (F.) BRENK (1977), pp. 217-8.

9. On Plutarch's complex moralism in the *Lives*, see esp. (C.) PELLING (2002), pp. 237-51; (T.) DUFF (1999); (E.) ALEXIOU (2007); (T.) DUFF (2011); and most recently (C.S.) CHRYSANTHOU (2018).

10. Throughout, I have used the translations of the Loeb editions, which are slightly

Alcibiades' dream, which is omitted by both Diodorus (14.11) and Nepos (*Alc.* 10.2-6),¹¹ presents some useful information that invites the readers to look both back and ahead to Alcibiades' biography, and understand comprehensively what has preceded and what follows.¹² The details about Alcibiades wearing the clothing of the courtesan, who holds his dead body in her lap and paints his face with cosmetics, dovetail nicely with and evoke Alcibiades' earlier dissolute lifestyle, particularly his effeminacy and licentiousness, which, as Plutarch has shown throughout the *Life of Alcibiades*, produced shattering consequences in the career of the great man.¹³ Besides, they tally not only with his living at the time with a courtesan,¹⁴ but most importantly with the second version of the motives behind Alcibiades' murder. Some say, as Plutarch explains, that Alcibiades' death should not be ascribed to the world of politics and the fear which the Spartans and the Persians felt for Alcibiades' experience and energetic conduct, but to a more private motive, namely that he offended a girl of a well-known family and her brothers punished Alcibiades for his insolence (cf. ὕβρις) (*Alc.* 39.9).

The reader, however, cannot help noticing that such references to, and reverberations of, Alcibiades' effeminate and excessive way of life are out of step with the noble and heroic stance of Alcibiades during his death,¹⁵ which Plutarch depicts in the same chapter. The corresponding account is worth quoting in full: "The party sent to kill him did not dare to enter his house, but surrounded it and set it on fire. When Alcibiades was aware of this, he gathered together most of the garments and bedding in the house and cast them on the fire. Then, wrapping his cloak about his left arm, and drawing his sword with his right, he dashed out, unscathed by the fire, before the garments were in flames, and scattered the Barbarians, who ran at the mere sight of him. Not a man stood ground against him, or came to close

adapted at some points.

11. See (F.) BRENK, (1975): 339 n. 7; (S.) VERDEGEM (2010), p. 391. On Alcibiades' dream, see also Cic. *Div.* 2.69.143; Val. Max. I 7 ext. 9 with (S.) VERDEGEM (2010), p. 391 n. 158.

12. On the predictive force of Alcibiades' dreams, see also F. BRENK, (1975): 339.

13. Cf. (C.) PELLING (2009), pp. lvi-vii; (S.) VERDEGEM (2010), pp. 393-4; (C.) PELLING (2010), p. 321. For Alcibiades' effeminacy, in particular, see (T.) DUFF (1999), pp. 231, 236-7; (D.) GRIBBLE (1999), pp. 265-6, 281-2.

14. See (T.) DUFF (1999), p. 240.

15. Cf. (C.) PELLING (2010), p. 321.

quarters with him, but all held aloof and shot him with javelins and arrows. Thus he fell, and when the Barbarians were gone, Timandra took up his dead body, covered and wrapped it in her own garments, and gave it such brilliant and honourable burial as she could provide" (*Alc.* 39.3-7).

Alcibiades' death scene is calculated to recall and contrast with the earlier dream in some significant respects. First, the courtesan covers and wraps Alcibiades' dead body in her own garments in order to provide him with a most honourable burial, rather than adorning his face like a woman's with cosmetics.¹⁶ In addition –*contra* the dream—Alcibiades bravely manages to escape his attackers, who avoid hand-to-hand combat, while he remains unscathed by the fire. Remarkably, there are some important links between Alcibiades' dream and reality, but there is also discontinuity and surprise,¹⁷ which serve, I would suggest, to bring all the more sharply into relief Alcibiades' exceptional qualities and heroic conduct. We may remember at this point that one version of the story (according to Plutarch) relates that Lysander was persuaded to kill Alcibiades by the authorities in Sparta, who were afraid of his quickness and ability to do great things (*Alc.* 38.6).

Bearing in mind all of the above observations, one might reasonably wonder what kind of dream occurs in the last chapter of the *Life of Alcibiades*. Do we have an 'internal' dream that captures Alcibiades' memory of his previous excesses, or even his anxiety about his current or future critical situation? Or is it an 'external', god-sent dream that manifests a sort of divine 'retribution' for or displeasure with Alcibiades' vice? Or is this a case of a dream that is both 'internal' and 'external', which reflects Alcibiades' experience and psychology and which offers proleptically an ominous note concerning Alcibiades?¹⁸ Whichever it is, the dream, particularly through its evocation of key characteristics of Alcibiades and its complex interaction with central themes of the wider narrative, achieves a sense of moral 'openness' and complexity at the end of the *Life*, which feeds into and reinforces Plutarch's subtle problematising of Alcibiades' moral status and his reluc-

16. (C.) PELLING (2010), p. 321.

17. Cf. (C.) PELLING (2009), pp. lvi–vii. See also (F.) BRENK, (1975): 340 who acknowledges a loose connection between the dream and the subsequent funeral, and argues that the dream reveals no attempt on behalf of Plutarch to "describe a direct vision of the future murder". Cf. (F.) BRENK (1977), p. 228.

18. (S.) VERDEGEM (2010), p. 394 n. 170 thinks along these lines. See also (C.) PELLING (2010), pp. 320-1.

tance to tie Alcibiades down a determinate ethical framework throughout his biography.¹⁹

II. *Marius*

Towards the end of the *Life of Marius*, Plutarch focuses on Marius' reaction to the news about Sulla's arrival in Rome after his victory over King Mithridates of Pontus. Marius, Plutarch relates, is being shaken and overwhelmed by anxieties about the new dreadful war and fresh struggles that he will face (*Mar.* 45.4). "Tortured by such reflections," Plutarch says, "and bringing into review his long wandering, his flights, and his perils, as he was driven over land and sea, he fell into a state of dreadful despair, and was a prey to nightly terrors (cf. εἰς... νυκτερινὰ δειμάτα) and disturbing dreams (καὶ παραχῶδεις ὄνειρους), wherein he would ever seem to hear a voice saying: 'Dreadful, indeed, is the lion's lair, even when the lion is not present'" (*Mar.* 45.5). The lion clearly points to Sulla who is expected to arrive soon.²⁰

In the next lines, Plutarch details Marius' reactions further: Marius resorts to drunkenness in order to sleep and get rid of his anxious thoughts (*Mar.* 45.6); and when someone comes with tidings from the sea that Sulla is approaching, fresh terrors fall upon Marius, partly because he is afraid of the future, and partly because he is exhausted and sated with the present (*Mar.* 45.7). It is precisely this internal anxiety of Marius that the earlier dream pointedly dramatises and represents, though we may still be uncertain about what to make of Marius' despondency: does Marius suffer because he can no longer fight with the same zeal, although he is highly ambitious –as he has been during the rest of his life– to do so?²¹ Or does he suffer because, although he wishes to escape from his dreadful, ambitious past, he cannot do so? On this second reading, Marius is being tragically trapped by his own past – a point at which Marius and Alcibiades resemble each other very well.

19. On this theme, see (T.) DUFF (1999), pp. 205-40; (D.) GRIBBLE (1999), pp. 267-82; (M.) BECK (2000), pp. 26-9; (C.) PELLING (2009), pp. xlii-iv, lvi-vii; (C.) PELLING (2010), p. 322; (S.) VERDEGEM (2010), pp. 407, 419-22; (C.S.) CHRYSANTHOU (2018), pp. 105-6.

20. See (C.) PELLING (1999), p. 25.

21. See (C.) PELLING (1999), p. 25, who notes that "Marius's mind breaks because it can no longer summon the genuine ambition which dominated his earlier career: he can only fight his wars in hallucination".

This sense of moral perplexity becomes deeper in the following lines where Plutarch offers two alternatives about the specific state in which Marius found himself before his death. The first, based on the historian C. Piso, records that, while Marius was walking with his friends after supper and discussing his frequent reversals of fortune, he said that it was not the part of a mindful man to trust himself to fortune any more (*Mar.* 45.8-9). Is this philosophical self-reflection intended to suggest to the readers that Marius will eventually restrain his insatiable and unreasonable passion for more? Another rather negative possibility, however, is also entertained, which enables the readers to expand their reflections even further, drawing them into deeper engagement with Marius' mindset, and hence his character. According to some people, Plutarch states, Marius' ambitious nature (cf. τὴν φιλοτιμίαν αὐτοῦ) became entirely clear during his illness, driving him into a strange delusion in which he thought that he had the command in the Mithridatic war (*Mar.* 45.10). Based on this specific instance, Plutarch offers his moral commentary on Marius. He highlights in particular Marius' love of rule and envy, which instilled in him (as Plutarch notes) a passion for waging the war, as well as his insatiability, which led him to lament his fortune regardless of his old age and great political achievements (*Mar.* 45.11-12).

The readers' inquiry into Marius' character is furthered in the next, and last, chapter of the *Life*. First, Plutarch provides two comparative examples of Greek philosophers, Plato and Antipater of Tarsus, who at the point of their death remembered the benevolence of their *daimōn* and/or *tychē* and expressed their gratitude (46.1-2);²² and second he draws out a general moral excursus, which offers his readers the opportunity to reflect at greater length upon the key attributes of Marius. The readers are drawn to consider how and how far the general moral lesson might be relevant in their evaluation of Marius' character.²³ Plutarch comments, in particular, on unmindful and thoughtless people, who (as he says) are empty of blessings and full of hopes and thus "look always to the future while they neglect the present" (*Mar.* 46.3). "These men", Plutarch stresses, "cast aside the present gift of Fortune as something alien to them, while they *dream of* (ὄνειρώπτουσιν) the future and its uncertainties. And this is natural. For they assemble

22. See (T.) DUFF (1999), pp. 107-8.

23. On this technique of Plutarch, see (T.) DUFF (1999), pp. 102, 107-11; (G.) SCHEPENS (2000), p. 441; (T.) DUFF (2011), pp. 61-3; (C.S.) CHRYSANTHOU (2018), pp. 120-7.

and heap together the external blessings of life before reason and education have enabled them to build any foundation and basement for these things, and therefore they cannot satisfy the insatiable appetite of their souls” (*Mar.* 46.4-5).

The verb *ὀνειρώττουσιν*, which in the present context might denote both ‘dreaming’ during sleep as well as more generally one’s ‘aspirations’,²⁴ irresistibly reminds us of the *ταραχώδεις ὀνείρους* to which Marius fell prey amidst his desperate reflections on Sulla and the terrible situation in which he was embroiled after so many wanderings, perils, and flights in his life (*Mar.* 45.5). At first glance, Marius’ disturbing dreams in this episode are far from the far-flying dreams of the “unmindful and thoughtless persons” that Plutarch describes at the end of the biography. Marius, for example, does not dream of his future fighting against Sulla in the way he deludedly thinks he has obtained the command in the Mithridatic war (*Mar.* 45.10). But as mentioned above, a closer inspection of the concluding chapters of the *Marius* shows that these disturbing dreams are revealing of Marius’ inner agony and anxiety that might well stem from his overambitious and discontent nature – a most prominent characteristic of Marius throughout his life.²⁵

By way of conclusion, it is important to note that, just like earlier in the case of Alcibiades, so here in the *Life of Marius* the dream serves to dramatise and prompt reflection on the tense and nuanced relationship between the character’s dream and his waking reality, and this constitutes a particularly elaborate way of making us feel him empathetically. Plutarch presents the dreams and embeds them in the *Lives* in such a way as to play an important narratological function in his text: dreams work in tandem with the wider narrative of a biography and invite the reader to draw connections across different sections of a *Life*, often carrying with them a complex set of analogies and antitheses concerning an individual’s character and morality.²⁶ The dreams in Plutarch’s *Lives*, thus, prove to be an important part of the way in which Plutarch’s biographical narrative becomes morally ‘exploratory’

24. See (J.) HARRISON (2013), pp. 54-5, citing further examples of the same wording in Plutarch and elsewhere.

25. See e.g. *Mar.* 2.4; 28.1-2; 31.3; 34.6, cited and analysed by (T.) DUFF (1999), pp. 109-10, 118-21.

26. On Plutarch’s dreams as drawing the readers to look forwards and backwards in a biography, see (C.) PELLING (2010), pp. 322-5.

and 'interrogatory' rather than 'prescriptive' and 'expository';²⁷ and accordingly they point to the way in which Plutarch integrates the peculiarities of historical events into the universality of the moral-philosophical lessons which he thinks are to be drawn from the past, for his reader to contemplate and study.

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27. On the distinction of Plutarch's moralism between 'protreptic/expository' and 'descriptive/exploratory', see (C.) PELLING (2002), pp. 237-9.

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Περίληψη

Η παρούσα εργασία εξετάζει τον αφηγηματικό ρόλο των ονείρων στους *Παραλλήλους Βίους* του Πλουτάρχου. Τα όνειρα του Αλκιβιάδη και του Μάριου στα επιλογικά κεφάλαια των αντίστοιχων βιογραφιών τους αποτελούν δύο αντιπροσωπευτικές μελέτες περιπτώσεων ως προς το πώς ο Πλούταρχος χειρίζεται τα όνειρα, σε συνδυασμό με άλλα αφηγηματικά μέσα, προκειμένου να χαρακτηρίσει τους ήρωές του και να προβληματίσει τους επάγρυπνους αναγνώστες του ως προς την πολυπλοκότητα και τις δυσκολίες που ενέχει η ηθική αποτίμηση των βιογραφούμενων προσωπικοτήτων.