Plutarch and the Delphic Oracle

Rebecca Anne Frank
Seattle, Washington

B.A. St. Olaf College, 2014
M.A. University of Virginia, 2016

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Abstract

This dissertation assesses how Plutarch of Chaeronea uses the Delphic oracle as a literary motif and how it features as a part of his philosophical agenda in his writings. I argue that Plutarch represents the oracle as intrinsically connected to his philosophical program and that he uses Delphi as a springboard for investigation of philosophical and theological questions. Previously, scholars attempting to establish Plutarch's views on Delphi and Delphic divination have ignored or dismissed the *Lives* as evidence, using primarily the so-called 'Delphic dialogues' (*De E apud Delphos*, *De Pythiae oraculis*, and *De defectu oraculorum*) to establish Plutarch's philosophical views. I demonstrate that this approach misrepresents the purpose of the dialogues and the nature of the conversations among the interlocutors in each. Furthermore, I establish that the *Parallel Lives* cannot be ignored when considering Plutarch's views on divination, as I show how Plutarch has woven his philosophical understanding of the oracle into the *Lives*. My study of the oracle stories in the *Lives* reveals a very clear and consistent narrative about the Delphic oracle and Delphic divination that stands in contrast to many of the views expressed by the various interlocutors in the dialogues. This narrative includes in particular the purpose of the oracle, the god's connection to the oracular sanctuary, and how the god communicates with humans through the oracle. Additionally, I illustrate how Plutarch creates a narrative across both the *Lives* and the dialogues about the Delphic sanctuary from the archaic past into his own day. In Plutarch's model, Delphi used to be the primary source of divine guidance for Greek states and leaders. By Plutarch's day, however, the prophetic power of oracles had become increasingly challenged, and the Delphic oracle had long since lost the political clout it once wielded over the Mediterranean world. In response, Plutarch crafts a new identity for Delphi to increase its relevance under Roman rule. Rather than advising states, Plutarch presents the oracle operating as a center for serious theological and philosophical thought, where prominent Greeks and Romans could come together and grow in wisdom though the aid of the god. In this way, Plutarch presents the oracle a medium through which Apollo fulfills both his philosophical and prophetic agendas.

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Introduction

Plutarch and the Delphic Oracle

This dissertation is an exploration into the Delphic oracle and Delphic oracle stories in the writings of Plutarch of Chaeronea. Specifically, I investigate how Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle as a literary motif in his dialogues and biographies, and how he represents it as operating as an active oracular sanctuary, including in particular the purpose of the oracle, the god's connection to the oracular sanctuary, and how the god communicates with humans through the oracle. As a priest of Apollo at Delphi, Plutarch is an invaluable source on the state of the Delphic oracle in the first and second centuries CE.[1] The oracle appears in nearly all of his Greek *Parallel Lives*, either in the form of oracular responses or journeys to the sanctuary itself, as well as being the setting, and occasionally the subject, of a number of Plutarch's dialogues. The prominence of the oracle in Plutarch's writings has prompted speculation as to why Delphi holds such a visible position in his works. Scholars such as Frederick Brenk, Philip Stadter, and Paolo Desideri have argued that Plutarch is an apologist for the oracular site, striving to pull it out of its obscurity and celebrate a hallmark of Greek culture before its subjugation to Rome.[2] Jeremy McInerney has suggested that Plutarch's presentation of Delphi is political: a celebration of classical Greek culture and a rejection of Roman domination.[3] In spite of this apparent interest in Plutarch's use and presentation of Delphi, a thorough study of how Plutarch portrays the Delphic oracle in both the *Lives* and the dialogues has not been undertaken previously.

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[1] On Plutarch's position at Delphi, see Burkert (1996) and Casanova (2012).

[2] E.g. Brenk (1977), (2017); Stadter (2004), (2011); Desideri (2012).

[3] McInerney (2004).

The function of oracles in the work of Herodotus and Thucydides has received considerable scholarly attention over the past several decades, as scholars such as Thomas Harrison, Julia Kindt, and Elton Barker have examined the historiographers' views regarding oracles and their role in their histories.[4] The function of the oracle in Plutarch's corpus, however, has not received the same attention. Scholarly discussions of Plutarch's portrayal and view of oracular divination is concentrated on exposition of his "Delphic dialogues": *De E apud Delphos, De Pythiae oraculis,* and *De defectu oraculorum*.[5] Each of these three dialogues dramatizes conversations in which unique groups of interlocutors, representing different philosophical schools, discuss the nature of the Delphic god and his oracular sanctuary. Investigations into Delphic oracle stories in Plutarch's *Lives* fall primarily into the category of historical rather than literary studies, as scholars aimed to use Plutarch's accounts of oracles to reconstruct historical 'oracular incidents' and the use of oracular sites over time.[6]

While the neglect of the literary context of these oracles by scholars in these historical approaches has been noted,[7] the literary context of the oracle stories in Plutarch's *Lives* as well as in the Delphic dialogues has yet to be examined thoroughly. To date, Frederick Brenk's study in his 1977 monograph *In Mist Apparelled: Religious Themes in Plutarch's Moralia and Lives* remains the only overarching analysis of the Delphic oracle

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[4] Harrison (2000), Kindt (2016), Barker (2006). See also Hornblower (1992), Bowden (2005) 65-87, Hollman (2011) 94-117.

[5] See, for example, Simonetti (2017), Heineman (2018) 41-60. As Bowden (2005: 34) notes, Plutarch's discussion in these dialogues represent the only extant ancient descriptions of how the oracle spoke.

[6] For example, Parke and Wormell (1956), Fontenrose (1978) and (1988). Against this historical approach, see Johnston (2005) 285-287.

[7] E.g. Maurizio (1997).

in Plutarch's *Lives*.[8] While the range of this study is broad, it does not constitute an in-depth analysis of how the oracle appears not only in the *Lives*, but in the *Moralia* as well, and focuses primarily on the oracle's appearance in the Roman *Lives*.

Michael Flower has observed that "the topic of the Greek *mantis* rests at the cusp of literature and history."[9] For Plutarch, the *mantis* lies not only at the intersection of history and literature, but also at the meeting of philosophy and religion. By ignoring how Plutarch presents the oracle in the *Lives* as compared to the *Moralia*, scholars have neglected to appreciate the complexity of the oracle as it existed for Plutarch. It was not only a religious institution; it also played an integral role in his presentation of history, his views of literature, and his assessment of human character. Recently, research on Plutarch has moved towards recognizing the unity of Plutarch as the author of what is often discussed as the two 'halves' of his work: the *Lives* and the *Moralia*.[10] As Jan Opsomer has wryly noted, "Plutarch did not stop being a philosopher when writing the *Lives*."[11] While seemingly uncontroversial, and indeed irrefutable, this view is not without opposition. Scholars have traditionally been wary of approaching the *Lives* as works of philosophy, or indeed of analyzing Plutarch's philosophical agenda in the biographies at a deeper level than simply acknowledging that the *Lives* were composed with a moralistic aim in mind.[12] While this project is not an overarching assessment of all aspects of

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[8] Brenk (1977) 236-255. While broad, this study is not comprehensive with regard to the *Lives*, focusing on broader themes with less analysis of each example in its context. Stadter (2011) attempts a similar approach, though with a more limited scope, addressing only the "historical" *Lives*.

[9] Flower (2008) 21.

[10] See, for example, Nikolaidis (2008).

[11] Opsomer (2016a) 123.

[12] For a defense of the philosophical purpose of the *Lives*, see Chrysanthou (2018).

Plutarch's philosophical project in the *Lives*, it bridges the gap between what are seen as Plutarch's philosophical works – the *Moralia* – and his biographical ones, assessing how the Delphic oracle is treated in both the *Parallel Lives* and in the Delphic dialogues. My approach parallels that of Julia Kindt for Herodotus, as I ask "how a particular author, writing at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose, told Delphic oracle stories within his work."[13] These stories are not limited to a specific category of Plutarch's work, but permeate his entire corpus. I investigate how the portrayal of the oracles in the *Lives* relates to the various views Plutarch presents in the *Moralia*, regarding the oracular sanctuary both in his own day as well as in the past.

To answer this question, I begin with the Delphic dialogues, distilling the general issues at stake in each of the three dialogues and the positions presented on these issues by the varying interlocutors. By establishing which aspects of the Delphic oracle the interlocutors discuss and the different arguments they make, I create the basis for a comparison between the portrayal of the Delphic oracle in the *Lives* and in the dialogues. For each of the *Lives*, I examine how Delphic oracle stories are grouped within the series of biographies, paired *Lives*, and within individual biographies. I assess the role the oracle plays literarily as well as what image of the Delphic sanctuary emerges from each *Life* as well as from the series of biographies as a whole, using the aspects of the Delphic oracle at issue in the Delphic dialogues as guiding questions throughout the chapters. Finally, I conclude by assessing to what degree the views expressed by Plutarch's interlocutors in the dialogues reflect the image of the oracle Plutarch presents in the *Lives*, and how Plutarch uses the oracle as a literary motif or structuring device in both bodies of texts.

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[13] Kindt (2016) 10.

This dissertation is divided into two main sections. In the first (Chapter 1), I introduce and examine the Delphic dialogues. I present a new approach to reading the Delphic dialogues, arguing that these dialogues are explorations into the nature of the god and his relationship to humans and that Plutarch wrote them as models for how to undertake philosophical inquiry, rather than as prescriptive answers to the questions posed by the interlocutors in each work. In the process, I show how Plutarch uplifts the Delphic sanctuary as an extension of the god and representative of his philosophical mission on earth. Finally, through comparison on the Delphic dialogues I establish what are the main questions and themes I examine between the dialogues and the *Lives* in the second half of the dissertation.

The remainder of the dissertation (Chapters 2-5) constitutes my study of the Delphic oracle in the *Parallel Lives*. Before turning to specific *Lives*, I first establish my methodological approach (Chapter 2), arguing that in the *Lives* Plutarch expected reader engagement, and that he designed these texts as exercises for his readers in which they were expected to reflect on questions of moral character and leadership using as a basis his presentation of the famous Greek and Roman statesmen in each pairing. The *synkrisis* thus serves not as the conclusion Plutarch wished his readers to reach upon finishing each pair of *Lives*, but as models for his readers containing possible conclusions they could reach about the men under study in each pair.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the *Lives* of the early Greek founder-figures Lycurgus, Theseus, and Solon, demonstrating how Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle as functioning in the mythical and archaic Greek past and how he uses the oracle to shape his readers' perception of the lawgivers and the polities they established. I show how Plutarch presents

the oracle as having been the advisor and supporter of kings and leaders, serving as the primary intermediary between rulers and the divine, and in the process presenting the Delphic god as the philosopher *par excellence*.

Chapter 4 addresses the portrayal of the Delphic oracle in the *Lives* of Classical Greek statesmen. I demonstrate that Plutarch employs the Delphic oracle at pivotal moments of Greek history, using the oracular responses and his subjects' interactions with the oracle to reveal truths about leadership while also showing how the Delphic oracle played a pivotal role in the Persian and Peloponnesian wars and in the Macedonian conquest of Greece.

In Chapter 5, the final set of case studies, I analyze *Lives* in which Plutarch condemns clearly the use or treatment of the Delphic oracle by his characters, including in particular the *Lysander, Agesilaus,* and *Demetrius.* I show how in each case Plutarch uses his subjects' interactions with the Delphic oracle to establish negative aspects of their characters while also demonstrating the dangers posed to the oracular sanctuary and its reputation by those interested in exploiting it for personal gain.

Finally, in the Conclusion I address the initial question of the dissertation, arguing that my study of Delphic oracle stories in Plutarch's *Lives* reveals a clear and consistent narrative about the Delphic oracle and Delphic divination, and in both the *Lives* and the dialogues Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle as a mechanism used by the god to promote philosophy and wisdom among humans.

Chapter 1

The Delphic Dialogues

i. Plutarch's use of dialectic

What does Plutarch say about the Delphic oracle in the Delphic dialogues? This question is far easier to pose than it is to answer. In each of the dialogues conflicting views regarding the oracle are juxtaposed by the interlocutors with little to no clear authorial indication of which views, if any, are to be preferred or understood to be correct. At various points, Plutarch's characters weigh in on the benefits and disadvantages of different explanations, but these discussions take place within the story-world of the dialogues, and so cannot be assumed *ipso facto* always to be the views of Plutarch. Consequently, in order to determine what Plutarch has to say about the oracle in the Delphic dialogues, it is necessary to determine first how the views and arguments presented by different characters should be evaluated, and to analyze the narratological role of the oracle in the dialogues. Only in this way can we then establish how Plutarch both uses and portrays the Delphic oracle in these works.

The dialogue form provides an author with a unique opportunity to present different arguments or perspectives without adopting a specific viewpoint or even privileging one claim over another. The form does not, however, prevent the author from giving preferential treatment to a particular interlocutor or argument. But when the author does not say explicitly which views, if any, are more valid, it is difficult to claim that any particular views expressed in the work are shared by the author. Even if one can demonstrate that Plutarch shows a clear preference for one opinion or explanation over the others given, this is not necessarily conclusive: as has been demonstrated with regard to

the Platonic dialogues, even when one viewpoint or philosophical argument is predominantly developed over the course of the dialogue, this does not by default mean that the author of the dialogue shares those views.[14] Furthermore, as Kent Moors has noted for Plato, the very nature of a dialogue necessitates a careful study of the setting, the speakers, and the internal audience of the conversation.[15] Dialogues function as dramas rather than lectures. It is necessary to assess not only what is being said, but by whom, in what context, and for what purpose within the story-world of the dialogue.

Plato's use of dialectic has received considerable attention in scholarship, albeit with little consensus on specifically how to interpret the philosophical arguments present in Plato's dialogues.[16] In contrast, Plutarch's use of dialectic has received considerably less scholarly attention. While similarities exist between Plato's and Plutarch's dialogues, allowing for some comparison between the two authors, Plutarch's dialogues, and the Delphic dialogues in particular, display fundamental structural differences from the Platonic dialogues. Crucially, they lack a unifying Socrates-figure. Additionally, the dialogues sometimes include Plutarch as a character at different stages of his life and occasionally the authorial Plutarch commenting on the character Plutarch's views.

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[14] See, for example, Hyland (1968) 38-44, Moors (1978) 92-93, and Kahn (1996) 36-38.

[15] Moors (1978) 77, 88-89. For Plato's use of characterization in his dialogues, see also Blondell (2002) 1-52.

[16] This difficulty was clearly articulated by Hyland (1968: 38), and while there have been considerable advances in scholarship since then, there is as of yet no consensus on why Plato used dialectic, or how to interpret his philosophical views through his dialogues. This problem is compounded by Plato's inconsistency in how he uses dialectic within his various dialogues. On the variety in Plato's use of dialectic, see Kahn (1996: xiv-xvi, 36-48, 292-328; 2014: 131-148) and Long (2009). Long's conclusion, that it is difficult if not impossible to find a meaningful singular explanation for why authors of dialogues choose to use this literary form, is likely correct. This is not to say, however, that explanations cannot be found for authors on an individual level, or, at the very least, at the level of an individual dialogue or set of dialogues.

Unfortunately, as I will demonstrate in detail below, Plutarch-as-author does not portray himself as an interlocutor in a positive light, nor does he tell his reader directly which views he favors or believes to be correct. Consequently, it is even more difficult to determine which views, if any, Plutarch is promoting in the dialogues since there is no clear indication as to whose opinions Plutarch supports. Frederick Brenk articulated well the problem in trying to understand Plutarch's philosophical views from his dialogues: "Plutarch records through the masks of various *personae* the many strands of philosophical and religious speculation in his day, often without clearly revealing his own position."[17] Nevertheless, scholars attempting to understand Plutarch's philosophical beliefs typically highlight one particular interlocutor as expressing Plutarch's personal opinion on the matter at hand in each dialogue. This approach fails to account for Plutarch's portrayal of the interlocutors as a whole and his use of dialectic. To demonstrate this, I will analyze the different approaches scholars have used to identify who speaks for Plutarch in the dialogues. I argue that a holistic approach to the dialogues and to the views contained therein is necessary to understand Plutarch's methodology and consequently to assess his portrayal of the Delphic oracle in the Delphic dialogues.[18]

The most natural answer to the question of who speaks for Plutarch would be to interpret Plutarch the interlocutor as expressing the views of Plutarch the author of the dialogues when he is present as a character in a dialogue. To assess this possibility, I will examine the treatment of Plutarch as a character in *De E apud Delphos*, the only one of the

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[17] Brenk (1977) 85.

[18] Given the many different manifestations of dialectic in Plutarch's dialogues and the focus of this dissertation, my discussion of Plutarch's dialectic will focus on his use of the literary form in the Delphic Dialogues, with occasional reference to other dialogues when applicable for the purpose of comparison.

Delphic dialogues in which Plutarch features as an interlocutor. In the dialogue, a young Plutarch presents a mathematical explanation for the mysterious E dedication at Delphi. Plutarch-as-interlocutor's speech is, however, prefaced by an interjection by Plutarch-as-narrator, who treats with disdain the explanation Plutarch-as-interlocutor is about to deliver. Following Eustrophus's enthusiastic praise for the numerical theory proposed by Theon, Plutarch-as-narrator remarks: "Eustrophus was saying these things to us not as a joke, but because at that time I was devoting myself passionately to mathematics, although soon I was going to honor entirely the saying 'nothing in excess' after I joined the Academy."[19] With this self-effacing remark delivered by the narrator, Plutarch hints to the readers that they should, perhaps, approach Plutarch-as-interlocutor's subsequent speech expanding upon Theon's numerical theory with some skepticism, since it will be immoderate and is the product of a young man without sufficient philosophical training or experience.[20] The equally dismissive response of Ammonius, Plutarch's teacher, to Plutarch-as-interlocutor's speech emphasizes the inadequacy of the young Plutarch's attempt even further:

[19] *De E apud Delphos* 387f: ταῦτα δὲ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἔλεγεν οὐ παίζων ὁ Εὔστροφος, ἀλλ᾽ ἐπεὶ τηνικαῦτα προσεκείμην τοῖς μαθήμασιν ἐμπαθῶς, τάχα δὴ μέλλων εἰς πάντα τιμήσειν τὸ ‘μηδὲν ἄγαν’ ἐν Ἀκαδημείᾳ γενόμενος. For *De E apud Delphos* I follow the text of Obsieger (2013) except where noted otherwise.

[20] On the Pythagorean roots of the theory Plutarch-as-interlocutor espouses, see Ferrari (2010) 48-52, Obsieger (2013) 168, and Simonetti (2017) 138-146. Simonetti argues that here Plutarch-as-narrator is taking the opportunity to brag about his accomplishments as a youth, given the complexity of his numerological theory. While Plutarch-as-interlocutor's theory is complex, this does not mean that it is necessarily correct and the narrative framing of the speech contradicts this positive portrayal.

> ὁ δ᾽ Ἀμμώνιος, ἅτε δὴ καὶ αὐτὸς οὐ τὸ φαυλότατον ἐν μαθηματικῇ φιλοσοφίας τιθέμενος, ἥσθη τε τοῖς λεγομένοις καὶ εἶπεν, ‘οὐκ ἄξιον πρὸς ταῦτα λίαν ἀκριβῶς ἀντιλέγειν τοῖς νέοις, πλὴν ὅτι τῶν ἀριθμῶν ἕκαστος οὐκ ὀλίγα βουλομένοις ἐπαινεῖν καὶ ὑμνεῖν παρέξει.’[21]
>
> But Ammonius, because he himself also believed that not the smallest part of philosophy lies in mathematics, was pleased with the arguments and said, ‘It is not fitting to dispute too strictly these matters with the young, except that each one of the numbers will provide ample material to those wishing to praise and hymn them.’

Ammonius’s response echoes the words of Plutarch-as-narrator before Plutarch-as-interlocutor’s speech, highlighting the young Plutarch’s youth and inexperience to the detriment of Plutarch-as-interlocutor’s argument.[22] While Plutarch-as-narrator notes that Ammonius was pleased with Plutarch-as-interlocutor’s attempt, this should not be taken as an indication of Ammonius’s approval of the explanation given by the young Plutarch.[23] Instead, Plutarch-as-author qualifies this approval: Ammonius, Plutarch-as-narrator explains, was pleased insofar as he approved of Plutarch-as-interlocutor’s attempts to demonstrate the value of mathematics in philosophy. Nevertheless, the praise Plutarch-as-interlocutor has heaped upon the number five may be easily applied to other numbers, diminishing the validity of the claim overall.[24] It stands to reason, therefore, that at least in

[21] *De E apud Delphos* 391e.

[22] On Plutarch’s presentation of himself as a youth, see Klotz (2011).

[23] *De E apud Delphos* 391e.

[24] *De E apud Delphos* 391e-f.

this dialogue, the words of Plutarch-as-interlocutor are not to be trusted as representing the opinions or beliefs of Plutarch-as-author at the time of writing.[25]

In the example above, Plutarch-as-narrator appears to agree with ideas expressed by Ammonius, both of them cautioning against accepting the explanation for the E given by Plutarch-as-interlocutor and for similar reasons. The apparent affinity between Plutarch-as-narrator and his teacher has prompted the theory that Plutarch-as-author expresses his philosophical beliefs through the character of Ammonius in his dialogues, parallel to the way in which Socrates is often characterized as promoting Plato's philosophical ideas in the Platonic dialogues.[26] As in the case of Socrates, there is no direct evidence for the philosophical views of the historical figure of Ammonius. The primary evidence for Ammonius's philosophy comes from Plutarch's dialogues, making it even more difficult to ascertain whether Plutarch is projecting views – his own or otherwise – onto his former teacher.[27] But when Ammonius is taken to be speaking on behalf of Plutarch, expressing his personal philosophical views, any distinction between the views of Plutarch and Ammonius breaks down. Ammonius cannot be expressing his own views and those of Plutarch unless we are to merge the two philosophers into one and assume that Plutarch

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[25] It is possible, as Dillon (1996: 186-187, 190) suggests, that Plutarch is representing faithfully the views he personally held in his youth. This does not mean, however, that Plutarch is presenting these views as credible to the reader in the dialogue.

[26] Another example of apparent agreement between Plutarch-as-narrator and Ammonius may be seen in *De E apud Delphos* 385b. For Ammonius as a literary mouthpiece for Plutarch, see Opsomer (2009) 123-125 and Ferrari (2010: 56). On the characterization of Socrates in Plato, see Moors (1978) 89-92; Kahn (1996) 1-4, 71-75; Blondell (2002) 67-80, Dorion (2010).

[27] These dialogues are *De E apud Delphos, De defectu oraculorum,* and *Quaestiones convivales*. The non-Plutarchan evidence for Ammonius, comprising a brief mention by Eunapius and an inscription from Eleusis referencing an 'Ammonius of Chollidae,' has been collected and analyzed by Jones (1967). While this evidence helps establish Ammonius's social position in Athens, it does not provide any indications as to his philosophical views.

agreed completely with his teacher on the matters discussed in the relevant dialogues.[28] Even if this point is conceded, for both Plutarch-as-interlocutor and Ammonius there is the further difficulty of how to proceed in a dialogue in which neither character is present, such as *De Pythiae oraculis*. Unless it is necessary to assume in dialogues in which Ammonius is not present that Plutarch cannot be supporting any of the views expressed by the interlocutors, then another solution is needed to explain how to interpret Plutarch's dialogues.

Frederick Brenk has suggested that the last speaker in each of the dialogues represents the most correct opinion on the subject at hand, in which view he is followed by, among others, Claudio Moreschini and Kristin Heineman.[29] The final speakers in the Delphic Dialogues are the only interlocutors whose arguments are not directly contradicted by a subsequent speaker, and their speeches often claim a disproportionate share of the dialogue.[30] Scholars have consequently surmised that the final interlocutors' concluding arguments may be better than the others proposed. There is a crucial difference, however,

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[28] For example, Dillon (1996: 189-191; 2002: 226-229), followed by Ferrari (2010: 56), argues that Ammonius represents Plutarch-as-author in the dialogues and that Plutarch could not have ascribed philosophical beliefs to Ammonius that the latter did not hold. Against Dillon's arguments that Plutarch's character of Ammonius must closely resemble the historical figure, Opsomer (2009: 123-125) notes that just as Socrates in the Platonic dialogues cannot be assumed to be an accurate representation of the historical Socrates, so too this could be the case with Ammonius in the Plutarchan dialogues. Nevertheless, Opsomer follows Dillon in arguing that on the whole Plutarch's portrayal of Ammonius is not likely to be entirely unfaithful to the historical figure, though he acknowledges that this cannot be proven.

[29] Brenk (1977: 85), Moreschini (1996: 29-34), Heineman (2018: 41-42). More recently, Brenk has revised his position on the speakers in the Delphic Dialogues, arguing that in each case, their views or characters are inherently flawed, which would serve as a clue to the reader that their final speech should not be accepted by the reader without further consideration. See, for example, Brenk 2009, 2012, 2016.

[30] Ammonius's final speech in *De E apud Delphos* is given 2.5 Stephanus pages, or roughly one quarter of the work. Theon's speech in *De Pythiae oraculis* represents half of the work (7.5 out of a total of 15 Stephanus pages), and Lamprias's final speech in *De defectu oraculorum* represents approximately one quarter of the work (7 out of a total of 29 Stephanus pages).

between a solution being the best one proposed in a dialogue, and Plutarch presenting that solution as *the* answer, or his answer, to the questions at hand. Additionally, by assigning to a singular individual the role of designated 'spokesperson' for the author, scholars disregard the possibility that the other interlocutors may be expressing reasonable views as well, and emphasize the 'correct answer' to the questions at the expense of the rest of the dialogue. A solutions-based, rather than a methodological or journey-focused, approach ignores Plutarch's choice of literary form, which was to employ dialectic rather than presenting the material in the form of treatises as he does elsewhere in the *Moralia*.

In response to these attempts to identify a single voice speaking for Plutarch in each of the dialogues, Daniel Babut argues that the Delphic dialogues should be read holistically and that the interlocutors together present a multi-faceted image of the god.[31] While Babut's arguments are persuasive, there are times in the dialogues in which various theories do appear to be supported at the expense of others.[32] In light of this, Gernot Müller argues that Plutarch uses dialectic to emphasize the proper way to go about knowledge acquisition, and as a warning against jumping to conclusions without first engaging in proper reflection.[33] Plutarch, in Müller's view, does not reveal his personal beliefs directly, so as to encourage the readers to consider the arguments for themselves. Müller's claim finds strong support in the structure of the texts as well as in the interlocutors' repeated words

[31] Babut (1992). This view is also shared by Thum (2013), who argues that the entire dialogue is an answer to the question at hand. See also Simonetti (2017: 161-162) on *De E apud Delphos*.

[32] For example, the swiftness with which the remarks of the Cynic Didymus, nicknamed Planetiades, are dismissed in *De defectu oraculorum*, and Didymus's subsequent departure from the conversation does not reflect well on the substance of his comments (413a-d).

[33] Müller (2013).

of caution against blindly accepting the arguments presented, and in their exhortations to the audience, both internal and external, to consider the matter for themselves.

Particularly pertinent is the ending passage of *De defectu oraculorum*, in which Plutarch encourages the readers to question the arguments he has presented them with over the course of the dialogue. Lamprias, the narrator of the dialogue and the brother of Plutarch, ends both his speech and the dialogue with the disclaimer: "'I encourage,' I said, 'both you and myself to consider these arguments often, since they contain many objectionable claims and hidden meanings suggesting the opposite conclusions, which the present moment does not suffice to examine all.'"[34] Rather than leaving his reader with a clear answer to the question addressed both directly and indirectly throughout the dialogue – namely, why oracles were in decline – Plutarch charges his readers to consider what they have read and to weigh the arguments on their own.[35]

This warning bears stark similarities to the words of Sulla at the end of another Plutarchan dialogue, *De facie in orbe lunae*, in which Sulla charges the narrator Lamprias: "It is in your power, Lamprias, to make what you will of this tale."[36] Here, Sulla is reminding Lamprias that he is only the messenger of this myth concerning the moon told to him by a stranger.[37] This ending is buried under multiple levels of narration, as Lamprias

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[34] *De defectu oraculorum* 438d: 'ταῦτ'' ἔφην ἐγώ 'πολλάκις ἀνασκέπτεσθαι καὶ ὑμᾶς παρακαλῶ καὶ ἐμαυτόν, ὡς ἔχοντα πολλὰς ἀντιλήψεις καὶ ὑπονοίας πρὸς τοὐναντίον, ἃς ὁ καιρὸς οὐ παρέχει πάσας ἐπεξελθεῖν.'

[35] For the lack of conclusion in a dialogue, see also Kindt (2016: 179-183) on *De E apud Delphos*.

[36] *De facie in orbe lunae* 945d-e: ὑμῖν δ', ὦ Λαμπρία, χρῆσθαι τῷ λόγῳ πάρεστιν ᾗ βούλεσθε.

[37] See especially the preceding sentence: "these things," Sulla said, "I heard from the stranger passing through, and the servants and attendants of Kronos reported them to him, as he himself said" ('ταῦτ'' εἶπεν ὁ Σύλλας 'ἐγὼ μὲν ἤκουσα τοῦ ξένου διεξιόντος, ἐκείνῳ δ' οἱ τοῦ Κρόνου κατευνασταὶ καὶ θεράποντες, ὡς ἔλεγεν αὐτός, ἐξήγγειλαν). Sulla gives a similar reminder before launching into his tale in 941a.

narrates how Sulla told him a story that Sulla heard from a stranger, who had in turn heard it from another party. These levels of narration, combined with this final charge "to make what you will of this tale," serve as a disclaimer from Sulla regarding the veracity of what he has just said, but also through him a disclaimer from Plutarch to the readers of the dialogue.[38] And yet, the context of the myth's telling as a part of a serious philosophical discussion compels the reader to analyze the myth carefully, asking both why this story is being told, and how its explanations compare to the other proposals made over the course of the dialogue.[39] By ending with this charge by Sulla Plutarch does not discount entirely the contents of the dialogue, but rather warns readers neither to accept nor reject what they have read automatically, and instead to consider what they ought to make of it. The similarity of these charges at the ends of both *De defectu oraculorum* and *De facie in orbe lunae* suggest that these are not just isolated cases but rather indicative of how Plutarch conceived of his dialectic: offering potential strategies for how to tackle questions, without giving definitive answers.

Returning to the Delphic dialogues, both *De E apud Delphos* and *De Pythiae oraculis* conclude with similar cautionary statements, as they emphasize the power and wisdom of the god relative to humans. Ammonius in *De E apud Delphos* stresses the inferior nature of humans and their inherent weakness (ἀσθένεια) in contrast to the god.[40] Similarly, Theon in the closing statement of *De Pythiae oraculis* warns against condemning

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[38] As argued by Kechagia-Ovseiko (2017) 14-15.

[39] For other examples of myths or similar tales in other Plutarchan dialogues, see also *De sera numinis* 563-568a. Theocratus in *De genio Socratis* 589f goes so far as to claim that myths have a way of touching upon the truth. For analysis of Plutarch's approach in creating and employing philosophical myths, see Verniere (1977) 63-68.

[40] *De E apud Delphos* 394c: 'τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἐκπλήξει καὶ σεβασμῷ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὡς ὄντα διὰ παντὸς ἀναπεφώνηται, τὸ δ' ὑπόμνησίς ἐστι τῷ θνητῷ τῆς περὶ αὐτὸ φύσεως καὶ ἀσθενείας.'

the divine for one's own inability to comprehend the god's purpose.[41] In both dialogues, the interlocutors have spent a considerable amount of time engaged in attempts to understand the nature of the divine and logical reasons for the actions of the god. And yet, as final statements to the conversations, Ammonius and Theon remind the audience, both internal and external, of the inherently weak position from which they and the other interlocutors have been making their cases. They themselves are humans, attempting to comprehend the divine. The final statements of these dialogues thus suggest a more skeptical view of the arguments presented by all of the interlocutors, and serve as a reminder to the reader of humanity's innate frailty and inability to comprehend the divine. By acknowledging this inability, Plutarch hints to the readers that even the best of the interpretations given by the interlocutors in his dialogues is inherently flawed.

In addition to the concluding cautionary remarks, the dramatic setting of the dialogues and the opening comments establishing a frame for the ensuing discussions condition the reader to expect an exercise in philosophical inquiry, rather than a clear or straightforward explanation of divine phenomena. This is seen most clearly in the case of *De E apud Delphos*, a dialogue in which Plutarch in his role as narrator gives a lengthy explanation to Sarapion, the dedicatee of the dialogue, of the two settings of the

[41] *De Pythiae oraculis* 409d: 'κἂν τὴν αἰτίαν μὴ ἱκανῶς πύθωνται τῆς μεταβολῆς, ἀπίασι τοῦ θεοῦ καταγνόντες, οὐχ ἡμῶν οὐδ' αὐτῶν ὡς ἀδυνάτων ὄντων ἐξικνεῖσθαι τῷ λογισμῷ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ διάνοιαν.' While Theon is not claiming that it is impossible for humans to understand, he is saying that when we fail to understand the god, it is a failure on our part to understand the divine, not a fault of the god. This perhaps also serves as an admonition to readers to remember, as they think over this question for themselves, that they should not blame their failure on the god, but rather should keep searching, through reason, to find logical explanations.

conversation he will relate, both its initial context, and how and why it was later reported by the older Plutarch.

De E apud Delphos is, structurally, a series of nested stories: Plutarch-as-author writes to his friend Sarapion about how he answered a question his sons had been posing for some time, and about which certain visitors to the sanctuary were also curious. Instead of providing a straight answer, or an essay proving one point over another, Plutarch recounts a conversation he had with Ammonius, Lamprias, Theon, Eustrophus, and Nicander a number of years earlier. This conversation results in not one, but multiple different explanations for the E dedication at Delphi with none clearly highlighted or identified explicitly as correct. While at the end of *De defectu oraculorum* Lamprias, serving as both narrator and interlocutor, tells the readers directly not to mine the dialogue for answers but rather to use it as a tool for their own philosophical reflection, in *De E apud Delphos* the framework warns the readers not to expect answers to the questions at hand. Plutarch chooses to respond to his sons' questioning by showing them how to go about seeking the answer for themselves. In doing so, Plutarch is issuing a subtle warning both within the narrative to his sons, and to his readers more broadly, about the nature of philosophy and philosophical thought; there are no easy answers to the questions that are worth asking.

Furthermore, Plutarch's opening remarks in *De E apud Delphos* reveal that Plutarch is not claiming to answer the questions posed in the dialogue, but rather is giving an example of dialectic spurred on by the god.[42] Later, in the opening of the dialogue proper, Ammonius echoes Plutarch's earlier words when comparing the present topic of discussion

[42] *De E apud Delphos* 384f-385a.

– the meaning of the E dedication at Delphi – to two other famous inscriptions at the sanctuary: 'γνῶθι σαυτόν' ("know yourself") and 'μηδὲν ἄγαν' ("nothing in excess").[43] Ammonius calls attention to these two inscriptions and notes, "how many philosophical inquiries they have set in motion, and how great a multitude of discourses have arisen from each as if from a seed!"[44] As Ammonius articulates it, what is of paramount importance is not the final outcome, but rather the process of immersion in philosophical dialectic itself. Additionally, these inscriptions have sparked productive (γόνιμον) discussions, into which category Ammonius also places the topic at hand.[45] Plutarch has Ammonius praise philosophical inquiry itself as a worthy goal, rather than positioning the dialogue to give a clear and definitive answer to the question of the meaning of the E. This opening also serves as a warning to the readers that the dialogue may branch out from the initial question, and a reassurance that this is in fact a hallmark of proper engagement with philosophy. Philosophical discussions may circle increasingly closer to the truth, but need not ultimately reach that goal in order to be fruitful.[46] These remarks within the dialogues also caution against attempts to glean specific and definitive answers regarding Plutarch's own religious and philosophical views from the dialogues. If the dialogues are to be a starting point for philosophical inquiry, we cannot assume that the author's personal views will be clearly flagged for the reader, or that any views will be marked as necessarily correct.

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[43] *De E apud Delphos* 385d.

[44] *De E apud Delphos* 385d: ὅσας ζητήσεις κεκίνηκε φιλοσόφοις καὶ ὅσον λόγων πλῆθος ἀφ' ἑκάστου καθάπερ ἀπὸ σπέρματος ἀναπέφυκεν.

[45] Obsieger's (2013: 93-94) claim that the discussion of the E dedication is not meant to be serious overlooks the setting of the dialogue and the importance Plutarch places on *paideia* elsewhere in his writings.

[46] For this idea see also *De E apud Delphos* 384f.

This approach to the Delphic dialogues, to read them as example or model conversations for how to go about seeking answers to philosophical and theological questions, is supported further by Plutarch's description of the god in *De E apud Delphos*. In the opening of the dialogue portion, Plutarch-as-narrator states that Ammonius described Apollo as being as much of a philosopher as he is a prophet. It is because of this, Ammonius argues, that Apollo encourages humans to engage in logic and in philosophical discourse.[47] This portrayal of Apollo as a god endowed with philosophical knowledge is repeated throughout the dialogue, both by other interlocutors and by Plutarch-as-narrator before the beginning of the dialogue proper.[48] The philosophical aspect of the god makes the dialogue form a particularly apt medium for Plutarch to use in discussing the nature of the god and of his oracle at Delphi. Not only are the interlocutors modeling how to construct logical arguments, but they are doing so for all three of the Delphic dialogues on topics concerning the god, trying to understand apparent riddles or contradictions in his nature or his relationship with humanity.

The Delphic dialogues, then, serve as a demonstration of methodological principles of philosophical inquiry as seen in both their structure and their approach to dialectic, and as articulated by Plutarch-as-narrator and by the interlocutors of the dialogues. This does not mean that every argument should be weighed as equally valid by the reader, but rather that Plutarch employs the dialogue format first to demonstrate how one should go about philosophical thought, and then to encourage his readers to weigh for themselves the arguments that they have heard and to assess their validity on their own. As a result, instead

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[47] *De E apud Delphos* 385b-c.

[48] See, for example, *De E apud Delphos* 384e-f, 386e-f.

of trying to build a comprehensive map of Plutarch's philosophical and religious views, I will analyze the portrayal of the Delphic oracle in the Delphic dialogues, assessing both the literary context of the dialogues as well as what Plutarch as the narrator tells the reader about the oracle through his various interlocutors.

In what follows, therefore, I will present for each of the three dialogues first the role of the oracle within the dialogue, and subsequently how the oracle is being portrayed by the various interlocutors. My analysis of Plutarch's representation of the oracle will be guided by the following major areas of concern, which reflect different types of discussions concerning the oracle tackled in the dialogues: the purpose of the oracular sanctuaries and of the oracles; who consults the oracle, with what questions, and at what time; the ambiguity of oracular responses; the connection between the Pythia and the god; and the source of the phrasing of the oracles. As I will demonstrate, in all three dialogues these topics serve as important triggers for conversation for the interlocutors, encompassing their understanding of the reason for the Delphic sanctuary, its ritual and cult practice, the nature of the oracular responses, and the role of the Delphic oracle in Greek history. These questions will provide a basis for comparison between the individual dialogues, as well as between the dialogues and Plutarch's treatment of the oracle in the *Lives*, which will be treated in subsequent chapters. Following my analysis of the individual dialogues, I will conclude with a comparison of Plutarch's use of the oracle as a literary motif and his portrayal of it across the Delphic dialogues.

ii. *De E Apud Delphos*

De E apud Delphos is addressed to Sarapion, a Stoic poet and apparent friend of Plutarch's in Athens. In the preface of the work, Plutarch describes it as "some of the Pythian conversations" (τῶν Πυθικῶν λόγων ἐνίους) held by Plutarch and others at Delphi.[49] The structure of the dialogue is complex, beginning first with a preface describing the work as a gift to Sarapion, followed by a framing narrative into which the dialogue is set. Plutarch, long badgered by his children about the meaning of the large E inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, is finally compelled to give in to their pleas for an explanation.[50] And yet, rather than giving them a straightforward answer, Plutarch offers them instead a dialogue held many years previously, when he was still a youth. What follows is a series of seven attempts to explain the E. First, Lamprias, Plutarch's brother, claims that the five true wise men gave the E as a sacred offering (ἀνάθημα) as a way to prevent Cleobulus and Periander from joining their number, with E standing for the number five.[51] Next, an unnamed Chaldean visitor is said to have explained the E by claiming that E is the second vowel and the sun is the second planet, and Apollo is associated with the sun.[52] Nicander, a priest of Apollo at Delphi, presents the view of the Delphians, arguing that the E represents εἰ, meaning "if," representing the form of questions put to the oracle as well as wishes and prayers to the god (here, equivalent to εἴθε or εἰ γάρ).[53] In response, Theon, a

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[49] *De E apud Delphos* 384d-e.

[50] *De E apud Delphos* 385a-b.

[51] *De E apud Delphos* 385e-386a. These were Chilon of Sparta, Thales of Miletus, Solon of Athens, Bias of Priene, and Pittacus of Mytilene. The other two famous Delphic inscriptions - γνῶθι σαυτόν and μηδὲν ἄγαν – are said in Plato's *Protagoras* (343a-b) to have been dedicated by the seven sages.

[52] *De E apud Delphos* 386a-b.

[53] *De E apud Delphos* 386b-d.

Stoic philosopher, defends a philosophical, rather than purely theological, explanation, contending that the E represents εἰ as it is used as a part of logic and dialectic.[54] Eustrophus and Plutarch-as-interlocutor make the case from a numerological standpoint that the E signifies the number five, five being the most important number.[55] Finally, Ammonius, Plutarch's teacher at the Academy, claims that the E represents εἶ, or "you are," epitomizing the god's status as an eternal being.[56] In the process of this discussion, the interlocutors debate the nature of the god and his relationship to the sanctuary. I will first assess the role of the oracle in the dialogue, arguing that Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle as both setting and starting point for an ontological and theological conversation. I will then turn to the portrayal of the oracle, demonstrating how Plutarch uses the dialogue form to present a multi-faceted image of the god and of his oracle.

a. the role of the oracle

In *De E apud Delphos* the oracle serves as the physical setting of the conversation and provides a platform from which to embark on an exercise in ontological inquiry. Nevertheless, the oracle is not merely a convenient tool; the subjects taken up in the dialogue are problems raised by the oracle itself. Plutarch demonstrates that in order to understand the oracle, both how it works and the purpose of the sanctuary, one must first understand the nature of the god, the nature of humanity, and how they relate to each other. Plutarch ties the Delphic oracle to these ontological and theological questions in the

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[54] *De E apud Delphos* 386d-387d.

[55] *De E apud Delphos* 387e-391e.

[56] *De E apud Delphos* 391e-394c. As Ferrari (2010: 48) explains, "derrière chacune des réponses se trouve en effet une vision complexe du monde et du type de savoir qui lui est associé."

opening chapters of *De E apud Delphos,* anticipating the themes of the dialogue by associating the nature of the god with his interactions with humans via the oracle.

Plutarch prepares his readers to expect an ontological discussion of the god as an answer to the meaning of the E from the opening chapters of the dialogue. Following his dedication to Sarapion, Plutarch in his role as narrator begins the work proper with a claim regarding the nature of Apollo and the apparent purpose behind his actions:

> ὁ δ’ οὖν φίλος Ἀπόλλων ἔοικε τὰς μὲν περὶ τὸν βίον ἀπορίας ἰᾶσθαι καὶ διαλύειν θεμιστεύων τοῖς χρωμένοις, τὰς δὲ περὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτὸς ἐνιέναι[57] καὶ προβάλλειν τῷ φύσει φιλοσόφῳ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄρεξιν ἐμποιῶν ἀγωγὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν, ὡς ἄλλοις τε πολλοῖς δῆλόν ἐστι καὶ τῇ περὶ τοῦ εἶ καθιερώσει.[58]
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> And therefore our friend Apollo seems to those consulting the oracle to cure and to solve the difficulties concerning life by delivering oracles, but those difficulties concerning reason he himself seems to instill in and propound to the philosophical soul, producing a desire of the spirit leading toward the truth, as is clear in many other cases, and in the dedication of the E.

This passage illustrates neatly the topic of the dialogue – the inscribed E – and connects its meaning to Apollo’s nature as both a prophet and a philosopher. Although Plutarch-as-narrator here separates the prophetic from the philosophical aspect of Apollo – the former providing oracle-seekers with solutions to the ἀπορίαι of daily life, and the latter encouraging humans who are philosophically inclined (τῷ φύσει φιλοσόφῳ) to investigate ἀπορίαι for themselves – this is not a distinction that is maintained throughout the dialogue.[59] On the contrary, the subsequent discussion of the E that Plutarch names here as

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[57] Obsieger’s (2013: *ad loc.*) defense of ἀνιέναι (F) for ἐνιέναι (XD) is not convincing.

[58] *De E apud Delphos* 384e-f.

[59] Simonetti (2018: 122) argues for two different audiences for each of these activities, with the oracle solving problems for ordinary individuals and presenting problems in the form of riddles to

indicative of the philosophical aspect of the god focuses in nearly half of the explanations proposed on the prophetic powers of the god and the relationship between the god and humans as reflected in these powers.[60] It is also notable that Plutarch's example of Apollo provoking philosophical questions is intimately related to his prophetic work through the location of the inscribed E: the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Here, the physical location of Delphi reflects both aspects of the god; he prophesies through the Pythia, and he inspires humans to critical reflection through monuments present at the Delphic sanctuary. But as the subsequent conversation shows, the spur to critical thinking is not entirely separate from the oracular aspect of Delphi either. As Theon argues, oracular responses themselves can instill curiosity in humans, driving them to further intellectual contemplation. Plutarch-as-narrator's contrast here, emphasized by parallel, contrasting grammatical constructions, is less oppositional than first meets the eye. By opening the work with a claim connecting both prophecy and philosophy to Apollo and the Delphic sanctuary, Plutarch lays the foundations for a discussion based on these two aspects of the god's nature.

Plutarch reinforces this connection between the prophetic and the philosophical aspects of Apollo with Ammonius's words starting the discussion of the E:

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the intellectual elite. The text does not, however, rule out the possibility that these two activities – oracle-seeking and philosophical inquiry – were done by the same people. The emphasis is rather that Apollo provides an extra service to those possessing a philosophical spirit (τῷ φύσει φιλοσόφῳ) in addition to his role as prophet. Additionally, as the interlocutors demonstrate, oracular responses can nudge recipients towards philosophy while also helping humans navigate life's uncertainties.

[60] Obsieger's (2013: 93-94) argument for the separation of the philosophical from the prophetic aspects of Apollo is not supported by the text.

> Ὅτι μὲν γὰρ οὐχ ἧττον ὁ θεὸς φιλόσοφος ἢ μάντις, ἐδόκει πᾶσιν ὀρθῶς… Ἀμμώνιος τίθεσθαι καὶ διδάσκειν… ‘ἐπεὶ δὲ τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν’ ἔφη ‘τὸ ζητεῖν ⟨ἀρχή, τοῦ δὲ ζητεῖν⟩ τὸ θαυμάζειν καὶ ἀπορεῖν, εἰκότως τὰ πολλὰ τῶν περὶ τὸν θεὸν ἔοικεν αἰνίγμασι κατακεκρύφθαι [καὶ] λόγον τινὰ ποθοῦντα διὰ τί καὶ διδασκαλίαν τῆς αἰτίας…[61]
>
> That the god is no less a philosopher than a prophet, Ammonius seemed to all to posit and to teach correctly… ‘and since,’ [Ammonius] said, ‘seeking is ⟨the beginning⟩ of philosophical inquiry, and wonder and being at a loss is ⟨the beginning of seeking,⟩ it seems fitting that many of the things concerning the god are concealed in riddles and are seeking some reason on account of why (they are so) [and] explanation of the cause.

Ammonius, following Plutarch-as-narrator, represents Apollo as possessing a dual nature. The two halves of his nature are not completely separate, however, because the god conceals himself and his actions behind a mask of riddles and peculiar symbols, which include the E and other mysteries surrounding the Delphic sanctuary.[62] With this opening salvo, Ammonius joins the philosophical aspect of the god with the prophetic, arguing that the rituals and symbols surrounding the Delphic oracle are intended to promote philosophical inquiry in humans. The conversation does not merely take place at Delphi but, according to Ammonius, is also *about* Delphi, since the oracular sanctuary is a physical representation of the god whose nature the interlocutors are investigating.

Plutarch underscores the centrality of the Delphic oracle to the god's nature through his presentation and organization of the explanations given by the interlocutors. The physical sanctuary serves as a starting point for a conversation that ripples outwards as the speakers' explanations expand from the local level and the physical location of the E at the

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[61] *De E apud Delphos* 385b, c.

[62] *De E apud Delphos* 385c-d.

sanctuary as seen in Lamprias and Nicander's explanations, to the nature of the god who gives oracles (Theon), the nature of the cosmos (Eustrophus and the young Plutarch), and the nature of the supreme and eternal god at the heart of Being (Ammonius). As the discussion broadens, the oracle itself fades from view while the interlocutors, and Plutarch and Eustrophus in particular, focus on the nature of the god rather than his interaction with humans. Nevertheless, the oracle returns explicitly in the final explanation given by Ammonius, who brings the discussion back to the location of the E and fuses the two primary aspects of the conversation: the nature of the god and the Delphic sanctuary. Ammonius explains the mysterious E as both a greeting and a statement of truth regarding the god. The E, meaning "You are" ('εἶ'), stands in apposition to the Delphic admonition "Know yourself" ('γνῶθι σαυτόν').[63] As such, the E represents a dialogue between humans and the god, in the same way that the oracle itself is a portal through which humans can communicate with the divine.

The arguments put forward demonstrate in their totality how interconnected the Delphic sanctuary is with the nature of the god. Even a seemingly simple question – why an E? – leads directly to ontological questioning: the E must relate to the god as it is carved onto his temple, so how is it a reflection of Apollo? The statements of Plutarch-as-narrator and Ammonius at the opening of the work, those of the other interlocutors in the middle, and the final explanation given by Ammonius all serve to emphasize the role of the oracle in understanding Apollo. Delphi, as the god's sanctuary, is an extension of both aspects of the god.

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[63] *De E apud Delphos* 392a.

b. the portrayal of the oracle

Turning to the portrayal of the oracle, two distinct images emerge from the dialogue. On the one hand, the oracle provides guidance and clarity to humans, while on the other, it challenges humans, teaching them to use reason and logic. Rather than rejecting one explanation at the expense of the other, Plutarch portrays the two opposing images of the oracle as reflecting different facets of the god's nature, the combination of which results in a more complex and nuanced understanding of the god.[64] This two-fold image of the god results in diverging portrayals of the oracle's purpose, the consultants of the oracle, and the oracular responses. Consequently, my treatment of these questions will be divided into two main sections, each discussing how the oracle is portrayed by the interlocutors who promote that image of the god.

Plutarch-as-narrator and Nicander both describe the oracle as providing guidance and clarity to humans, separating the philosophical aspect of the god from his prophetic activities. The resulting portrayal of the oracle is one of simplicity and sincerity, with consultants asking direct questions and receiving clear answers. In his opening statement, discussed above, declaring that the oracle solves the ἀπορίαι of human life, Plutarch-as-narrator presents the oracle as intended to issue clear guidance in areas of human uncertainty.[65] Plutarch-as-narrator emphasizes the simplicity of the oracle in this portrayal by juxtaposing it with the complexity of the philosophical aspect of Apollo. The god, the

[64] Thum (2013). See also Simonetti (2017) 129: "These diverse depictions, if taken all together, constitute a 'collective effort' to define the sublime god Apollo, with the highest possible level of accuracy."

[65] *De E apud Delphos* 384e-f.

narrator claims, solves problems via the oracle, but poses them to those who are philosophically inclined in their φύσις.[66]

Nicander echoes Plutarch-as-narrator's description of the oracle's purpose in his explanation for the E. As a seer, Nicander argues, Apollo answers questions to provide guidance, and as a god he listens to people's prayers.[67] Nicander rejects explicitly a philosophical interpretation of the E as a symbol, maintaining that it stands for the conditional particle εἰ, 'if,' representing the form used for questions directed to the oracle:

> ἔστι γάρ… σχῆμα καὶ μορφὴ τῆς πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐντεύξεως καὶ τάξιν ἡγεμονικὴν ἐν τοῖς ἐρωτήμασιν ἔχει τῶν χρωμένων ἑκάστοτε διαπυνθανομένων, εἰ νικήσουσιν, εἰ γαμήσουσιν, εἰ συμφέρει πλεῖν, εἰ γεωργεῖν, εἰ ἀποδημεῖν.[68]
>
> For it is the figure and the form of the petition to the god and holds the predominant position on each occasion in the questions of those consulting the oracle, if they shall win, if they shall marry, if it is beneficial to sail, if they should farm, if they should travel abroad.

The examples Nicander lists concern realities of daily life, either for individuals or for states and leaders. This aligns closely with how Plutarch-as-narrator frames the role of the oracle, providing solutions to the ἀπορίαι of everyday life (περὶ τὸν βίον).[69] Although Plutarch-as-narrator does argue for a philosophical reading of the E, both figures emphasize the simplicity of the oracle itself; its purpose is to bring clarity and answer questions, not to pose questions to humans.

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[66] On Plutarch's use of the term φύσις in the dialogue, see Wéry (2006).

[67] *De E apud Delphos* 386c, Simonetti (2017) 134-135

[68] *De E apud Delphos* 386b-c.

[69] *De E apud Delphos* 384e.

The arguments of Ammonius and Theon directly contradict the presentation of the oracle seen in Plutarch-as-narrator's and Nicander's accounts. According to these interlocutors, the god's purpose is to challenge humans, teaching them to use reason and logic, which he accomplishes through the oracle. In their telling, the oracle stimulates the minds of the Greeks, demanding careful thought to understand the god's meaning, which the god has obscured deliberately.

Ammonius's claim in his opening remarks that the god is as much a philosopher as a prophet, making it thus fitting that many things concerning the god appear to be concealed in riddles (αἰνίγμασι), presents the god as requiring humans to untangle the riddles to understand the meaning behind his cult and the rituals associated with it.[70] Indeed, in Ammonius's view the god explicitly encourages the exact type of discussion the interlocutors are currently engaged in through symbols such as the E.[71] Although Ammonius's discussion in this part of the treatise is focused on physical symbols and rituals, rather than the oracular words themselves, his emphasis on the god's active presence in the oracular sanctuary and on the god's philosophical agenda mark a contrast between the portrayals of Nicander and Plutarch-as-interlocutor and that of Ammonius. While Plutarch-as-interlocutor emphasizes the philosophical aspect of the god, he draws a contrast between his oracular and his philosophical roles that is not present in Ammonius's speech. For Ammonius, the god's philosophical spirit is present throughout all aspects of

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[70] *De E apud Delphos* 385b-c. Boulet (2008: 161-162) argues that Ammonius's version of Apollo more extreme than is found elsewhere in Plutarch's works, and so cannot be assumed *ipso facto* to represent Plutarch's personal ideology: "one cannot conclude that the pupil shared entirely the teacher's view: in speaking of the supreme god in his other works, Plutarch often sets him *in* time rather than *out* of time."

[71] *De E apud Delphos* 385d.

the Delphic sanctuary, providing food for thought to those who are intelligent enough to perceive it.

Theon promotes Ammonius's concept of a philosophical Apollo further in his rejoinder to Nicander's interpretation of the E. While Ammonius does not call the oracular responses evidence of the god's philosophical aspect, Theon does so directly, exclaiming: "That the god is the most skilled in dialectic (διαλεκτικώτατος), the majority of his oracles make clear."[72] Theon's use of the adjective διαλεκτικός is polemical in light of Nicander's earlier speech. Nicander had claimed that Apollo explicitly rejected those who are διαλεκτικός, and that the conditional particle εἰ used in the typical mode of soliciting the advice of the god did not represent a true condition. Instead, the god interprets the conditional statement as reality (ὡς πράγματα). Theon rejects this argument explicitly, arguing that logic need not, and indeed should not, be removed from the E. As a prophet, Apollo is capable of using logic to reason what would happen in the future should events in the present be undertaken.[73] With this argument, Theon fuses the philosophical with the mantic activities of the god. Apollo's prophetic powers are inseparable from his dialectical skills, since the oracles represent at their core the results of logic.

Theon proves his argument as to the διαλεκτικός nature of the god with the example of the altar at Delos. When the Delians approached the oracle seeking advice, the god told them to double the size of their altar not as a physical test, but to encourage the Greeks to

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[72] *De E apud Delphos* 386e: διαλεκτικώτατος ὁ θεός ἐστιν, οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν χρησμῶν δηλοῦσιν.

[73] Boulet (2008: 161) claims that Plutarch clearly prefers Theon's argument to Nicander's. While this is possible, it would be a mistake, I believe, to discount Nicander's view entirely. The parallels between Nicander's view of the oracle and that of Plutarch-as-narrator suggest that the priest's interpretation should not be dismissed out of hand.

better themselves through education, using logic to work out the solution.[74] In the same way, "the god, when he produces ambiguous oracles (χρησμοὺς ἀμφιβόλους), is promoting and recommending dialectic (διαλεκτική) as necessary for those intending to understand him correctly."[75] Theon presents philosophy, and specifically dialectic argumentation, as necessary for understanding the god. By tying mastery of dialectic to understanding the god and his oracles, Theon connects philosophical thought with the oracle. The oracular responses are not merely advice to assist humans with everyday concerns, but also a means through which the god satisfies his philosophical goals, educating and shaping humans to engage in dialectic and logical reasoning.[76]

The presentation of Apollo and his oracle that emerges from the speeches of Theon and Ammonius presents the god as being actively involved in the sanctuary. Underlying both Theon's and Ammonius's claims is the assumption that Apollo is directly responsible for both the mysteries of the god's cult practice at Delphi and the words of the oracular responses. If the E does not come from the god, then it cannot represent the god's philosophical agenda on Earth. Likewise, if the god is not responsible for the oracular responses, and they are instead the words of the human Pythia, then Theon's argument as to the purpose of ambiguous oracles is compromised.

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[74] Plutarch also discusses this oracle to the Delians in *De genio Socratis* 579a-b and *Quaestiones convivales* 718e-f. In these contexts also the oracle is cited by the interlocutor to prove that the god uses the Delphic oracle to encourage the Greeks to educate themselves.

[75] *De E apud Delphos* 386e-f: οὕτως ἄρα χρησμοὺς ἀμφιβόλους ἐκφέρων ὁ θεὸς αὔξει καὶ συνίστησι διαλεκτικὴν ὡς ἀναγκαίαν τοῖς μέλλουσιν ὀρθῶς αὐτοῦ συνήσειν.

[76] Theon repeats this thought in the conclusion of his speech (387c), comparing Apollo's encouragement of humans to play music well because of his love of music, to his encouragement of humans to engage in philosophical discourse (τοῦ λόγου τὸ μέρος… ᾧ μάλιστα καὶ πλείστῳ προσχρωμένους ὁρᾷ τοὺς φιλοσόφους) because of his love of dialectic (διαλεκτικῆς φιλίᾳ).

In *De E apud Delphos* Plutarch presents the oracle as intimately connected to Apollo's nature. Two views, however, emerge from the dialogue as to the specifics of this nature. From one perspective, the oracle is a pure reflection of the oracular powers of the god. The god gives oracles to help people navigate life and make otherwise difficult decisions. Alternatively, as Theon and Ammonius describe him, the god is at his core philosophical, and in their view this philosophical nature permeates every aspect of his being and his cult at Delphi, including both the oracular sanctuary and the oracle itself. In this view, oracles can be deliberately ambiguous for the express purpose of encouraging humans to engage in logic. Nevertheless, for these four interlocutors the oracle is seen as a boon to humans; it is in what way that they differ.

iii. *De Pythiae oraculis*

In *De Pythiae oraculis*, Plutarch turns to the question of the oracle itself and the role the Pythia plays in the divinatory process. As with *De E apud Delphos*, the philosophical discussion that comprises the core of the dialogue is inset into a framing narrative. A certain Philinus, a friend of Plutarch, has just arrived and regales Basilocles, an otherwise unknown Delphian, with an account of a conversation in which he took part only moments before while on a tour of Delphi with a visitor to the sanctuary named Diogenianus, the Stoic philosopher-poet Sarapion, the Epicurean mathematician Boethus, and Plutarch's friend Theon.[77] The bulk of the conversation concerns the quality of the verse oracles and

[77] The exact identity of this Philinus is not known for certain. Plutarch refers to him elsewhere as Φιλῖνος ὁ ἡμέτερος (*Quaestiones convivales* 727b) and Φιλῖνος ὁ βέλτιστος (*De sollertia animalium* 976b), implying he was a friend. Jones (1970: 230-233) identifies him as Flavius Philinus of Thespiae, who is also attested through the epigraphic record. On the philosophical allegiances of Sarapion and Boethus, see Babut (1969) 246, Bowersock (1969) 67-68, and Boulogne (2003) 22.

why the oracle no longer speaks in verse;[78] the presence and purpose of ambiguity in oracular responses; the relationship between the Pythia and the god; and the source of the Pythia's inspiration. Many answers are proposed to each of these questions, but the interlocutors do not come to a clear agreement, nor does Plutarch tell his readers directly which views they themselves ought to adopt. Instead, the Stoic Sarapion and the Epicurean Boethus each argue from the perspective of the particular philosophical school with which they are identified by the narrator, and Theon argues for a mixture of the views promoted by the other interlocutors.[79] Unlike *De E apud Delphos*, *De Pythiae Oraculis* is not a series of mutually exclusive explanations, but a group discussion that builds on the theories and assumptions articulated previously, leading in a more or less uniform direction. This does not mean that all of the conclusions reached are views shared by Plutarch. The dialogue structure, and the distancing achieved by the doubled level of narration – it is a dialogue within a dialogue – still separate the author from the contents, allowing Plutarch to express ideas that he need not endorse.

The dialogue opens, however, not with a discussion of the oracle, but with the observation by Diogenianus that the bronze statues at Delphi have an unusual blue patina. It is only after this matter is discussed thoroughly, and different theories are proposed to explain the phenomenon, that the quality of the oracular responses is introduced. This seemingly irrelevant introduction, while it does not contribute substantively to the

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[78] The Greek title of the work as recorded in the Lamprias catalogue – Περὶ τοῦ μὴ χρᾶν ἔμμετρα νῦν τὴν Πυθίαν ("Concerning the Pythia no longer prophesying in verse") – makes clear the role this question plays in the dialogue.

[79] Simonetti (2017: 17-28), expanding upon Babut (1992: 202-215), argues that the dialogue is structured around confrontation between extremes, with Plutarch identifying with the moderate Theon.

conversation that follows, demonstrates how philosophical inquiry is begun and how to go about it properly.[80] A single observation (that the statues have a unique patina), can lead to a broader discussion of larger phenomena (the physical properties of rust, oil, and air). This formula follows the pattern laid out by Ammonius in *De E apud Delphos*, that the beginning of philosophy is wonder (θαυμάζειν) and being at a loss (ἀπορεῖν). It is these forces that drive the individual to seek answers.[81] Plutarch provides an example in miniature of this behavior with the opening salvo in *De Pythiae oraculis* regarding the unique blue patina at Delphi. The subsequent conversation on the nature of the oracular responses will follow this same pattern of ἀπορία, ζήτησις, and ultimately φιλοσοφία.

a. the role of the oracle

In *De Pythiae oraculis*, the oracle serves as a starting point for a much deeper and broader ontological discussion of the divine. In the process, Plutarch addresses accusations made against the oracle and provides a number of defenses against these charges. As with *De E apud Delphos*, the discussion starts with a simple question – why are the verse oracles such bad poetry?[82] – and quickly spirals outward to include a much broader range of topics,

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[80] Pouilloux (1965) argues that the discussion of the patina parallels the conversation over the Pythia's inspiration, with the interaction between the bronze and the Delphic air together producing a unique creation (the unusual patina), just as the Pythia together with the prophetic *pneuma* produces the oracular responses. Pouilloux's interpretation and my own are not mutually exclusive, since there is no reason that Plutarch could not be anticipating here the subsequent discussions in both their form, as I argue, and their content, in Pouilloux's interpretation. In support of Pouilloux's reading see also Babut (1992) 213-215 and Simonetti (2017) 29-30.

[81] *De E apud Delphos* 385c. On aporia and aporetic philosophy in Plutarch's thought, see Dillon (2018). Opsomer (1998: 12), expanding upon Krämer (1971: 52), argues that Plutarch, as a New Academic philosopher, engages in a philosophy that is as much zetetic as it is aporetic, pursuing "a continuing and open-minded *search* (ζήτησις) *for truth*."

[82] *De Pythiae oraculis* 396d: "…but we see that most oracles are full of mistakes and ineptitude in both their verses and their expressions (τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς τῶν χρησμῶν ὁρῶμεν καὶ τοῖς μέτροις καὶ

which are nevertheless related to the original question. The conversation that ensues addresses why the oracle changed to giving predominantly prose oracles instead of verse,[83] why oracular responses are sometimes vague,[84] the connection between Apollo and the Pythia,[85] and the respective natures of the god and humans.[86] In answering these questions, the interlocutors defend the prophetic prowess of the oracle as well as the language and the use of vagueness or ambiguity in oracular responses. I will first identify the attacks on the oracle singled out by Plutarch for comment in the dialogue, and subsequently how the dialogue serves to defend the oracle against these charges.

The first charge made against the oracle concerns the quality of the oracular responses. The visitor Diogenianus expresses his confusion at the apparent low-quality (φαυλότητα) and cheapness (εὐτέλεια) of the god's oracular verses.[87] The god, as the leader of the Muses, should produce oracles of the utmost lyrical beauty, and yet the oracular responses leave much to be desired.[88] Plutarch makes it clear that this belief is not unique to Diogenianus through Sarapion's attempts to argue in support of the god, and Boethus's withering critique of Sarapion's efforts.[89] To salvage the god, the pious Sarapion suggests changing the definition of what good poetry is to fit the Pythia's verses, while Boethus

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τοῖς ὀνόμασι πλημμελείας καὶ φαυλότητος ἀναπεπλησμένους). See also below. Here and elsewhere for *De Pythiae oraculis* I follow the text of Schröder (1990).

[83] *De Pythiae oraculis* 402e-404b, 406f-407a, 407f-408b.

[84] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407d-408b.

[85] *De Pythiae oraculis* 404b-405d.

[86] *De Pythiae oraculis* 398a-c, 404c-407f, 409c-c.

[87] *De Pythiae oraculis* 396c: "After some verse oracle was read aloud… Diogenianus said that many times he had been amazed at the words in which the oracles are spoken, at their poor quality and cheapness" (χρησμοῦ δέ τινος ἐμμέτρου λεχθέντο… πολλάκις ἔφη θαυμάσαι τῶν ἐπῶν ὁ Διογενιανός, ἐν οἷς οἱ χρησμοὶ λέγονται, τὴν φαυλότητα καὶ τὴν εὐτέλειαν).

[88] *De Pythiae oraculis* 396c-d.

[89] *De Pythiae oraculis* 398f-399e.

scorns Sarapion for ignoring his own sense in the matter. The back-and-forth between the Epicurean and the Stoic emphasizes their philosophical positions, and subtly reinforces Diogenianus's initial observation as well. That Diogenianus has touched a nerve, raising a real critique of the oracle that the interlocutors interpret according to their philosophical allegiances is, I believe, clear from the intensity of the discussion that follows, and the persistence with which the interlocutors pursue satisfactory answers. Plutarch ultimately deflects this criticism as beside the point, as is clear from the structure of the remainder of the dialogue, and how this section of the conversation is concluded. Theon interrupts Sarapion's and Boethus's bickering to challenge the premise of the question over which they were arguing: the literary quality of the oracular responses does not matter because the phrasing is not the handiwork of the god, but of the Pythia. It is notable that this question of quality never resurfaces after this point. Even Diogenianus changes his original question from the quality of the oracular responses to "why has the oracle ceased using verse?"[90]

The second and most serious charge against the oracle takes the form of questioning its prophetic capabilities. Boethus scorns *manteis* as being simply excellent at guessing, claiming that "the best *mantis* is the one who guesses well" (ὁ μὲν 'εἰκάζων καλῶς' ὂν 'ἄριστον μάντιν'), and ridicules prophecies for being sweeping statements that are too vague to be proven incorrect.[91] As evidence that Boethus is not alone in his doubt,

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[90] *De Pythiae oraculis* 397d: πῶς πέπαυται τὸ μαντεῖον ἔπεσι [καὶ λόγοις] χρώμενον. While the general meaning of the passage is clear, the text appears to be corrupt. For a discussion of the problems, as well as the various solutions proposed, see Schröder (1990) 158-159.

[91] *De Pythiae oraculis* 399a. This statement refers to a well-known fragment of Euripides, which is quoted in full by Lamprias in *De defectu oraculorum* 432c: μάντις δ' ἄριστος ὅστις εἰκάζει καλῶς. On the fragment, see Kannicht (2004) §973 and Schröder (1990) 239. Although Boethus attacks by name the Delphic Sibyl and Bacis, that his attack has wider purchase is made evident by Sarapion's response in which he defends divination through assessment of two specific oracles, including the oracle regarding Spartan kingship (Parke-Wormell §112, Fontenrose Q163). Plutarch quotes this oracle in two other passages: *Agesilaus* 3 and *Lysander* 22. While Plutarch states in both

Diogenianus's claim that people have lost confidence in the Delphic oracle is not dismissed by the others, but rather becomes the focus of the subsequent discussion.[92] None of the interlocutors other than Boethus claim that the oracle has lost – or never had – prophetic abilities, but in their eagerness to defend the oracle and the god they acknowledge this belief, and indicate that it was widespread. Nevertheless, Plutarch does not grant an anti-oracle perspective a fair hearing in the dialogue. Not only do all of the interlocutors save for Boethus argue in defense of the oracle, but the setting itself of the dialogue supports its oracular capabilities.[93] As the interlocutors converse, they are walking past the many treasures given to Delphi over the centuries. The catalogues of statues and various dedications serve both as a source for discussion of how rulers have interacted with the oracle and as support for the oracle's power. Simply put, why would the oracle have accrued so many riches if it was not prophetic? Daniel Babut has demonstrated clearly that the setting of the dialogue is designed to dictate the progression of the topics of conversation, with the monuments mentioned on the group's *periegesis* chosen specifically

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passages that it was Diopeithes who announced the oracle to the Spartans in connection with Agesilaus's eligibility to be king of Sparta, he does not give a clear provenance for the oracle in either. Although Plutarch nowhere names this oracle as Delphic, it is clearly marked as such by Xenophon (*Hellenica* 3.3.3) and Pausanias (3.8.9), the latter of whom records the text of the oracle with only slight variation from the versions found in Plutarch. Schröder (1990: 253) argues from this that it is clear that Plutarch did not consider the oracle to be Delphic, since if he did, he would have noted it in at least one of these three passages. Nevertheless, regardless of whether Plutarch considered these specific oracles Delphic, the phrasing of Boethus's complaint, and his use of the plurals Σίβυλλαι and Βάκιδες, is inclusive rather than exclusive. It is not only the Delphic Sibyl and Bacis, but any oracles given whose phrasing requires interpretation from the recipient, or whose chronological scope is not immediately clear. Parke-Wormell's (1956: §357) assertation that the subsequent oracle regarding Thera must be Delphic because of its inclusion in a Delphic dialogue is unsupported by the context.

[92] *De Pythiae oraculis* 402b.

[93] For the interlocutors' defense of the oracle see, for example, 398b-c (Philinus), 398d-e (Diogenianus), 399b-e (Sarapion), and 408d-409d (Theon).

to trigger the particular philosophical discussion that ensues.[94] Where Babut argues that the setting only prompts discussions, however, I would add that Plutarch uses the physical setting of Delphi both to start and to comment on the discussions at hand. As I will demonstrate, the Delphic sanctuary acts as a character and a participant in the conversation, promoting some, and providing evidence against other, arguments made by the human interlocutors.

The timing of Plutarch's descriptions of the Delphic dedications supports this reading. Immediately after Sarapion's defense of the oracle in light of Boethus's accusations against it, Plutarch returns to his narration of the *periegesis,* informing the readers of the interlocutors' surroundings: the treasure-house of the Corinthians, as well as that of the Acanthians and of Brasidas, and numerous other statues and dedications. The interlocutors themselves emphasize the dedications present at the sanctuary, as when Theon calls attention to the plethora of riches surrounding the group, noting the quantity and the value of the offerings and tithes given to the god.[95] Although Theon's catalogue is offered as a rebuke to the Greeks for attempting to honor the god with spoils of war taken from other Greeks,[96] it does not lessen the impact of the artifacts' presence in proving Sarapion's argument regarding the prophetic powers of the oracle. To reinforce this point, near the end of the dialogue Theon calls on his companions to observe the sheer volume of dedications and monuments erected at Delphi:

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[94] Babut (1992), especially 202-215.

[95] *De Pythiae oraculis* 401c-d.

[96] *De Pythiae oraculis* 401c: "seeing the god surrounded by offerings and tithes from slaughters and wars and pillaging, and his temple full of spoils and plunder from the Greeks" (φόνων δὲ καὶ πολέμων καὶ λεηλασιῶν ἀπαρχαῖς καὶ δεκάταις κύκλῳ περιεχόμενον τὸν θεὸν ὁρῶν καὶ τὸν νεὼν σκύλων Ἑλληνικῶν ἀνάπλεων καὶ λαφύρων). For Plutarch's attitude towards internal Greek conflict, see also Swain (1996) 154-156.

> ἡ δὲ τῆς Πυθίας διάλεκτος, ὥσπερ οἱ μαθηματικοὶ γραμμὴν εὐθεῖαν καλοῦσι τὴν ἐλαχίστην τῶν τὰ αὐτὰ πέρατ' ἐχουσῶν, οὕτως οὐ ποιοῦσα καμπὴν οὐδὲ κύκλον οὐδὲ διπλόην οὐδ' ἀμφιβολίαν ἀλλ' εὐθεῖα πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν οὖσα πρὸς δὲ πίστιν ἐπισφαλὴς καὶ ὑπεύθυνος οὐδένα καθ' αὑτῆς ἔλεγχον ἄχρι νῦν παραδέδωκεν, ἀναθημάτων δὲ καὶ δώρων ἐμπέπληκε βαρβαρικῶν καὶ Ἑλληνικῶν τὸ χρηστήριον, οἰκοδομημάτων δὲ ⟨καὶ νῦν κατακοσμεῖ⟩ κάλλεσι καὶ κατασκευαῖς Ἀμφικτυονικαῖς.[97]
>
> Just as mathematicians call straight the shortest line between two points, so also the discourse of the Pythia does not make any bend or curve or doubling back or ambiguity, but is straight with regard to the truth; but [her discourse] is unstable and scrutinized with regard to the trust [placed in it] although up to the present day there is no evidence against it, and it has filled the oracular sanctuary with votive offerings and gifts from both barbarians and Greeks, and ⟨even now adorns⟩ the oracular sanctuary with beautiful buildings furnished by the Amphictyonic Council.

The decorated treasuries and the offerings they contain – or used to contain – stand as proof, Theon argues, of the longstanding prophetic power of the oracle. In the same breath, Theon both acknowledges that the oracle's veracity has been doubted and denounces emphatically the validity of this perspective. Why would so many treasures have been offered by Greeks and non-Greeks alike if the Pythia were not prophetic? Even the recent revival of the sanctuary serves as direct evidence of the god's continued presence at the sanctuary, for if Apollo were not present, there would be no logical reason for the recent

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[97] *De Pythiae oraculis* 408f-409a. Schröder's conjecture of καὶ νῦν κατακοσμεῖ is intriguing. For his reasoning, see Schröder (1990) 435-438. If correct, it would create a contrast between the offerings given over the centuries and what can currently be seen by visitors to the sanctuary. This contrast is particularly poignant in light of the famous seizures of Delphic treasure, most notably by Sulla and Nero, reminding the audience that the sanctuary used to house far more gifts than the current state attests.

revival and restoration of the sanctuary.[98] These reminders of the interlocutors' physical surroundings given both by the narrator and by Theon transform the oracle from merely the setting and subject of the dialogue into a participant in the conversation, supplying evidence at times supporting, other times rejecting, claims made by the interlocutors and guiding the progression of the arguments.

In addition to using the physical sanctuary to support his portrayal of the god, Plutarch also employs oracle stories in the dialogue as evidence both proving the prophetic powers of the god and demonstrating the continued power of the oracle and of the god at Delphi. Theon, in his lengthy final rejoinder to his companions, recites a long list of past oracles demonstrating the presence of prose oracles throughout Greek history, as well as the existence of verse oracles from his own day.[99] Although specifically showing the use of prose, the clear outcomes of all the oracles mentioned and the placement of the list within Theon's speech – sandwiched between Sarapion and Philinus's declarations of support for the oracle and Theon's own emphasis on the importance of holding correct opinions concerning the god – emphasizes the prophetic qualities of the oracle in the face of criticism such as Boethus's and the general disregard and distrust mentioned by Diogenianus. As with the oracles introduced by Sarapion, the oracles Theon names, while not always ending up well for the recipients, never failed to come true and also serve as evidence of the persistence of the oracle up until his own day.

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[98] *De Pythiae oraculis* 409c: "But it is not possible that so great and of such a sort a change could happen in so little time through human diligence, unless the god is present here and divinely inspiring the oracle" (ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἔστιν [ἄλλως ὅτι] τηλικαύτην καὶ τοσαύτην μεταβολὴν ἐν ὀλίγῳ χρόνῳ γενέσθαι δι᾽ ἀνθρωπίνης ἐπιμελείας, μὴ θεοῦ παρόντος ἐνταῦθα καὶ συνεπιθειάζοντος τὸ χρηστήριον). On the meaning of συνεπιθειάζω, see Schröder (1990) 447.

[99] *De Pythiae oraculis* 403b-404b.

Far from brushing aside the question of the oracle's prophetic powers as Andreas Bendlin has suggested, Plutarch rather highlights this issue, placing the question of its prophetic ability at the forefront of the conversation while simultaneously reinforcing the oracle's prophetic capability throughout the dialogue.[100] Plutarch has shaped the dialogue in such a way that it not only addresses key questions regarding the workings of the oracle but also serves as a robust defense of the oracle's power and relevance. The shared opinions of all of the interlocutors except for Boethus, the physical setting, and the oracle stories given as examples all prove that the Delphic oracle not only was prophetic, but also that it still retains this power in Plutarch's own day. While the oracle may have undergone changes, the dialogue as a whole promotes the oracle's continuity. This continuity extends to the views one should hold of the oracle. Plutarch demonstrates through the speeches of Sarapion and Philinus the need to investigate and seek to understand the oracle, but to do so in a way that does not challenge or undermine the god's divinity or prophetic powers.[101] Theon returns to this point later in the dialogue, arguing that if one holds "correct and pure opinions concerning the god" (ὀρθὰς καὶ καθαρὰς περὶ τοῦ θεοῦ δόξας), then it is possible to reach conclusions regarding the god and the oracle that run contrary neither to reason nor to religious scruples.[102]

While in *De E apud Delphos* the oracle serves as a conversation-starter, in *De Pythiae Oraculis* the oracle is at the center of the discussion, serving both as the instigator

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[100] Bendlin (2011) 198.

[101] *De Pythiae oraculis* 402e-403a. Bendlin's (2011: 201-204) view that the interlocutors are advocating against traditional religious ideology is not supported by the text. Rather, Sarapion argues that their endeavor is in support of traditional religion (402e: πάτριον… πίστιν), seeking philosophical explanations for divine phenomena.

[102] *De Pythiae oraculis* 404b.

of conversation and the primary subject of discourse. Plutarch presents the oracular sanctuary itself as a teacher, with Delphic imagery promoting philosophical inquiry as well as guiding the interlocutors towards correct solutions. Furthermore, this discourse allows Plutarch to address accusations against, or rather misconceptions concerning, the oracle and through the periegetic structure of the dialogue and the anecdotes included therein to deflect these charges and defend the validity and the sanctity of the oracular sanctuary.

b. the portrayal of the oracle

In what follows, I will address the portrayal of the oracle in the dialogue as seen in the purpose ascribed to it by the interlocutors, who is consulting the oracle and for what reasons, the role of ambiguity in oracular responses, and the relationship between the Pythia and the god. In so doing, I will present the arguments made by individual speakers (and Theon in particular because of his outsized role in the dialogue), as well as those that appear to have the support of the interlocutors as a group.

the purpose of the oracle

The purpose of the oracle, according to the interlocutors, is to reveal divine truth to humans. While Diogenianus, Sarapion, and Philinus all attest to the veracity of the oracle, as I have discussed above, Theon goes further in his explication of ambiguous oracles, claiming that "the god does not wish for the truth to be concealed."[103] The oracle *must* speak the truth, even if the Pythia chooses to do so in ambiguous language. Even Boethus acknowledges implicitly the oracle's reputation for truthful utterance, although he questions the divine

[103] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407e: ἀφανίζειν μὲν οὐ θέλει τὸ ἀληθές.

source for the Pythia's inspiration in his claims that oracles hedge their bets, issuing pronouncements so vague as always to be correct.[104] While Boethus undermines the prophetic abilities of the oracle, his accusations imply the necessary veracity of the oracle while mocking the institution nonetheless. This is why it is so critical for the interlocutors to ask why there has been a change in how oracular responses given. Theon's explanation, as I will demonstrate below, allows for the oracle's underlying purpose to remain the same, while its interactions with humans have altered to meet the current needs and abilities of the people.

oracle-seekers and queries

As regards oracle-seekers and the answers they receive, a key assumption behind the conversation of the interlocutors is rooted in change: the style of oracular responses has changed, and the interlocutors seek answers for why this is so. Nevertheless, this premise is not accepted without opposition. Theon opens his lengthy speech with evidence challenging the validity of Diogenianus's question, arguing that the oracle gave prose responses in the past, and gives verse oracles in their own day. Theon proves this continuity through a series of examples of oracle-stories.[105] These oracle-stories in turn, however, emphasize a crucial difference between the past and the present that becomes the focus of

[104] *De Pythiae oraculis* 398f: "what is there that is extraordinary or unexpected concerning either land or sea, cities or men, which someone could prophesy and not find it happen? Though this is hardly prophesying, but telling, or rather throwing and scattering words without substance into the infinite; which things chance often finds wandering about and happens to coincide with fortuitously" (τί δ' ἔστι τῶν ἀτόπων καὶ ἀπροσδοκήτων περὶ γῆν ἢ θάλατταν ἢ πόλεις ἢ ἄνδρας, ὅ τις ἂν προειπὼν οὐ τύχοι γενομένου; καίτοι τοῦτό γε σχεδὸν οὐδὲ προειπεῖν ἔστιν ἀλλ' εἰπεῖν, μᾶλλον δὲ ῥῖψαι καὶ διασπεῖραι λόγους οὐκ ἔχοντας ἀρχὴν εἰς τὸ ἄπειρον· οἷς πλανωμένοις ἀπήντησε πολλάκις ἡ τύχη καὶ συνέπεσεν αὐτομάτως).

[105] *De Pythiae oraculis* 403b-404a.

Theon's subsequent comments. While it is not true, according to Theon, that the oracle has switched from only verse to only prose, there is a marked difference in the degree of ambiguity in oracular responses, which Theon correlates with a change in the status of oracle-seekers and the matters concerning which they are seeking answers. Theon's explanation is primarily political in nature: previously, the oracle was sought out by kings and tyrants and by states seeking guidance in major political affairs; now, the oracle answers petty, personal queries for which answers in such elevated language would be inappropriate and unnecessary.

All of Theon's oracle stories from the distant past involve states or important leaders as petitioners: the Spartans and the Athenians seeking advice in military matters, or whether to allow an exile to return; tyrants querying the god on matters of succession (Deinomenes of Sicily) or their personal safety (Procles of Epidaurus); Lycurgus receiving laws to reorder the Spartan state.[106] Even personal questions, as with Procles, when coming from a ruler have broader consequences than the small, petty questions of common folk. These past examples stand in stark contrast to the lone oracle he cites from his own day: the young and foolish priest from Phocis who sought the god's assistance with removal of miasma.[107] The young priest's request for expiation is not unusual in the history of the oracle, but its juxtaposition with the other oracles named by Theon reinforces his

[106] It is curious that in all the oracle stories Theon tells, with the exception of the Spartan rhetra, the oracle foresees the future, but does not necessarily assist the petitioners in their decision-making. Either the oracle was misunderstood or not heeded, as in the case of the Athenians, or it predicted a doom that was seemingly unavoidable, as with Deinomenes of Sicily and Procles of Epidaurus.

[107] *De Pythiae oraculis* 404a. On this oracular response, and its curious use of iambic meter, see Parke (1945) 61 and Schröder (1990) 332-333.

description of a contrast between the past and the present in who is consulting the oracle. Because of the centrality of the passage to this topic, I quote it in its entirety:

> τὰ δὲ νῦν πράγματα καθεστῶτα, περὶ ὧν ἐρωτῶσι τὸν θεόν, ἀγαπῶ μὲν ἔγωγε καὶ ἀσπάζομαι· πολλὴ γὰρ εἰρήνη καὶ ἡσυχία, πέπαυται δὲ πόλεμος, καὶ πλάναι καὶ στάσεις οὐκ εἰσὶν οὐδὲ τυραννίδες, οὐδ' ἄλλα νοσήματα καὶ κακὰ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ὥσπερ πολυφαρμάκων δυνάμεων χρῄζοντα καὶ περιττῶν. ὅπου δὲ ποικίλον οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἀπόρρητον οὐδὲ δεινόν, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ πράγμασι μικροῖς καὶ δημοτικοῖς ἐρωτήσεις οἷον ἐν σχολῇ προτάσεις "εἰ γαμητέον" "εἰ πλευστέον" "εἰ δανειστέον," τὰ δὲ μέγιστα πόλεων μαντεύματα φορᾶς καρπῶν πέρι καὶ βοτῶν ἐπιγονῆς καὶ σωμάτων ὑγείας, ἐνταῦθα περιβάλλειν μέτρα καὶ πλάττειν περιφράσεις καὶ γλώσσας ἐπάγειν πύσμασιν ἁπλῆς καὶ συντόμου δεομένοις ἀποκρίσεως, ἔργον ἐστὶ φιλοτίμου σοφιστοῦ καλλωπίζοντος ἐπὶ δόξῃ χρηστήριον·[108]
>
> I, for my part, am well pleased with and welcome the existing state of affairs, regarding which people ask the god. For there is much peace and quiet, war has ceased, there are no migrations or civil strifes nor tyrannies, nor other illnesses and evils in Greece needing powerful and extraordinary cures, as if compounded from many drugs.[109] But wherever there is nothing complicated or secret or terrible, but questions concerning small and ordinary affairs such as questions proposed in school – 'if one ought to marry,' 'if one ought to sail,' 'if one ought to lend money' – and the most important oracles of the cities are concerning the yields of crops and the growth of flocks and health, to wrap such things in meter and to employ periphrases and to introduce unusual words to questions deserving simple and short answers, is a deed worthy of an ambitious sophist showing off to gain honor.

[108] *De Pythiae oraculis* 408b-c.

[109] Schröder (1990: 419) demonstrates that these categories (migrations, *stasis*, tyranny) align with oracle-stories told by Theon earlier in his speech.

Theon ties his explanation for the change in oracular responses to the *pax Romana*: Greece is peaceful both socially and politically, oracle-seekers have changed with the times, and the Pythia's responses merely reflect this new reality.[110] Cities do not need to question the oracle on wars or foreign diplomacy, merely on private, local issues such as disease or famine, and individuals likewise have no more pressing concerns than the personal, rather than the state-level. There is much that this passage leaves unsaid regarding Rome and the status of Greece under the principate. But whether or not this portrayal of the political climate is accurate or should be viewed as Plutarch's own view, it is clear that Theon connects the change in the use of the oracle to the change in Greece's political status. Theon's opening catalogue of oracle-stories introduces the principle he lays out here towards the end of his speech: the times have changed, and so too has the oracle. The Delphic oracle, as he will go on to say, is still very much active, and is still tending towards the needs of the people. Those people, and their needs, are no longer the same as in the past.

ambiguous oracles

The question of oracular ambiguity is old, and not without controversy. For this reason, I believe it is necessary first to define my word-choice, and then to defend it in light of the scholarly debate surrounding the problem of ambiguity in divination. As Frederick

[110] Schröder (1990: 419). Swain (1996: 180) deemphasizes the pro-Roman nature of this passage, arguing that the focus is on the nature of oracular questions, not the political situation. While it is true that Theon does not mention Rome by name in this passage, I do not agree that he cannot be commenting directly on Rome. Theon is highlighting the current political state of affairs and contrasting it with previous inter-Greek strife as an explanation for why the oracular responses have changed. To take out this political background and commentary deprives Theon's argument of its coherency and plausibility.

Naerebout and Kim Beerden demonstrate, when it comes to riddles and riddling, there is no clear agreement on what exactly this means.[111] For my purposes, I understand an ambiguous oracle to be one that makes use of metaphors or language otherwise requiring explication and analysis in order to comprehend the true meaning. A common feature of ambiguous oracles is that they are often entirely or partially misunderstood by the recipients. This may be ascribed within the texts as either a consequence of human error, or the intended outcome of either the god or the Pythia.[112]

Whether or not one may properly say that ambiguity existed at all in oracular divination remains a matter of contention among scholars. Joseph Fontenrose rejected the possibility that the Delphic oracle had a reputation for ambiguity in antiquity, at least before Lucian.[113] His view is the result of a narrow set of criteria for determining Greek understanding of the oracle focused on the historical oracle and oracles given, rather than the literary tradition.[114] Robert Parker, Peter Struck, and Georges Rougement vehemently disagree with this position, as the literary record is too clear on this account to dismiss it

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[111] Naerebout and Beerden (2012) 122-123. On this problem of defining ambiguity see also Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2005).

[112] As Maurizio (2001) demonstrates with regard to Cassandra in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, prophetic statements need not necessarily be riddling on the surface in order to be misinterpreted or render the recipients at a loss as to how to proceed. That being said, the curse placed on Cassandra's prophetic voice makes it difficult to extrapolate from the Chorus' inability to comprehend her words and apply her situation to the Pythia, as Maurizio attempts to do.

[113] Fontenrose (1978) 236-238. Spickermann (2013:146-148) argues that Lucian critiques oracles, and Delphi in particular, for playing off human fears and making use of obfuscation and ambiguity to deceive mortals. See also Karavas (2008-2009) 95-97. While Plutarch and Lucian may well be expressing views that would have seemed unusual or alien to the average Greek in their day, I do not believe that this serves as reasonable grounds for rejecting their perspectives entirely.

[114] Fontenrose argues that while authors such as Herodotus include apparently ambiguous oracles (that is, oracles whose meaning is not properly understood by the recipients), these authors do not state outright that Delphi has a reputation for ambiguity. Naerebout and Beerden (2012: 142-143) support Fontenrose's conclusions as to the historical lack of oracular ambiguity through analysis of inscribed oracular responses, explaining the existence of riddling oracle stories through the popularity of riddles in Greek society, rather than as reflecting a historical reality.

outright.[115] Striking a middle ground, Hugh Bowden makes a distinction between cryptic responses and deliberate ambiguity, arguing that the moral lessons behind oracle stories require that it be possible for oracles to be understood properly, and that it is human error that is to blame when they are not.[116]

Nevertheless, Theon refers to the oracle on multiple occasions as employing ἀμφιβολία ("ambiguity"), both in *De Pythiae oraculs* and in *De E apud Delphos*.[117] In these cases, Theon's argument is that the ambiguity is intentional, and if not the product of the god, it is at least approved of by the god. This is not to say that these dialogues demonstrate that historically the oracle was in fact ambiguous or cryptic in its responses. These dialogues instead indicate that Plutarch was aware of criticism of the oracle for lack of clarity specifically with regard to oracles in the distant past. In *De Pythiae oraculis*, Plutarch connects the oracle's reputation for αἰνίγματα with a theological and philosophical understanding of the god and the oracle.[118] I believe it is thus not only acceptable to acknowledge and discuss ambiguous and riddling oracles in Plutarch's texts, but necessary in order to understand his portrayal of the oracle in his writings. Ultimately, it is not my purpose here to argue for or against the historicity of Plutarch's account of earlier Greek history. I am concerned with Plutarch's literary representation of the oracle, so what the

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[115] Parker (2000) 80, Struck (2003) 171-172, Rougement (2005). See also Maurizio (2001) and Johnston (2008) 51-56. Additionally, Maurizio (2013) argues that ambiguous oracles served an important function, giving a way for believers to reduce cognitive dissonance when prophecies appeared to fail.

[116] Bowden (2005) 49-51.

[117] *De Pythiae oraculs* 407b, 408f; *De E apud Delphos* 386e.

[118] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407a, 409d. On the connection between αἴνιγμα and oracles, see Struck (2005) 160-165.

average Greek would have thought about the Delphic oracle is only of concern in so far as Plutarch addresses their thoughts in his writings.

That oracles could be ambiguous is not questioned in the dialogue, but several different explanations for this phenomenon are given, even by the same interlocutor. Early in the dialogue Boethus accuses oracles of being deliberately vague so as never to be incorrect.[119] Although, as discussed above, this is not specifically in reference to the Delphic oracle, that this view was applied to Delphic oracles is clear from a passage of Theon's speech later in the dialogue in which he contrasts the old poetic and murky language of the oracle with the Pythia's present manner of clear and direct address.[120] Theon discusses at length the possibility of the oracles employing ambiguity, and offers several different explanations for this phenomenon. First, people in the past used to treat the obscure with awe and reverence, seeing it as a hallmark of the divine;[121] now they distrust it and are suspicious of it, so the oracle has shifted its tone to facilitate better communication in line with the aims and purpose of the sanctuary.[122] Second, while the god is divine, his servants at the sanctuary are not. Because previously the oracle was often consulted by powerful rulers, the god may have allowed the Pythia to mask harsh truths so as to avoid suffering repercussions should the oracle be unfavorable to the oracle-seeker.

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[119] *De Pythiae oraculis* 398f.

[120] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407b: "they were already viewing the metaphors and the riddles and the ambiguities with suspicion, as nooks or places of refuge made for a seer making a mistake to enter into and to retreat from his prophecy" (ἤδη καὶ τὰς μεταφορὰς καὶ τὰ αἰνίγματα καὶ τὰς ἀμφιβολίας ὥσπερ μυχοὺς καὶ καταφυγὰς ἐνδύεσθαι καὶ ἀναχωρεῖν τῷ πταίοντι πεποιημένας τῆς μαντικῆς ὑφεωρῶντο).

[121] *De Pythiae orauclis* 407a.

[122] Theon also blames this shift in attitudes to the abuse of the oracle by oracle-mongers and charlatans (*De Pythiae oraculis* 407c).

The truth cannot be left unrevealed, but it can be obscured slightly.[123] Finally, because previously oracles were sought on high-stakes political issues, the oracular responses were masked, not so the recipient would not be able to understand, but so that if the enemies of the recipient caught wind of the oracle, they would not be able to comprehend its meaning.[124] These last two explanations are diametrically opposed: the former assumes the recipient will fail to understand an ambiguous oracle, while the latter hinges upon the very understanding that the former denies. In all three cases, however, Theon makes clear that there are significant changes between the past and his own day that would explain why ambiguous oracles are no longer given by the Pythia. Theon's response, offering a series of alternatives without expressing a clear preference for a particular solution, mirrors Plutarch's overarching approach in the dialogues. Even if Theon is assumed to be speaking for Plutarch, the lack of an unambiguous answer even within Theon's speech problematizes attempts to declare which position Plutarch officially held. Nevertheless, regardless of whether Plutarch believed the views espoused by Theon, or by Boethus for that matter, it is clear from the text that some degree of ambiguity is assumed to have been present in some Delphic oracles, although its source and purpose either varied or was contested.

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[123] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407e: "because he is making use of mortal servants and prophets, whom it is fitting for him to protect and to guard, in order that those serving the god not be killed by wicked men, while he is not willing that the truth be concealed, but turning aside the revelation of it just as a light takes many refractions and is split, the god takes away the truth's harsh appearance" (χρώμενος δὲ θνητοῖς ὑπηρέταις καὶ προφήταις, ὧν κήδεσθαι προσήκει καὶ φυλάττειν, ὅπως ὑπ' ἀνθρώπων οὐκ ἀπολοῦνται πονηρῶν ⟨τῷ⟩ θεῷ λατρεύοντες, ἀφανίζειν μὲν οὐκ ἤθελε τὸ ἀληθές, παρατρέπων δὲ τὴν δήλωσιν αὐτοῦ καθάπερ αὐγὴν ἐν τῇ ποιητικῇ πολλὰς ἀνακλάσεις λαμβάνουσαν καὶ πολλαχοῦ περισχιζομένην ἀφῄρει τὸ ἀντίτυπον αὐτοῦ καὶ σκληρόν).

[124] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407e.

the god and the Pythia

The source of the oracular language is a point of contention among the interlocutors from the opening pages of the dialogue and informs nearly every aspect of the conversation. With each successive topic the interlocutors swirl back around to the relationship between the Pythia and the god, and which of them exactly is responsible for the oracular responses. In his defense of the aesthetic qualities of the verse-oracles, Sarapion maintains that it is the god who is responsible for the phrasing of the responses.[125] Theon, just as emphatically, declares the Pythia's words to be her own, reflecting the god's truth in language her tongue is capable of speaking.[126] Here too it is Theon whose views comprise the lion's share of the conversation regarding the Pythia. In order to defend his claim that it is the Pythia who composes the oracular responses while inspired by the god, Theon presents a case for the nature of the Pythia's enthusiasm. Making use of metaphors, Theon argues that just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so too does the Pythia's soul reflect the god's divine truth.[127] As a result, any changes in how oracular responses are given is a result of changes in the human priestesses, rather than in the eternal god. The god makes use of what he is given, rather than instilling in the priestesses a poetic spirit or a gift for verbal artistry.[128] As I have argued above, it is by no means clear that Plutarch or even Theon agrees with this position in its entirety. Theon, after all, ends his speech with a declaration of human ignorance and inherent inability to comprehend divine purpose. Nevertheless, it is Theon's perspective that the reader is left with, emphasizing the human nature of the Pythia and

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[125] *De Pythiae oraculis* 396d, 396f-397b. Boethus's suggestion (396e-f), although he professes ignorance, that the verses are not the god's because they are poorly made, anticipates Theon's view.

[126] *De Pythiae oraculis* 397b-c, 405c-d.

[127] *De Pythiae oraculis* 404e.

[128] *De Pythiae oraculis* 404f-405d.

thus the human source of "the riddles and the allegories and the metaphors of the oracle" (τὰ αἰνίγματα καὶ τὰς ἀλληγορίας καὶ τὰς μεταφορὰς τῆς μαντικῆς).[129]

In *De Pythiae oraculis* Plutarch demonstrates through the structure and the setting of the dialogue the oracular sanctuary's role as a teacher, and through the contents of the interlocutors' conversation explores how the Pythia serves as a representative of the god. Throughout the discourse, each of the interlocutors introduces different theories or interpretations of the god and the oracle to be discussed. The use of poetic language and the artistic quality of oracular responses as well as their clarity are interrogated closely, since the answers to each of these questions bears ontological implications for the god and his relationship with mortals. Rather than providing definitive proof of one theory over another, the interlocutors demonstrate the benefits and disadvantages of different theories about the god. While the varying theories may be weighted as more or less plausible, ultimately human ignorance, as emphasized in Theon's final words, stands in the way of absolute certainty. Although true knowledge is not necessarily attainable, Plutarch stresses through the dialogue that such inquiry is still valuable and worth undertaking properly. Plutarch positions the Delphic oracle amid this human inability and uncertainty, standing as a representative of the god and thus a touchstone to divine truth, aiding humans in their struggle towards true philosophical understanding. Seen in this light, the oracle functions as a character in the dialogue, commenting on the arguments being made by the human interlocutors, guiding discussion, and hinting at the truth through the Pythia's oracular responses and through the Delphic landscape and its monuments.

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[129] *De Pythiae oraculis* 409d.

iv. *De defectu oraculorum*

De defectu oraculorum is dedicated to Terentius Priscus, the patron of Martial and a friend of Plutarch and his brother Lamprias, who serves a double role as both narrator and interlocutor.[130] In the dialogue, discussion centers around the question of why there are fewer active oracular sanctuaries in Greece than there were in the past, and why those that are still extant are not as active as they were formerly. Although the interlocutors – Plutarch's brother Lamprias, the rather mysterious figures Demetrius and Cleombrotus,[131] Plutarch's teacher Ammonius, the historian Philip,[132] the Cynic philosopher Didymus (nicknamed Planetiades),[133] and Heracleon of Megara[134] – do not agree on the reason for this decline in oracles, the belief that oracles throughout the Greek world are increasingly being abandoned underpins the dialogue.[135] In the process of debating why the oracular

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[130] *De defectu oraculorum* 409e. For Plutarch's relationship with Terentius Priscus, see Jones (1971) 60, 63. That the narrator is a figure other than Plutarch is not revealed until well into the dialogue (413d).

[131] The identities of these two figures is rather murky. Brenk (1977: 90-91) argues that it is possible that Demetrius is a historical figure, but views Cleombrotus as entirely fictional. Ogilvie (1967: 115), Puech (1992: 4843), and Spawforth (2004: 165) argue for Cleombrotus's historicity, connecting him to a figure of the same name found in the epigraphic record. As for Demetrius, Puech (1992: 4844-4845) connects him with Demetrius of Tarsus, a grammarian. See also Flacelière (1974) 88-89.

[132] On the identity of Philip, see Ogilvie (1967) 115, and Puech (1992) 4569-4570.

[133] Didymus is otherwise not known. See Ogilvie (1967) 115-116. Puech (1992: 4845-4846), *contra* Ziegler, argues that Lamprias's introduction of him makes it likely that he was a real person, rather than a fictional character made to represent Cynicism. Didymus has been compared to the even more mysterious Epicurus, a stock literary figure representing Epicureanism whose swift departure serves as the basis for the conversation in *De sera numinis vindicta* (548b): Helmig (2005) 323-324, Opsomer (2016b) 38-39. Didymus's nickname 'Planetiades' ("wanderer"), which the interlocutors use exclusively after he is first introduced (413a), does not inspire confidence in either his philosophical capabilities or in his historicity, standing in as a stock wandering Cynic.

[134] This Heracleon appears to be the same figure who appears as a student of Plutarch in *De sollertia animalium* 975c: Ogilvie (1967) 11, Puech (1992) 4850.

[135] The historicity of this assumption has been called into question in recent years by scholars citing archaeological evidence pointing to the contrary, in particular regarding sanctuaries in Asia Minor. See, for example, Fontenrose (1988) 15-20 and Bendlin (2011) 211-212. Nevertheless, within *De defectu oraculorum* that there was a decline in both the number of sanctuaries and the number of

sanctuaries are closing and by whose agency, the interlocutors discuss the nature of gods and demigods, the number of worlds and their relationship to each other, the relationship between the soul and the body, the prophetic source for the oracles, and the nature and source of the Pythia's inspiration.

In the dialogue, the interlocutors argue on behalf of the oracle and the god through a discussion of the nature of the divine and its relationship to humans. The dialogue opens with a question concerning the oracle – why are oracular sanctuaries disappearing? – which leads to further questions regarding the nature of gods and *daimones*, the source of the oracles' prophetic power, and the relationship between humans and the divine world. In the end, Ammonius and Lamprias return the conversation to the oracle proper, but as with *De Pythiae oraculis*, the question has changed slightly. It is no longer "why are the oracles disappearing?" but rather an explanation for how the oracle works that also serves as a defense of the oracle and of oracular divination.[136]

a. the role of the oracle

In *De defectu oraculorum* Plutarch again uses the oracle to model how to go about proper philosophical inquiry, making use of both positive as well as negative examples. As I demonstrated for *De Pythiae oraculis*, the initial topic of conversation among the interlocutors – here, an eternal flame in the sanctuary of Ammon at Siwah – serves as a

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oracle-seekers is assumed to be true by all interlocutors. On the possibly tendentious nature of Plutarch's depiction of Delphi, see McInerney (2004) 43-55 and Stadter (2004) 19-31. I am following Stadter (2011: 199) with regard to the question of the historicity of Plutarch's depictions of the oracle: "the present concern is not what actually happened, but what leads Plutarch to include a given notice and to treat it as he does." See also Bowden (2013) 48-49.

[136] On the apologetic aspect of the dialogue see also Flacelière (1974) 11, and Simonetti (2017) 59-60.

case study that allows Plutarch to preview proper dialectical behavior and methodology, anticipating the subsequent discussion of the disappearance of oracles. In what follows, I first briefly summarize the opening account involving the sanctuary of Ammon before laying out the main theoretical principles of dialectic that Plutarch models in the discussion of the sanctuary of Ammon. For each main principle, I will then demonstrate how Plutarch employs this lesson in the central section of the dialogue.

Plutarch opens *De defectu oraculorum* with a delightful little anecdote regarding the mythical origins of the Delphic oracle and how it became known as the *omphalos* of the world. The tale of the meeting of the eagles transitions smoothly into a present-day meeting at Delphi by two travelers journeying from opposite ends of the earth: the philosopher and historian Cleombrotus of Sparta, and the grammarian Demetrius of Tarsus.[137] In the course of their meeting, Cleombrotus relates a story he was told by the priests of Ammon at Siwah while on his travels. An oil lamp with an eternal flame at the sanctuary had been consuming less oil each year, and so, the priests surmised, the years must be becoming shorter to account for this phenomenon. Not content with this explanation, Demetrius, Cleombrotus, and Ammonius debate how best to go about explaining this phenomenon observed by the priests, proposing solutions and critiquing others in turn.

Of the dialectical principles on display in this short digression, the most prominent throughout is taking a long view of each argument, following the proposed solutions through to their logical conclusions before reflecting on whether those conclusions are themselves rational or reasonable. Ammonius articulates this point most clearly in his

[137] *De defectu oraculorum* 409e-f.

ridicule of the priests for failing to undertake this very practice. If the years were becoming shorter, surely other phenomena would be affected in both the terrestrial and the celestial spheres. To assume this explanation would thus have radical implications in nearly every field of science – ramifications, one might add, that have not been noticed elsewhere – and so a more rational explanation must be sought.[138] Demetrius, Lamprias, and Ammonius emphasize the importance of rationality throughout their subsequent conversation, insisting on seeing a theory through to the end,[139] and warning against excessive credulity.[140] These words of caution, coming in the middle of the dialogue, serve as reminders to each other as well as to the reader to be treating the theories analytically and to avoid accepting a proposed solution before it has been thought through in its entirety.

In addition to taking a long view of the situation, the interlocutors also emphasize the importance of interrogating the premises on which arguments are made. Demetrius, upon first hearing Cleombrotus's story of the oil lamp, compares such excessive extrapolation to painting a lion from a single claw (ἐξ ὄνυχος τὸν λέοντα γράφοντας): the data point is too minute a premise from which to posit changes of a cosmic scale.[141] While Cleombrotus rejects Demetrius's argument, since it is possible to deduce significant

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[138] *De defectu oraculorum* 410f-411d.

[139] *De defectu oraculorum* 432c (Demetrius).

[140] *De defectu oraculorum* 420c (Ammonius): "For what prevents us from accepting a statement that is majestic and very philosophical? For if rejected it would remove many things that have been claimed but are not possible to be proven, and if accepted many impossible and non-existant things would follow" (τί γὰρ κωλύει φωνὴν δέξασθαι σεμνὴν καὶ φιλοσοφωτάτην; καὶ γὰρ ἀθετουμένη πολλὰ τῶν ἐνδεχομένων ἀποδειχθῆναι δὲ μὴ δυναμένων ἀναιρεῖ, καὶ τιθεμένη πολλὰ συνεφέλκεται τῶν ἀδυνάτων καὶ ἀνυπάρκτων). Ammonius's statement at this point serves as a check on Cleombrotus's demonological theory, calling on both the other interlocutors and the reader to question whether what they have just heard, as pretty as it sounds, is actually a reasonable solution. See also 431a (Lamprias).

[141] *De defectu oraculorum* 410c.

phenomena from seemingly insignificant details, it is important that those details be precise and the consequences be in relation to the accuracy of the data.[142] Later in the dialogue Heracleon reinforces this point by reminding the others of the need to be wary lest they support theories with untenable hypotheses.[143] Similarly, Cleombrotus and Ammonius both chide the others, asking if they are going to abandon their original principles so quickly, and to accept premises with which they previously disagreed.[144]

These remarks, in conjunction with Lamprias's final analysis reminding the others to reflect again on what has been said, serve as clear warnings to the reader to be aware of the repercussions of each argument: a good philosophical conversation involves close analysis of all arguments made, and resists taking anything at face value or for granted until both the premises and the consequences of each claim have been understood in their entirety and evaluated for their logical consistency and probability.[145] As Daniel Babut articulates, both the initial vignette and the broader discussion emphasize the importance of rational explanations based on sound logical foundations.[146] It is for this reason that, later in the dialogue, the Cynic Didymus Planetiades removes himself rather unceremoniously from the conversation. He is not willing to engage on a rational level with the other interlocutors, and so must be removed, or in this case remove himself, from the group so the conversation may progress properly.[147] In sum, once again Plutarch uses

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[142] *De defectu oraculorum* 410c-f.

[143] *De defectu oraculorum* 418d-e.

[144] *De defectu oraculorum* 419c, 435a-f.

[145] E.g. *De defectu oraculorum* 418d-e, 420c, 431a-b, and 435a-c.

[146] Babut (1992) 232-233.

[147] As Simonetti (2017: 61-65) notes, Didymus's irreverence automatically makes him a problematic and even dangerous interlocutor. With whom should one hold philosophical conversations is a question that arises in Platonic dialectic as well, to which several different

oracular sanctuaries, and Delphi in particular, to model how to go about philosophical inquiry while simultaneously using it as a starting point from which to discuss the nature of the divine.

In addition to using the dialogue on oracles as a demonstration of how to seek answers to philosophical questions, Plutarch uses the oracle, by virtue of its liminal position as a connection between humans and the divine, to reflect on the nature, degree, and purpose of divine involvement in the human world. As with *De E apud Delphos* and *De Pythiae oraculis*, this reflection expands beyond direct mention and discussion of the oracle and the oracular sanctuary, but nevertheless remains throughout closely connected to the underlying questions posed by the oracle and the disappearance of oracular sanctuaries observed by the interlocutors.

b. the portrayal of the oracle

As regards these questions and the resulting portrayal of the oracle in the dialogue, my analysis will be divided, as with *De Pythiae oraculis*, into assessment of the purpose of the oracle as laid out by the interlocutors, who is described as or shown to be consulting the oracle and concerning what matters, the presence of or reasons for ambiguous oracles, and the relationship between the god and the Pythia. In the process, through the varied interlocutors Plutarch explores different theories as to how and from where the oracle receives its prophetic inspiration.

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answers are offered. On the merits of different types of interlocutors in Plato's dialogues, see Long (2008).

the purpose of the oracle

When it comes to the purpose of the oracle, the interlocutors are in perfect agreement, even the quarrelsome Didymus: the oracle stands as a gift to humanity from a divine power – either the gods or *daimones* – whose purpose is intended to benefit humans. Didymus blames the decline of oracles on humans: they were annoying and disrespecting the gods by asking "questions that were shameful and irreverent,"[148] so to punish them, "divine providence packed up the oracles and departed from everywhere."[149] This suggestion that the gods take away the oracles in order to punish humans is immediately rejected by the other interlocutors, leading to Didymus himself leaving in a huff.[150] Nevertheless, the base assumption behind Didymus's argument is not questioned; namely, that the oracles are a fundamental boon as a source of divine guidance for humans. Lamprias makes this claim directly in his rebuke of Didymus. The god, Lamprias argues, is good-tempered (εὐόργητος) and mild (πρᾶος), and being responsible for the birth, nurture, existence, and capacity for reason of humans (οἷς αἰτιός ἐστι γενέσεως καὶ τροφῆς καὶ τοῦ εἶναι καὶ φρονεῖν), would not take away such a gift once given because humans have become unworthy.[151] Ammonius gives a similar, though more explicitly human-centered, purpose to the oracle in connecting the decline in oracles to the decline in the human population. From Ammonius's perspective, oracles without humans to use them fail to fulfill their existential purpose, and so are removed not out of spite, but because they are no longer

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[148] *De defectu oraculorum* 413b: αἰσχρῶν καὶ ἀθέων ἐρωτημάτων.

[149] *De defectu oraculorum* 413a: πρόνοια θεῶν συσκευασαμένη τὰ χρηστήρια πανταχόθεν οἴχεται.

[150] *De defectu oraculorum* 413b-d.

[151] *De defectu oraculorum* 413c. See also Babut (1992) 230-231.

needed.[152] Nevertheless, Ammonius's argument still rankles the other interlocutors for placing the god in the role of destroyer as well as creator.[153] The question of the god's destructive capabilities becomes an important topic of the remaining conversation, as the interlocutors debate whether the god could, or would, be destructive. In addition to emphasizing the god's role in the oracles' disappearance, Didymus's explanation also gives a limited perspective on what types of questions the oracles are intended to answer. Their purpose is not to solve every-day dilemmas, but loftier issues than those concerning "treasures or inheritances or unlawful marriages."[154] Didymus's speech, like that of Boethus in *De Pythiae oraculis*, demonstrates alternative perspectives on the oracle. Even though his views are swiftly and firmly quashed, the time the interlocutors dedicate to unravelling and disproving his statements suggests that these views, while not approved of by Plutarch, were more widely held than Plutarch and his companions would like.[155] Nevertheless, on one position Didymus and Lamprias are in perfect agreement, and that is the beneficial and productive power of the oracle, if used properly.[156]

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[152] *De defectu oraculorum* 414c; Simonetti (2017) 77.

[153] See, for example, Lamprias's reply to Ammonius, *De defectu oraculorum* 414d-e.

[154] *De defectu oraculorum* 413b: θησαυρῶν ἢ κληρονομθῶν ἢ γάμων παρανόμων.

[155] A similar pattern appears in *De sera numinis vindicta* 548b-c. There the interlocutors are torn initially over whether it is better to pass over dangerous arguments or thoughts in silence, lest one risks giving them a wider audience inadvertently, or to discuss them at length so as to refute them.

[156] On the question of proper use see also *De defectu oraculorum* 438a-d. The oracle can only fulfill its knowledge-giving purpose if the proper rituals are followed.

oracle-seekers and queries

The interlocutors' conversation presupposes a fundamental change in the number of active oracular sanctuaries and the number of people consulting some of the still-active oracles.[157] Nevertheless, the interlocutors focus on the question of divine agency and intentionality in the closure of the oracular sanctuaries, rather than asking why humans might be consulting oracles less frequently.[158] It is only Ammonius who suggests that fewer humans visiting the oracular sanctuaries are a cause of their disappearance. Ammonius argues that there is a decline in oracles to match the decline in the Greek population: there are fewer people in Greece, so fewer people needing help from the oracles and as a result fewer oracular sanctuaries.[159] In this presentation, the type of people seeking oracles, and the issues concerning which they would do so, are rendered irrelevant, since the disappearance of oracles is strictly related to population size, not the type of people or activities in question. Nevertheless, Ammonius does provide a hint towards the end of the dialogue as to the types of oracle-seekers in the past through his catalogue of benefactions Delphi has given to the Greeks over the years: successful wars, the foundation of cities, healing from pestilence, and reversal of crop failure.[160] In this catalogue, the oracles that are highlighted concern

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[157] See, for example, Lamprias' comment on the state of the oracle at Siwah (*De defectu oraculorum* 411e), Demetrius's claim of the abandonment of Boeotian oracles (411e-412a), and Ammonius' description of the decrease in oracle-seekers to Delphi (414b-c).

[158] Demetrius articulates this focus clearly in his description of the disappearance of oracles (*De defectu oraculorum* 411e): "Why is it necessary to speak about others, when Boeotia, which was formerly multi-lingual as a result of the oracles, now has dried up entirely as if a spring, and a great drought of prophecy holds the land?" (τὰ γὰρ ἄλλα τί δεῖ λέγειν, ὅπου γε τὴν Βοιωτίαν ἕνεκα χρηστηρίων πολύφωνον οὖσαν ἐν τοῖς πρότερον χρόνοις νῦν ἐπιλέλοιπε κομιδῇ καθάπερ νάματα, καὶ πολὺς ἐπέσχηκε μαντικῆς αὐχμὸς τὴν χώραν;).

[159] *De defectu oraculorum* 414a-c.

[160] *De defectu oraculorum* 435d: τὸ μαντεῖον αἴτιον γέγονε τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἔν τε πολέμοις καὶ κτίσεσι πόλεων ἔν τε λοιμοῖς καὶ καρπῶν ἀφορίαις

not personal, but polis-level problems. Ammonius does not deny that personal questions were asked, but his presentation is skewed towards city or state-level issues, and consequently city or state-level consultants.

Didymus's explanation offers a different perspective on humanity's role in the disappearance of oracles, suggesting that changes in the types of oracle-seekers and questions over time are causing the oracles to disappear. As discussed above, a key aspect of Didymus's argument is his identification of the types of questions people should not ask the oracle. The premise of this argument, as Lamprias notes in his subsequent rebuke, is that people in their day are worse than those in the past, and specifically, that the types of improper questions being asked were not asked in the past. Didymus's examples of inappropriate questions include those that ask about everyday matters and those that test the god through the oracle, an example of which may be found in the opening lines of the dialogue. Plutarch opens the dialogue with the story of Epimenides of Phaestus, a man who put both the oracle and the god to the test by asking the oracle to verify the tale of Delphi being the *omphalos* of the world.[161] While the narrator indicates that the god disapproved of this use of the oracle, its inclusion in the dialogue would appear, on the surface, to back up Didymus's claims.[162] A closer look at the figure in question in this story reveals the opposite. Epimenides of Crete was a mystical sage, traditionally attributed to the 6th century BCE, with a rather fantastic history, living to extreme old age and possibly having spent time living among the nymphs.[163] His status as a figure from the distant past is notable in

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[161] *De defectu oraculorum* 409e-f.

[162] *De defectu oraculorum* 409f-410a.

[163] For the mythic history of Epimenides, and the traditions attached to him, see Dodds (1951) 141-147. Recent years have seen a surge in scholarship on Epimenides. See in particular the volume edited by Federico and Visconti (2001) dedicated to studies of Epimenides, and Bernabé's (2007:

the present context. Didymus's explanation requires that such disrespectful oracles be a phenomenon of the present, rather than of the distant past. Rather than proving Didymus's point, Plutarch's opening example serves to support Lamprias's instead: people have not changed fundamentally for the worse, at least not in the types of questions they ask.

Rather than having any of the interlocutors offer clarity to the question of human change or decline, Plutarch has the interlocutors instead debate primarily the question of divine change. Nevertheless, several different understandings of who sought out the oracle, and over what matters, emerges from the dialogue. Ammonius presents a contrast between the past, in which many important polis-level questions were addressed to oracles, with the present, in which the relative decline in population has resulted in far less divine assistance being needed. Didymus's argument demonstrates that in his own day people were consulting oracles on personal or otherwise inappropriate matters, although Lamprias disproves his claim that divine anger at such requests then resulted in the disappearance of oracular sanctuaries: people have been acting impiously towards the gods since time immemorial. The resulting impression from these two interlocutors is one of change over time: fewer people are consulting oracles since there are fewer oracles left in Greece, though whether there is a change in what types of people or questions is a matter of debate among the interlocutors.

105-168) collection of the fragments and testimonia of Epimenides in *Poetae epici Graeci II, fasc. 3*.

ambiguous oracles

Unlike *De Pythiae oraculis*, in *De defectu oraculorum* the ambiguity of oracles is not a topic of discussion among the interlocutors. Nevertheless, it does make an appearance in the preface of the dialogue that merits further scrutiny. Epimenides of Phaestus's question put to the god regarding the *omphalos* of the world is said to elicit a "vague and ambiguous oracle" (χρησμὸν ἀσαφῆ καὶ ἀμφίβολον).[164] While Plutarch does not reveal what this oracle was, he records Epimenides's response to the oracle he received:

οὔτε γὰρ ἦν γαίης μέσος ὀμφαλὸς οὐδὲ θαλάσσης·
εἰ δε τις ἔστι, θεοῖς δῆλος θνητοῖσι δ᾽ἄφαντος.[165]

There was neither a center of the earth nor of the sea;
but if there is some such place, it is known to gods, but hidden from mortals.

Epimenides's conclusion that the god was making use of an ambiguous oracle so as to deny the oracle-seeker understanding of the answer he sought is echoed by the narrator, who gives his own interpretation of events in the subsequent sentence: "the god clearly rightly deflected that one from testing an ancient myth as if testing a painting by touching it."[166] The narrator, like Epimenides himself, explains the unclear response as a deliberate move by the god with the express purpose of denying the recipient access to the knowledge he sought. There is no room for the Pythia in this explanation – the source of the ambiguity and the purpose for it rest with the god alone.

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[164] *De defectu oraculorum* 409f.

[165] *De defectu oraculorum* 409e. For other attestations of this fragment of Epimenides, see Bernabè (2007: 146-147) 43F.

[166] *De defectu oraculorum* 409f-410a: ἐκεῖνον μὲν οὖν εἰκότως ὁ θεὸς ἠμύνατο μύθου παλαιοῦ καθάπερ ζῳγραφήματος ἁφῇ διαπειρώμενον.

It is important to remember here that Plutarch is not the narrator of this dialogue, although at this point in the work the reader is not aware of that yet.[167] This separation of narratological voice from Plutarch's own demands even further caution when interpreting the validity and weight of claims made by the narrator. This statement must be understood to be Lamprias's opinion, and as such orients to reader to the narrator's world-view in the dialogue. Rather than being a clear statement of belief from Plutarch the author, it suggests to the reader a line of interpretation that the narrator will follow, and readers must use their discretion in evaluating its validity.

the god and the Pythia

The bulk of *De defectu oraculorum* concerns the question of what divine power is responsible for giving the oracles, divided between the contrasting views of Ammonius, Cleombrotus, and Lamprias, and mediated in part by Ammonius. I will sketch in brief the arguments laid out by these interlocutors as to the source of the oracle's prophetic power and the role of the Pythia in the divinatory process in order to assess the implications and consequences of each theory.

Ammonius places full responsibility for the decline in the number of oracular sanctuaries on the shoulders of the gods, for only a god could destroy something a god has created.[168] Consequently, Ammonius is not inclined to assent to the arguments of Cleombrotus and the others that demigods could be responsible for the oracles, and identifies the prayers and sacrifices made to the god before oracular consultation can occur

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[167] The narrative voice is not identified until 413d.

[168] *De defectu oraculorum* 413d-414c.

as victims of this line of reasoning: if the god is not responsible for the oracles, then what power is consulted during the sacrifices?[169] Furthermore, if the source of the prophetic power is a divine *pneuma*, as Lamprias argues initially, this renders both the sacrificial victims and the Pythia herself redundant and unnecessary.[170]

Cleombrotus makes a rousing case that *daimones*, rather than the god, are the divine powers running the oracular sanctuaries.[171] These intermediary powers may have a destructive force that the god, by the Platonic arguments put forth earlier in the dialogue, cannot have. As temporal beings, their departure or death could explain the cessation of oracles without compromising the nature of the gods.[172] Cleombrotus's speech on *daimones* has caught the attention of historians and philosophers alike. Frederick Brenk discredits Cleombrotus's theory, calling attention to its skeptical reception by the other interlocutors and the far from flattering portrayal of Cleombrotus by the narrator. [173] Against this view, Daniel Babut defends Cleombrotus, arguing that he is not the clown others claim him to be and that his views on demonology may well reflect Plutarch's own.[174] Rather than voting for or against Cleombrotus, or any of the other pious

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[169] *De defectu oraculorum* 435a-b. See especially 435a: ἡ δ' ἐμὴ μείζων ἀπορία καὶ περὶ μειζόνων· ἄρτι γὰρ οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως τῷ λόγῳ παρεχωρήσαμεν ἐκ τῶν θεῶν τὴν μαντικὴν ἐς δαίμονάς τινας ἀτεχνῶς ἀποδιοπομπουμένῳ.

[170] *De defectu oraculorum* 433c-f, 435c-d.

[171] See especially *De defectu oraculorum* 417a-b.

[172] *De defectu oraculorum* 414e-431b, especially 415a. Cleombrotus's demonological theory bears close relation to that of Diotima as described by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (see in particular 202d-203a).

[173] Brenk (1977) 111: "Even if Cleombrotos is not a bungling idiot, he at least is no intellectual genius, and the rest of the company delight in manifesting his incompetency in handling philosophical problems." See also Spawforth (2004) 165: "If Cleombrotus was dead at the time of this work's composition… Plutarch's somewhat unflattering portrayal of his intellectual powers would appear less impolite."

[174] Babut (1994). Simonetti follows Babut (1994) in considering demonology a plausible hypothesis for Plutarch, arguing that Cleombrotus's theory was at least in part accepted by Plutarch, although

interlocutors and their theories, I believe that with Cleombrotus's speech Plutarch follows one of the key principles of proper dialectical practice: Plutarch has presented the most logical argument for *daimones* being the power behind oracles, explaining the various ramifications on a cultic as well as a cosmic level. Cleombrotus's argument will stand as a clear counterpoint to Lamprias's expanded theory of double causation that ends the dialogue. These theories together provide the reader with two diametrically opposed but still religiously scrupulous, logic-based approaches to understanding divine inspiration.

Lamprias's vision of oracular divination is one of collaboration between the artist (the god), the medium (the divine *pneuma*), and the agent (the Pythia). It is only when these three forces are in harmony that successful divination occurs, and failure to observe this can lead to disastrous consequences as seen in the death of the Pythia forced to prophesy when the divine refused.[175] In this way, Lamprias is able to preserve the validity and the rationality of Delphic cult. Performing sacrifices, preserving the chastity of the Pythia, and observing the proper days for consultation are not arbitrary, but necessary to ensure that successful divination can take place. Lamprias articulates his argument through a simile, making use of dedications standing before them to demonstrate his point. Who, Lamprias asks, should receive credit for a beautiful work of art – the artist, or the technique used? In previous generations, Lamprias argues, credit was given solely to the artists, while more recently people prefer to credit the science and forces behind the techniques.[176] Lamprias

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she argues that Plutarch's own views were closest to those of Lamprias (e.g. 60-61, 82-84). Van Nuffelen (2011: 164-167), following Brenk, notes that in both *De defectu oraculorum* and *De Iside et Osiride* Plutarch appears to discredit the notion of evil *daimones*, but argues that some aspects of Cleombrotus's demonological theory may be accepted as reflecting Plutarch's own beliefs.

[175] *De defectu oraculorum* 438b-c. On Lamprias's theory of double causation, see Brenk (1977) 113-144, Simonetti (2017) 100-105.

[176] *De defectu oraculorum* 436d-e.

views both approaches as inherently problematic, arguing that "both parties' arguments are missing a crucial element, since [the oldest theologians and poets][177] ignore or overlook the medium and the agent, while [younger thinkers and natural philosophers][178] ignore or overlook the source and method."[179] Lamprias professes to take a middle ground: we can appreciate *why* and *how* the natural forces operate without forgetting that they are being put to use by an artist – the god. Through this explanation, Lamprias presents the oracular response as akin to a painting that can be analyzed and its origin or source debated. Ironically, it is this very presentation, testing and querying the oracle and ancient stories as if they are physical objects, that Lamprias himself as the narrator said the god rebuffed in the opening of the dialogue.[180]

Lamprias's statement in the opening of the work against Epimenides' attempt to investigate a μῦθος stands in a programmatic position in the dialogue, and introduces, I believe, a methodology that will be on display throughout the dialogue as well as a warning against using this very approach. Epimenides's verse warns that there are things known only to the gods that are inherently unknowable to humans, while Lamprias's interpretation decries attempts to determine the veracity of μῦθοι. Nevertheless, in the dialogue, Ammonius, Cleombrotus, and Lamprias all rely on μῦθοι to make their arguments. Ammonius uses the story of Apollo and Python,[181] Philip that of the Great Pan,[182]

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[177] *De defectu oraculorum* 436d: οἱ μὲν σφόδρα παλαιοὶ θεολόγοι καὶ ποιηταὶ. On the identification of these θεόλογοι, see Simonetti (2017) 73-74.

[178] *De defectu oraculorum* 436d: οἱ δὲ νεώτεροι τούτων καὶ φυσικοὶ προσαγορευόμενοι.

[179] *De defectu oraculorum* 436e: ὅθεν ἀμφοτέροις ὁ λόγος ἐνδεὴς τοῦ προσήκοντός ἐστι, τοῖς μὲν τὸ δι' οὗ καὶ ὑφ' οὗ, τοῖς δὲ τὸ ἐξ ὧν καὶ δι' ὧν ἀγνοοῦσιν ἢ παραλείπουσιν.

[180] *De defectu oraculorum* 409f-410a.

[181] *De defectu oraculorum* 414b-c.

[182] *De defectu oraculorum* 419b-420a.

Cleombrotus the myriad tales told by his mysterious philosopher,[183] and Lamprias the story of Coretas the goatherd.[184] Cleombrotus, before he launches into his tale of the mysterious sage, even refers to what they are doing specifically as testing stories as if they were physical objects: "since there is a jar of myths and arguments all mixed together set among us (and where could someone find friendlier listeners to test these stories as if they were foreign currency?), I do not hesitate to oblige with a tale of a foreign man…."[185]

It is readily apparent from even a cursory glance through other works in the *Moralia* that Plutarch is fond of using myths and such stories to demonstrate philosophical points. To claim that Plutarch is warning against using myth in philosophy would be unsupportable. It is notable, however, that Plutarch uses myth as a tool to think with and to help one engage in philosophical inquiry, rather than using myth as a literal example or proof.[186] It is this latter way of approaching mythical stories, I believe, that Plutarch challenges in *De defectu oraculorum*. Cleombrotus uses the story of the Great Pan, a tale told, like many of Plutarch's myths, several degrees removed, as proof that *daimones* can die; Ammonius uses the tale of Apollo and Python as proof that even Delphi was not always

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[183] *De defectu orauclorum* 421b-422c.

[184] *De defectu orauclorum* 433c-d, 435d.

[185] *De defectu oraculorum* 421a: ἐπεὶ δὲ μύθων καὶ λόγων ἀναμεμειγμένων κρατὴρ ἐν μέσῳ πρόκειται (καὶ ποῦ τις ἂν εὐμενεστέροις ἀκροαταῖς ἐπιτυχὼν ὥσπερ νομίσματα ξενικὰ τούτους δοκιμάσειε τοὺς λόγους;), οὐκ ὀκνῶ χαρίζεσθαι βαρβάρου διήγησιν ἀνδρός… Cleombrotus's description of a κρατήρ containing μῦθοι and λόγοι all mixed together like water and wine, along with his friendly address to his companions, likens the discussion to a symposiastic conversation such as those found in the *Quaestiones convivales*. Cleombrotus's metaphor directs the reader's attention to the methodology employed not only by Cleombrotus, but by all of the interlocutors.

[186] See, for example, the tales at the end of *De facie in orbe lunae* and *De sera numinis vindicate*, and the myth of Osiris in *De Iside et Osiride*. As Simias says in *De genio socratis*, myths can sometimes touch upon truths (589f: ἔστιν ὅπη ψαύει τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ τὸ μυθῶδες). From this, Hamilton (1934) argues sensibly that the onus is on the reader to determine if "serious philosophic truth" is contained in Plutarch's myths, and if so, what that truth is. On Plutarch's contrast of μῦθος and λόγος, see Hardie (1992).

an oracular seat and as evidence for his population-based explanation; Lamprias, although he criticizes this use of myths in the opening of the *De defectu oraculorum*, nevertheless argues later in the dialogue against the story of Coretas the goatherd using facts and other evidence to disprove an ancient tale.

By opening with a tale that emphasizes the limits of human knowledge and rejects the explicit testing of μῦθοι for facts, Plutarch warns the reader from the very beginning to treat with skepticism the methodological approach of the interlocutors. In case the reader fails to notice this, less-than-subtle reminders are scattered throughout the dialogue in the form of repetitions of the initial simile demonstrating an approach that the narrator rejects as inappropriate. Consequently, I do not read the speeches of Lamprias and Cleombrotus as Plutarch's manifesto, but rather the opposite. Here, Plutarch uses the oracle to put on display several competing theories about the relationship between the gods and humans, each with different consequences. Readers would do well to heed Plutarch's warnings before accepting any or all of these theories as plausible or even as Plutarch's own.

In *De defectu oraculorum* Plutarch presents a series of attempts to explain the relationship between the god and oracular sanctuaries. At the heart of this issue lies the question of who or what is responsible for the prophetic ability of the oracle. If the god is responsible, as argued by Ammonius, then the god must be understood to destroy as well as create. This difficulty is removed if it is *daimones* who supply the prophetic power to the sanctuaries, as Cleombrotus argues, but then the god's agency and close connection to the sanctuary are diluted. Lamprias's solution is a hybrid, attempting to absolve the god from exercising destructive powers while emphasizing the validity and necessity of following traditional Delphic ritual. Throughout the discussions, Delphic history and

rituals guide the conversation and the interlocutors in their exploration of the nature of the god and of his interactions with humans. Plutarch presents a variety of views to demonstrate how to discuss the divine, using the Delphic oracle as a tool and a topic with which to engage in true philosophy. Plutarch does not choose explicitly any of the theories proposed by the interlocutors as clearly correct, but rather demonstrates to the reader through the structure of the dialogue the potential pitfalls of each theory. As a result, *De defectu oraculorum* leaves the reader with more questions than answers, but provides a model for inquisitive readers to follow as they seek answers for themselves.

v. conclusion

a. the role of the oracle in the dialogues

In all three of the Delphic dialogues, the oracle serves as a medium through which to discuss broader philosophical, and in particular theological, questions. That being said, the setting and the central question of each dialogue are not incidental, merely conversation starters or inconsequential topics introduced as an excuse to discuss ontological and epistemological issues. Rather, conversation connects back directly to the underlying questions about the oracle under consideration in the dialogue. Rather than serving as pretexts for other inquiries, interrogation into the oracular sanctuary, the traditions and rituals surrounding the oracle, the role of the Pythia, and the nature and type of responses given are gateways to greater ontological understanding. As an intermediary between the human and divine spheres, the oracle invites reflection into how these worlds relate to each other, while providing hints and suggestions of proper explanations through the physical

sanctuary as well as through Delphic cult. Ultimately, in the dialogues Plutarch demonstrates the didactic role of the Delphic oracle. Plutarch expands Delphi's role to that of a teacher and instructor of humanity, adding to the sanctuary's pedigree by making the oracle itself a model for how to conceive of the divine and how best to approach answers to philosophical and theological questions. The oracle is the perfect teacher for questions regarding human nature and the role of the divine in the world, through its status as the most famous, and one of the most trusted, points of mediation between the divine and human realms.

As a teacher of the divine, the oracle also functions as an ideal medium for demonstrating how to engage in philosophical reflection, in particular on religious matters where certainty is difficult and proof nearly impossible to achieve. Plutarch realizes this function slightly differently across the three dialogues. In *De E apud Delphos*, the setting and structure of the dialogue reveal to the reader the proper way to approach enigmatic and seemingly inexplicable problems. Plutarch-as-narrator deliberately chooses to use a dialogue to answer the question of the meaning of the E, rather than providing his children and the guests with a straight answer, and calls attention to this decision. In so doing, Plutarch transforms the dialogue from a simple answer to a question into a teachable moment for both his internal and his external audience. *De Pythiae oraculis* demonstrates how to have a productive dialogue, with the interlocutors working closely together to reach increasingly more nuanced answers to philosophical questions. Finally, *De defectu oraculorum* demonstrates what kinds of questions prompt good philosophical discussion, and how to go about answering them. At each point the interlocutors remind each other to interrogate the logic of their arguments, the reasonableness of their conclusions, and what

assumptions underlie their claims. It is notable in all three dialogues that it is not the conclusions that are emphasized, but the journey. The conversation always wraps back around to the initial question at hand in its conclusion, but in a way that accounts for the many paths the interlocutors took along the way. Were the point of the dialogues to provide clear and concise answers, they would surely fail to fulfil their purpose. As didactic models for how to approach philosophical inquiry, they represent three different yet complementary lessons on how to apply rational, philosophical inquiry to traditional religious practice and ritual.

b. the portrayal of the oracle

the purpose of the oracle

It comes as no surprise that Plutarch portrays the Delphic oracle in a positive light, in particular concerning the purpose of the oracle. Nevertheless, while on a superficial level the reported or demonstrated purpose of the oracle is the same across the Delphic dialogues – the oracle is a gift from the god to humans, and as such is intended to help them and be a source of guidance in their lives – going deeper, clear differences emerge between the dialogues as well as between individual interlocutors in each.

In *De E apud Delphos*, Plutarch-as-narrator describes the oracle as providing guidance to humans, helping them through the difficult decisions of daily life. As an extension of the god, however, the Delphic oracle also reflects the god's love of logic and philosophy. This is manifested in the oracle's propensity to challenge the intellect of those keen enough to perceive it, and to prompt humans to engage in and further develop logic and logical inquiry. The oracle achieves this both through the physical sanctuary itself, and

the mysterious E in particular, but also through enigmatic oracular responses, as Theon and Ammonius claim. *De Pythiae oraculis* emphasizes the status of oracles as proclaimers of divine truth, intended to help mortals. Boethus's claim, that prophets speak with veiled language so as to be able to claim infallibility, is soundly rejected by the other interlocutors in favor of interpretations that preserve the oracle's prophetic powers and does not insult the god's divinity. *De defectu oraculorum* echoes the portrayal of the oracle as a boon and a gift to mortals, as seen especially in the speeches of Lamprias and Ammonius. Even Didymus, as Boethus in *De Pythiae oraculis,* implicitly supports this view in his claim that the closure of oracular sanctuaries is a signal of the god's displeasure with mortals.

The similarity in purpose at a macro level, as seen here, is clear. When it comes to what sorts of questions the oracle was intended to answer, however, there is considerably less agreement. Theon in *De Pythiae oraculis* argues that the god has adapted the oracle to meet the needs of a new population, suggesting that the god considers low questions as well as lofty ones to be within the purview of the oracle. In *De E apud Delphos,* Plutarch-as-narrator and Nicander present a similar understanding to Theon's in *De Pythiae oraculis,* but this view is challenged by Didymus in *De defectu oraculorum*: he argues that the god is insulted by humans taking such questions to the god, and the emphasis in the oracle stories throughout the dialogues is on the questions made by cities and kings or tyrants, not by ordinary people. From this divergence of portrayals, some constants emerge. In a world in which there are fewer oracular sanctuaries and where Roman domination has reduced the political agency of the Greek states, Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle as a constant, continuing to provide assistance and clarity to humans through the oracular responses given by the Pythia, the oracular sanctuary itself, and Delphic ritual and tradition.

oracle-seekers and queries

Throughout the Delphic dialogues, Plutarch paints a contrast between the past and Plutarch's present day with regard to the status of the Delphic oracle as well as the identity of the consultants and the matters concerning which they sought divine aid. Plutarch admits that the oracle is no longer frequently sought out by kings and generals, but staunchly denies that this has relegated Delphi to obscurity. On the contrary, the oracle is still thriving as a philosophical, rather than political, center.

In *De E apud Delphos*, the priest Nicander calls attention to the standard type of questions made to the oracle. While there are larger, *polis*-level questions such as whether to go to war, he also includes many everyday questions such as whether to marry or take up farming. This latter category of questions mirrors the claim by Plutarch-as-narrator about the purpose of the oracular sanctuary. Examples of the former type, however, make up the bulk of examples of actual oracles, or the dedications given in thanks for such oracles, cited in the dialogue. The catalogues of dedications from *poleis*, kings, and tyrants emphasize both the importance of Delphi and the importance of those who in the past relied on the god to help them make difficult and important decisions. Any temporal distinctions between the types of responses received or requests made in the past and those in the present are smoothed over: the focus is on the continuity of the importance and prestige of the Delphic sanctuary, not on how it has changed over time.

In contrast, the dichotomy between past and present serves as a focal point of the interlocutors' arguments in both *De Pythiae oraculis* and *De defectu oraculorum*. In *De Pythiae oraculis* Theon claims that in the past despots and tyrants used to consult to oracle on key political questions, but now it is all personal enquiries. Theon gives a political

explanation for this phenomenon, emphasizing the peace enjoyed in their present day as a key reason for this change. Humans and human society have changed, resulting in a different use of the oracle than in the past. The discontinuity between the Classical past and Plutarch's present day continues in *De defectu oraculorum*, although the various interlocutors dispute the exact nature of this discontinuity. Didymus blames the decline of humanity and people's attitudes towards the god as seen reflected in who was consulting the oracles and concerning what problems. This argument, however, is rebutted both directly and indirectly: Lamprias as the narrator demonstrates that this conclusion is false in the opening of the dialogue, in addition to telling Didymus so as a participant in the conversation. Ammonius associates the decrease in the number of people seeking oracles with the proportional decrease in the number of priestesses at Delphi. Ammonius rejects the idea that this decrease is a consequence of a greater indifference to the oracle by humans or the god, however, claiming instead that the number of oracular sanctuaries and the capacity for receiving oracle-seekers at each has stayed proportionate to the Greek population.

With the exception of *De E apud Delphos* with its rhetorical emphasis on the oracle's continuity from the past, the interlocutors in the Delphic dialogues paint a picture of an oracle that has undergone change. It is still thriving, but it has lost its role as the political mediator of the Greek world. *De Pythiae oraculis* and *De defectu oraculorum* emphasize both the heavier traffic at Delphi in the Classical past as well as loftier issues raised then as compared to their own day. This is not necessarily a reflection of a historical difference in usage; texts about personal questions are far less likely to have been preserved than those concerning kings and states. However this may be, Plutarch's interlocutors posit

a historical change, and so it is necessary to take this claim seriously in order to understand Plutarch's literary portrayal of the oracle. Plutarch's emphasis on the oracle's continuity *in spite of* this change in the status of oracle-seekers and the magnitude of their questions supports his overall portrayal of Delphi's new role in the Mediterranean world. The Delphic oracle is still relevant not for its ability to influence on a political level, but for what it represents: a medium through which humans may become closer to understanding the divine.

ambiguous oracles

Plutarch takes a cautious approach to ambiguous oracles, with the interlocutors careful to present them in a light that reflects positively on the god. That the Delphic oracle has given less than clear oracular responses in the past is not questioned in any of the dialogues, and the language Plutarch employs to describe this phenomenon (αἴνιγμα, ἀμφιβολία, ἀσαφός) is decidedly unambiguous on this matter.

In *De E apud Delphos* ambiguous oracles are designed to prompt humans to use logical reasoning. They are not a hindrance or a trick played on oracle-seekers, but continue the purpose of the oracular sanctuary: to benefit and guide humans by promoting education and rational thinking. This explanation is not compatible with that given by Theon in *De Pythiae oraculis* to address this same phenomenon. In *De E apud Delphos*, the ambiguous oracles must be the product of the god for the explanation to be logically coherent, while in *De Pythiae oraculis* the opposite is claimed: the god does not deliberately mask the truth. Any ambiguity or vagueness is the product of the Pythia rather than the god, since the words should be seen as hers, not the god's. Theon does not supply a single explanation

for why the Pythia would add this ambiguity, suggesting that it could be to hide the truth from a wicked oracle-seeker, or to hide the response from the oracle-seeker's enemies. Ultimately, since the Pythia is herself human, the motivations of the various priestesses over the centuries is not important – her nature and actions can change: it is the nature of the god that cannot. Finally, in *De defectu oraculorum*, Lamprias as narrator describes the god as employing a vague and ambiguous oracle both to deny the oracle-seeker the knowledge he sought, and as a rebuke to Epimenides for having the gall to ask such a question of the oracle.

In each dialogue, the ambiguous oracles and the reason for them ties back directly to the key questions at hand in the dialogue, hinging on the portrayal of the god promoted by the particular interlocutor(s) involved. The variety of explanations present in the Delphic dialogues points to the problem of Delphic ambiguity for Plutarch. It is prevalent and has far-reaching implications for the nature of the god and his interactions with humans, as well as for the source and interpretation of oracular responses.

the god and the Pythia

The role of the Pythia in the divinatory process, and the corresponding role of the god, fluctuate between the dialogues. In *De E apud Delphos* and *De defectu oraculorum*, the Pythia is deemphasized to the point of becoming invisible. She is rendered irrelevant to the divinatory process via omission in *De E apud Delphos*, and serves as a passive vessel for the *daimones* or the divine *pneuma* in *De defectu oraculorum*, as seen in Lamprias's tale of an oracular consultation that led to the death of the priestess. In contrast, Theon gives the Pythia a comparatively outsized role in *De Pythiae oraculis*, describing the oracles as

reflections of the truth from the god off the soul of the Pythia. Theon's argument gives the Pythia considerably more control over the oracles than is seen in either of the other dialogues. It is worth emphasizing, however, that in none of the dialogues is the divine source of the oracles, or their inherent truthfulness, seriously doubted. Those who do cast scorn upon the oracle, including the Epicurean Boethus and the Cynic Didymus, are quickly countered by the other interlocutors who emphasize that they must proceed with proper reverence to the god. Scrutiny of the oracle should not cross the line into impiety.

Finally, the function of the rituals at the sanctuary, including the purity of the priestess, the ritual sacrifices, and the observance of the proper days and times for consultation to occur are themes running throughout the Delphic dialogues. In each case, the interlocutors as a group argue that the rituals surrounding the oracle should not be ignored by the philosopher, but provide clues to the theological questions for which the interlocutors are seeking logical answers. Although Plutarch does not demonstrate much respect for the Delphic priests and the local tour guides in particular, the traditional rituals of the Delphic oracle are upheld in each of the dialogues. As Sarapion reminds the group in *De Pythiae oraculis*, they are following the faith of their ancestors not through blind acceptance, but by employing logical reasoning to demonstrate why these traditions are not only good, but reflect further reaching truths about the nature of the divine.[187]

c. conclusion

When taken together, the Delphic dialogues present an image of the Delphic oracle that is much more than an oracular sanctuary. Delphi stands as a touchstone for humans to access

[187] *De Pythiae oraculis* 402e.

divine knowledge through the oracular responses, but also through its physical presence. Walking through the sanctuary opens up new lines of inquiry for those with curious minds, and provides clues as to how those questions might be answered. Delphi is the center of the world, perhaps not literally, but certainly metaphorically, or so Plutarch would have his reader believe. Delphi serves as an ideal location for philosophical inquiry because it is a sanctuary to a philosophical god whose presence permeates Delphic ritual and cult as well as the physical dedications at Delphi. Delphi may no longer play a pivotal role in the political sphere, but through the Delphic dialogues Plutarch makes the case for a new role for the sanctuary as a center for philosophical and theological reflection, where individuals from different schools of thought may gather to share knowledge and work together in their search for deeper understanding. The dedication to Sarapion at the opening of *De E apud Delphos* illustrates this principle clearly. Plutarch dedicates the dialogue to a Stoic philosopher, and asks Sarapion to share it with his friends in Athens.[188] Plutarch declares his intention that this dialogue spawn further conversations in Athens and elsewhere, requesting a response from Sarapion. In this way, Plutarch extends Delphi's sphere of influence in the philosophical realm beyond simply those who travel to the physical sanctuary; anyone may experience the power of the oracle through the Delphic dialogues.

[188] *De E apud Delphos* 384e.

Chapter 2

Reading *Parallel Lives*

Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* form a series of paired biographies in which Plutarch compares Greek and Roman statesmen. The biographical books are made up of the two *Lives* in each pairing and are bound together by rhetorical display pieces – the opening prologue and the concluding *synkrisis* – which frame the *Lives* as explorations into moral and ethical questions, conducted through narrations of the lives of famous Greek and Roman statesmen. Twenty-two of the biographical books have survived, although the original length of the series is unclear.[189] As with many of the works of the *Moralia*, it is difficult to date any of the individual books of the *Lives* with any degree of certainty. Internal references allow for a rough relative chronology in some cases, but this does not extend to all books of the *Lives* and cannot be fixed to historical points without considerable speculation.[190] In recent decades, scholars have increasingly argued that the *Lives* should be read as works of literature, and have worked towards a deeper understanding of Plutarch's philosophical program in the biographies. Consequently, before I address how Plutarch portrays the Delphic oracle in the *Parallel Lives*, I will lay out here how I approach the *Lives* as a rhetorical project and how Plutarch presents philosophical and moral principles in these biographies, including their syncretic structure, the nature of Plutarch's

[189] Twenty-three books are listed in the Lamprias Catalogue, in addition to the unpaired *Lives* and the *Lives of the Caesars*. Plutarch mentions *Lives* of other men in the biographies as well, though it is by no means certain that these were ever written. For a discussion of the scope of the *Parallel Lives*, see Pelling (2010), Hagg (2012: 239-244), and Geiger (2014: 292-293).

[190] Jones (1966: 66-74) lays out the evidence for a relative chronology of the paired biographies based on internal references, and attempts to fix this relative ordering to specific dates. Jones' work has been continued for the Roman *Lives* by Pelling (2002: 1-44, 91-115). For more recent attempts to date the *Lives*, see Geiger (1981: 170-177), Sirinelli (2000: 285-302), and Nikolaidis (2005).

moralism, the role of the reader in Plutarch's philosophical agenda in the biographical books, and the books' purpose as well as their intended audience. In so doing, I will argue that in the *Lives*, as in the Delphic dialogues, Plutarch does not give clear answers, but instead instructs the reader on how to undertake serious philosophical reflection. Plutarch reveals the *Lives'* didactic purpose through the syncretic nature of the biographical books, his use of implicit rather than explicit moralism, and his focus on reader engagement in the texts. As I will demonstrate, this didactic purpose of the *Lives* is an intrinsic aspect of Plutarch's philosophical project in the biographies, teaching his readers how to engage in critical reflection and self-assessment.

The *Parallel Lives* are at their core syncretic. The juxtaposition of a Greek and a Roman, connected by shared circumstances, political careers, or virtues and vices, implies comparison from the outset, and Plutarch reinforces this comparison directly throughout the *Lives* in the structure of the books as well as in the contents. Duff has demonstrated that the paired books follow a four-part division.[191] Each book typically opens with a prologue announcing the pair under scrutiny and introducing some themes shared by the two figures.[192] After the prologue comes the first *Life* – typically that of the Greek figure – followed by the second *Life.*[193] A formal *synkrisis* ends the book, comparing the relative

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[191] See most notably Duff (2011b).

[192] I follow Duff's revision of Stadter's (1988) distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' proems. Duff, following Stiefenhofer (1914/1916), instead categorizes the openings to the first *Lives* in each pairing into prologues and proems, with the former operating at the level of the book and the latter at the level of the individual *Lives* they preface. Books without prologues (as catalogued by Duff 2011b: 218): *Solon-Publicola, Aristides-Cato the Elder, Coriolanus-Alcibiades, Philopoemen-Flamininus, Pyrrhus-Marius, Lycurgus-Numa, Lysander-Sulla, Agesilaus-Pompey,* and *Themistocles-Camillus*. On the structure and function of the prologues see Duff (2011b) 218-222 and Duff (2014).

[193] *Coriolanus-Alcibiades*, *Aemilius-Timoleon*, and *Sertorius-Eumenes* are preserved as Roman-Greek in the manuscripts. As Duff (2011b: 221) argues, it is clear at least for the latter two pairs that this must have been the order intended by Plutarch because the *Aemilius* and the *Sertorius*

merits and faults of the two main characters developed in the first and second biographies.[194] Not every book contains all four elements, but the pattern is consistent enough across the extant *Lives* to be read as the standard arrangement from which Plutarch occasionally deviated.[195] This four-part structure embraces comparison, demanding that the reader from the opening prologue through to the final *synkrisis* approach the texts with an eye towards extrapolation and analysis of similarity and difference.[196]

The nature of Plutarch's moralism is central to understanding how Plutarch judges – and expects his readers to judge – in the *Lives*; that is, how Plutarch presents events and characters in the *Lives*, and how he indicates his opinions of his subjects' actions or motivations. While Plutarch expects his readers to engage with him in his comparative exercise through the process of judging, seen most explicitly in the concluding *synkriseis* ending most pairs of *Lives* but also in his injunctions to the reader in the prologues,[197] he does not make it easy for them to find the answers he bids them to seek. Plutarch refrains from telling his readers directly what they should think regarding the characters' actions

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begin with prologues for their respective pairings. Pelling (2002: 357-359) rationalizes Plutarch's deviation from his normal ordering in these three pairs, arguing that typically in the biographical books Plutarch establishes a normal pattern in the first life, from which the following life deviates: for these three pairs the Roman figure demonstrated the more 'normal' pattern, thus causing Plutarch to alter his normal ordering.

[194] Books without concluding *synkriseis*: *Themistocles-Camillus*, *Pyrrhus-Marius*, *Alexander-Caesar*, and *Phocion-Cato the Younger*. Swain (1992: 111) argues that these *synkriseis* must have been lost, because the *synkrisis* is too fundamental a component to the biographical books to be able to be left off, as some of the prologues appear to have been. Against this view, Duff (1999a: 252-257) and Larmour (2014: 410-411) suggest that it is possible that Plutarch chose not to compose *synkriseis* for these *Lives*.

[195] As argued by Duff (2011b) 218, 258-259.

[196] Plutarch states comparison as the goal of the exercise in the prologues of the *Pericles-Fabius Maximus* (*Pericles* 2.5), *Aemilius-Timoleon* (*Aemilius* 1.8), *Demosthenes-Cicero* (*Demosthenes* 3.5), *Phocion-Cato the Younger* (*Phocion* 3.5), and *Agis and Cleomenes-Gracchi* (*Agis* 2.5).

[197] On the first- and second-person addresses in the prologues, see Pelling (2002: 267-282), Duff (2011b: 219-221; 2014), and Chrysanthou (2018: 38-40).

and motives, or how they should translate the actions and experiences of long-dead men into lessons for their own lives. Instead, Plutarch employs what Duff describes as implicit moralism: "narrative without direct narratorial comment; but moral issues are highlighted and often presented in such a way as to encourage in the reader a particular attitude of praise or blame."[198] Plutarch increases the difficulty of this exercise even further, as Chrysanthou argues, by keeping his readers guessing until the very end of the *Lives* as to how the subjects' actions should be judged, presenting conflicting views of their characters and motivations.[199] By taking a more subtle approach to presenting moral lessons in the *Lives,* Plutarch places the onus of interpretation on the reader, anticipating a reader whose moral framework is sophisticated enough to recognize virtue and vice without explicit identification as such by the narrator.[200]

Plutarch's emphasis on judgement and comparison is nowhere made clearer than in the formal *synkriseis* ending the pairs. The formal *synkrisis* is fundamental to understanding the overall syncretic structure of the *Lives* and Plutarch's authorial positioning. Scholars evaluating the *Lives* have until recently typically ignored or overlooked the *synkriseis*, criticizing them as overly simplistic and inappropriate endings

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[198] Duff (1999a) 54. Duff's use of the terms 'implicit' and 'explicit' moralism is a revision of Pelling's categories of exploratory versus expository, and protreptic versus descriptive moralism. These categories, as Pelling (2002: 238, 249) acknowledges, are problematic because Plutarch varies his approach, and often operates at the intersections of these categories rather than within any one particular mode. See also Duff (2007/2008).

[199] Chrysanthou (2018) 102.

[200] Duff (1999a: 55) articulates the problem well: "Most Lives provide very little explicit guidance as to how to understand the moral position of their subjects or of the actions narrated. Plutarch rarely intervenes into the narrative to point out where right and wrong lie…. Plutarch expects his reader to recognize, and to question, where an action is to be commended, and where blamed. He shapes his *Lives* in a way which draws on a set of moral doctrines, though it is not clear whether and on what level the audience would share the moral doctrines."

to the biographical pairs.[201] Erbse's seminal defense of the *synkriseis* in 1956 spurred increased attention to the form and their role in Plutarch's *Lives*, a theme that was taken up by, in particular, Stadter, Pelling, and Larmour, who demonstrated the close connections between the *Lives* in each pairing and the syncretic nature of Plutarch's biographical project.[202] In spite of this increased attention on the *synkriseis*, scholars still struggled to explain their seemingly simplistic nature, in particular in contrast to the complexity of the moral framework of the biographies.[203] Duff, in his 1999 monograph *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice,* argued that this outward simplicity should not be seen as a weakness of the biographical books, but was deliberate on the part of the author.[204] This view of the *synkriseis* as deliberately vague and thought-provoking has become widely accepted, though not without some reservations. In what follows, I will argue for an understanding of the formal *synkriseis* as rhetorical set-pieces designed to engage the audience in critical assessment of the characters and actions of the figures profiled in the *Lives* seen through the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the conclusions, Plutarch's inclusion of themes in the *synkriseis* that he ignores in the *Lives*, and explicit calls within the *synkriseis* themselves for the reader to join Plutarch in the comparative exercise.

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[201] For example, Moles (1988: 25) calls the *synkriseis* "disappointingly trite," while Stadter (1989: xxxii) labels them "rather pedestrian," and Pelling (2002: 353) calls the ending to the *Demetrius-Antony* pairing "uncomfortably trivial." Even Tatum (2010: 3) argues that "there is no question… that the *synkriseis* often seem at odds with the *Lives* that precede them."

[202] Erbse (1956), Stadter (1975), Pelling (2002) 349-363 (reprint of his 1986 article), and Larmour (1988).

[203] See, for example Pelling (2002: 349): "*Synkrisis* is certainly vital to Plutarch's technique in some pairs; yet it is not difficult to find others where our understanding of one Life is not especially enhanced by its pair."

[204] See also Duff (2000) 144-145.

The *synkriseis* purport to judge the paired men, but although they present arguments weighing the relative merits of the Greek and the Roman, the *synkriseis* are not conclusive regarding the characters in question.[205] Instead, Plutarch equivocates, praising first one, and then the other man, and in so doing offers up an equally balanced perspective that demonstrates the positive and the negative aspects of both men, while also demonstrating that no one is entirely perfect or thoroughly reprehensible.[206] Even Demetrius and Antony, two of Plutarch's worst models for proper behavior in the *Lives,* are not entirely without virtues: Demetrius's desire to rule was blameless, Plutarch claims, since he was set on liberating Greece, while Antony's rule constituted a tyranny; but Antony should be praised for winning power and glory on his own, having pulled himself up by his own bootstraps while Demetrius inherited power and prestige from his father Antigonus.[207] Rather than declaring one figure the winner overall, Plutarch emphasizes that which figure should be deemed 'better' depends on the criteria chosen for judging. As Larmour argues, "the concluding *synkrisis*… begins, not ends, the process of comparison between the two in moral and philosophical terms."[208] In other words, Plutarch does not present the *synkriseis* as the final word on the moral lessons to be learned from the biographies; instead, they serve as examples of how one might go about distilling lessons on conduct, values, and leadership from famous figures of Greek and Roman history. As provisional assessments

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[205] Such exercises where Plutarch presents a balanced perspective, arguing both sides of an issue, are also found elsewhere in Plutarch's corpus, most prominently in *De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute* and *Terrestriane an aquatilia animalia sint callidiora.*

[206] As argued by Swain (1992), Duff (1999a: 257-262), Duff (2000), and Pelling (2005: 328).

[207] *Demetrius-Antony* 1.1-3, 2.1-5.

[208] Larmour (2014) 408. Larmour (2014: 412) argues that the rather abrupt way *synkriseis* often end is deliberate, as the abruptness resists a sense of finality: the text may be over, but the syncretic exercise is not.

of the characters and careers of the Greek and Roman statesmen, the *synkriseis* push readers to engage with the material Plutarch has presented and conduct their own comparative exercise, taking Plutarch's *synkrisis* as a model for how it could be done.

In addition to the ambivalent nature of the judging, Plutarch also promotes reader engagement by focusing on themes in the *synkriseis* that are ignored or not emphasized in the *Lives* they follow. For example, in the *synkrisis* for the *Demosthenes-Cicero* pair, the figures are compared on criteria that Plutarch claims in the prologue he will avoid entirely in these *Lives*: rhetorical style and oratorical skill.[209] Similarly, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, in the *synkrisis* to the *Theseus-Romulus* pair, Plutarch suggests that Theseus's very life was against the will of the gods since he was conceived in violation of an oracular response his father Aegeus received from Delphi.[210] Nowhere in the *Theseus* does Plutarch make or even suggest the idea that Theseus's birth was ill-fated. Duff argues that contrasts such as these between the contents of the *Lives* and their corresponding *synkriseis* is by design, and that Plutarch triggers moral reflection in the reader through the inherent disconnect between the tone and contents of the *Lives*, and the focus and conclusions of the *synkriseis*, goading readers to dispute the claims of the *synkriseis* and conduct their own assessment.[211] But, as Tatum has argued persuasively, Plutarch did not need to provoke his readers into reflection by presenting seemingly false or misleading claims in the *synkriseis*,

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[209] *Demosthenes* 3.1, *Demosthenes-Cicero* 1.2. This discussion of the relative eloquence of the two men consumes three out of the five sections of the *synkrisis*. Conversely, in other *Lives* all aspects of the biographical book are closely connected. As Larmour (1988) demonstrates, the prologues, *Lives*, and *synkrisis* in the *Theseus-Romulus* pairing all relate closely to one another, with themes introduced in the prologue echoed throughout both *Lives* and returned to in the *synkrisis*. For analysis of other *Lives* with disjunctive *synkriseis*, see Larmour (2014: 414-415) and Chrysanthou (2018: 22-23).

[210] *Theseus-Romulus* 6.7.

[211] Duff (2000). Duff is followed closely in this view by Chrysanthou (2018) 23, *et passim*.

since *synkrisis* was a regular component of Greek *paideia* in Plutarch's day, an important aspect of which was reflection and assessment by the audience of the speaker's arguments. Consequently, Plutarch's implicit readers would have understood that upon reaching the end of the text the onus would shift to them to assess the validity of Plutarch's arguments in his syncretic exercise.[212] Understood in this way, the audience would anticipate that the *synkrisis* would present an argument that they, the implicit audience, would be expected to judge and critique. Clear disconnects between the *Lives* and the *synkriseis,* rather than goading the readers to challenge Plutarch's claims, instead demonstrate alternative means of judging, and invite assessment based on different criteria than might have been readily apparent to the readers.

By employing a rhetorical form in which the reader was understood to be expected to participate, Plutarch invites his readers to draw their own conclusions, both concerning the issues he raises as well as other facets of the subjects' lives. The *synkriseis* stand as examples for the reader, demonstrating one way of comparing and judging the figures in the *Lives*. This demand for reader engagement is implied, as Tatum argues, in the use of the *synkrisis* form itself, but is also at times made explicit, in particular towards the conclusion of the *synkrisis*. In the final statement of the *Philopoemen-Flamininus*, Plutarch exhorts his reader in the imperative to continue the deliberative process even after the text has concluded:

> ἐπεὶ δ' οὕτως ἐξεταζομένων δυσθεώρητος ἡ διαφορά, σκόπει μὴ τῷ μὲν Ἕλληνι τὸν ἐμπειρίας πολεμικῆς καὶ στρατηγίας στέφανον, τῷ δὲ Ῥωμαίῳ τὸν δικαιοσύνης καὶ χρηστότητος ἀποδιδόντες, οὐ φαύλως διαιτᾶν δόξομεν.[213]

[212] Tatum (2010) 14-18.

[213] *Philpoemen-Flamininus* 3.5.

> But since, after we have examined it in this way, the difference is so hard to observe, consider whether we would not seem to judge well, if we give the crown of experience in war and in generalship to the Greek, and that of justice and moral excellence to the Roman.

Plutarch addresses the audience directly and instructs them to judge whether the conclusion he has come to is correct. Here, as seen in the Delphic dialogues, Plutarch ends the book with an address to the audience relinquishing control of the discussion to them: he has made his move, it is now up to them to decide whether his case is convincing. The ending to the *Philpoemen-Flamininus* is not alone in addressing the reader in this way; direct address and engagement of the audience in the deliberative process occur in a similar fashion at the end of the *synkriseis* in the *Agis and Cleomenes-Gracchi* and *Lysander-Sulla* pairings as well.[214] As Pelling has noted, "In all these pairs the men are contestants, and the agonistic contests of the narrative prepare for the final synkritic competition. That is only resolved in the final words, and the judges are narrator and narratees."[215] Plutarch's inclusion of the audience in the judgement process is not limited to these *Lives*; direct address of the reader in the second person, or the use of first-person plurals occurs in

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[214] *Agis & Cleomenes-Gracchi* 5.7: "therefore, you yourself also observe the difference [between the men] from what has been said" (συνορᾷς μὲν οὖν καὶ αὐτὸς ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων τὴν διαφοράν). *Lysander-Sulla* 5.5: "It is time then to consider, whether we should not go utterly astray from the truth in declaring that Sulla was more successful, but Lysander possessed fewer faults, and in giving to the former first prize for self-control and moderation, while to the latter that for generalship and courage" (ὥρα δὴ σκοπεῖν, μὴ οὐ πολὺ τἀληθοῦς διαμαρτάνωμεν ἀποφαινόμενοι πλέονα μὲν κατωρθωκέναι Σύλλαν, ἐλάττονα δὲ ἐξημαρτηκέναι Λύσανδρον, καὶ τῷ μὲν ἐγκρατείας καὶ σωφροσύνης, τῷ δὲ στρατηγίας καὶ ἀνδρείας ἀποδιδόντες τὸ πρωτεῖον). Similar, though in a different vein, is the ending to the *Cimon-Lucullus* (3.6): "as a result, judgement is difficult for someone considering all of the evidence" (ὥστε πάντῃ μεταλαμβάνοντι δυσδιαίτητον εἶναι τὴν κρίσιν).

[215] Pelling (2002) 274. On the relationship between these two judges – narrator and narratee – see Pelling (2002) 273-361. Against Pelling's arguments of sympathetic readings, Duff (1999a) argues that the *synkriseis* are deliberately antagonistic, positioning the narratee *against* the narrator.

fourteen out of the eighteen extant *synkriseis*, in particular in the opening and closing statements.[216] By engaging the reader directly in his demonstration of how one might compare the figures featured in his biographical books, in addition to using a rhetorical form familiar to the readers that demanded reader engagement, Plutarch encourages his readers to undertake their own evaluation of the material in the biographies, and read his initial comparison in the *synkrisis* as an example of how they could proceed with their own assessment.

Plutarch thus appears to expect his readers to engage with the texts and the events they portray directly, but for what purpose? How does comparing the lives of long-dead statesmen assist Plutarch's readers in their own lives? Central to this issue is the question of Plutarch's intended readership. Plutarch's ostensible addressee and formal dedicatee for the *Lives* is Quintus Sosius Senecio, a prominent Roman statesman and twice consul who also served as dedicatee of Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales* and *Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus*.[217] The opening dedication, presumably included in the prologue to the *Epaminondas-Scipio,* the opening pair of the series, has been lost along with the *Lives* it accompanied,[218] but Plutarch addresses Sosius by name in the prologues to three

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[216] First-person plurals in *synkriseis* (per Duff 2014): *Theseus-Romulus* 1.1; *Solon-Publicola* 1.3, 4.1; *Lycurgus-Numa* 1.1, 1.10, 2.10, 3.6; *Aristides-Cato the Elder* 3.3; *Pericles-Fabius Maxiumus* 1.1; *Demosthenes-Cicero* 1.2; *Nicias-Crassus* 2.3; *Coriolanus-Alcibiades* 1.1; *Philopoemen-Flamininus* 3.5; *Pelopidas-Marcellus* 1.1, 1.8; *Agis and Cleomenes-Gracchi* 1.1; *Lysander-Sulla* 1.1, 5.6; *Agesilaus-Pompey* 1.1.

[217] *Quaestiones convivales* 612c, *Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus* 75a-b. For Sosius's life and career, see Jones (1970) 101-104. Scholars have posited that Sosius was originally from the East; Jones (1970: 103) presents arguments for this hypothesis. For the counterarguments, see Swain (1996: 144, 426-427). Jones (1971) posits that the Plutarch's *Lives* were dedicated in 99 CE because of this dedication to Sosius Senecio, consul of 99 and 107 CE. While this is certainly possible, it is by no means certain.

[218] The identity of this Scipio – Africanus or Aemilianus – is unclear and debated. For the key arguments on either side see Zieger (1951: 895-896) and Herbert (1957). See also Stadter (1989:

of the extant books of *Lives*: *Theseus-Romulus, Demosthenes-Cicero,* and *Dion-Brutus*.[219] Plutarch's implicit audience may thus be assumed to be made up of elites such as Sosius, although scholars are divided as to who would be included in this list. Stadter argues that Sosius's identity as a Roman necessitates including other Roman elites in Plutarch's implicit audience, as does Plutarch's focus on prominent statesmen in the *Lives*.[220] Nevertheless, Plutarch's tone in the *Lives* is that of a Greek addressing other Greeks. As Pelling notes, Plutarch's explanation of basic Roman words, concepts, and institutions imply a non-Roman audience, as do some of Plutarch's less than complimentary remarks about Romans.[221] Even if, as Stadter suggests, the inclusion of such definitions and explanations is a nod to generic conventions, the resulting presentation is one that privileges a Greek perspective.[222] As Duff argues, "In the Roman *Lives* reader and narrator are Greeks looking outwards together at customs which are Roman and foreign."[223] Nevertheless, whether the audience is Greek or Roman, Plutarch is taking up the mantle of philosopher to the powerful and through his biographies teaching the elites of his day how to live and rule.

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xxviii). For the placement of this pair in the series, see Ziegler (1951: 897) and Geiger (1981: 85-87).

[219] *Theseus* 1.1, *Demosthenes* 1.1, *Dion* 1.1. See also *Demosthenes* 31.7. Pelling (2002: 270-271) argues that Sosius is named directly in these prologues because these *Lives* speak more directly or personally to him.

[220] Stadter (1997) 74-75, (2000) 494-498, (2002a), (2002b), (2002c) 123-132.

[221] Pelling (2002) 270-271. See also Swain (1996) 139-145. Such passages include: *Coriolanus* 25.3-4, *Antony* 59.8*, Crassus* 7.1*, Camillus* 5.1*, Fabius Maximus* 9.2. For a list of Roman terms in the *Lives*, see Ziegler and Gärtner (1980: 200-203).

[222] Stadter (2002c) 123-124.

[223] Duff (2007/2008) 9.

The *Lives,* then, present Greek and Roman statesmen of the past to potential leaders in Plutarch's present, containing lessons on morality and leadership. Scholars have scoured the *Lives* for potential commentary on the political and military events of Plutarch's day, attempting to pull direct lessons from the *Lives* for politicians and military leaders of the second century CE.[224] And yet, Plutarch remains steadfastly aloof, avoiding making direct comparisons between the events in his biographies and contemporary goings-on.[225] Plutarch's programmatic statements, scattered throughout the *Lives*, offer a way to try to understand how Plutarch intended the *Lives* to bring about moral change and reflection in the reader.[226] Of these programmatic statements, one of the most exemplary is the oft-recounted opening of the prologue to the *Aemilius-Timoleon*, in which Plutarch describes his purpose in crafting the *Lives*:

> ἐμοὶ [μὲν] τῆς τῶν βίων ἅψασθαι μὲν γραφῆς συνέβη δι' ἑτέρους, ἐπιμένειν δὲ καὶ φιλοχωρεῖν ἤδη καὶ δι' ἐμαυτόν, ὥσπερ ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ τῇ ἱστορίᾳ πειρώμενον ἀμῶς γέ πως κοσμεῖν καὶ ἀφομοιοῦν πρὸς τὰς ἐκείνων ἀρετὰς τὸν βίον.

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[224] For attempts to read allusions to contemporary political events in the *Lives*, see Stadter (2002b), Brenk (2002), Zecchini (2002), and Monaco Caterine (2017). For how Plutarch constructs the image of ideal statesmen in his own day through the use of historical exempla, see Pelling (2004) and Trego (2016).

[225] Against attempts to fix Plutarch's references to particular contemporary events, see Pelling (2002: 239-249, 253-265) and Geiger (2017). Pelling (2002: 245) takes a passage from *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* as evidence that "Plutarch clearly hopes his audience will be too sensible to assume too close a correlation between the glorious deeds of the past and anything that might be practicable in present circumstances." See also Nikolaidis (2014) 356. While it is possible that Plutarch tucked allusions to or commentary on specific contemporary events into the *Lives*, it is difficult if not impossible to prove when he is doing this with any degree of certainty.

[226] *Nicias-Crassus* (*Nicias* 1.1-5), *Alexander-Caesar* (*Alexander* 1.1-3), *Pericles-Fabius Maximus* (*Pericles* 1.1-2.4), *Aemilius-Timoleon* (*Aemilius* 1.1-8), *Demetrius-Antony* (*Demetrius* 1.1-8). Stadter (1988) contextualizes Plutarch's proems within the genre of biography as well as more broadly in the Latin and Greek literature of the imperial era. Duff (1999a: 13-70) analyzes the extant programmatic statements and assesses their scope and validity when the whole of the series is considered, arguing that Plutarch's programmatic statements are not all-encompassing, nor does he appear always to have done what he claims he will do in these statements. On this disconnect between the programmatic statements and the *Lives*, see also Pelling (1988: 10-13).

> οὐδὲν γὰρ ἀλλ' ἢ συνδιαιτήσει καὶ συμβιώσει τὸ γινόμενον ἔοικεν, ὅταν ὥσπερ ἐπιξενούμενον ἕκαστον αὐτῶν ἐν μέρει διὰ τῆς ἱστορίας ὑποδεχόμενοι καὶ παραλαμβάνοντες ἀναθεωρῶμεν 'ὅσσος ἔην οἷός τε,'[227] τὰ κυριώτατα καὶ κάλλιστα πρὸς γνῶσιν ἀπὸ τῶν πράξεων λαμβάνοντες. 'φεῦ φεῦ, τί τούτου χάρμα μεῖζον ἂν λάβοις'[228] ⟨καὶ⟩ πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν ἠθῶν ἐνεργότερον;[229]
>
> I undertook the writing of *Lives* for the sake of others, but I am persisting in it and enjoying it for my own sake, attempting to arrange and to conform my life to the virtues of those [in the *Lives*] through history, using it as in a mirror. For the result seems like nothing other than sharing one's life and living together, whenever we receive and welcome each one of them as if entertaining a guest, we examine carefully "how large he was, and of what sort," taking the most important and best things to know from their deeds. "Oh, what greater joy than this can you attain," ⟨and⟩ more productive for the improvement of character?

Plutarch here claims that the *Lives* are to serve as mirrors for the readers and help bring about moral improvement. As Zadorojnyi has demonstrated, the image of mirrors did not hold the same resonance for Plutarch as it does today. Instead, he argues that "for the Graeco-Roman beholder… the dynamics of mirroring is a two-way process of metamorphosis that takes place on and thanks to the mirror-surface."[230] That is to say, mirrors do not merely reflect the viewer's image; rather, they provide the opportunity for transformation on the part of the viewer by illuminating some aspect of themselves that is

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[227] Homer *Iliad* 24. 630.

[228] Sophocles fr. 579.

[229] *Aemilius* 1.1-3.

[230] Zadorojnyi (2010) 171.

highlighted through the mirror-viewing.[231] In a similar vein, Stadter argues that by juxtaposing two figures from different cultural, political, and historical circumstances and asking the readers to compare the two men, Plutarch aims to train his readers in how to recognize and distinguish virtues and vices in real-world situations.[232] It is this distillation of virtue and vice that allows the readers then to evaluate their own lives and actions. Stadter's interpretation of ἔσοπτρον ("mirror") is thus more akin to a magnifying glass, highlighting virtues and focusing the readers' attention on their own souls and their respective strengths and weaknesses.[233] Understood in this light, the *Lives* are intended to open a three-way comparison between the reader and the Greek and Roman figures under scrutiny in each pairing, with the biographies helping to identify moral dilemmas and ethical issues as well as providing examples of the benefits or consequences of different choices.

Reading the *Lives* as the opening of a dialogue between the author and his readers emphasizes the preliminary nature of the biographical books; the *Lives* only truly fulfill their purpose as intended by Plutarch when they are read and studied by the reader. In this way, the texts are transformed from the works of a teacher – Plutarch – to teachers themselves.[234] Plutarch has anticipated reader-response theory in his conception of a

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[231] On the image of mirrors in Graeco-Roman thought, see also Taylor (2008), especially 1-26, 195-201.

[232] Stadter (2003/2004) 94-95.

[233] See also Van der Stockt's (1992: 32-37) analysis of the programmatic opening to the *Pericles-Fabius Maximus* pair (*Pericles* 1-2), in which he demonstrates that Plutarch uses the term ἱστορία as an active call to action to the readers to undergo moral investigation and critical contemplation. Rather than imitation (μίμησις) being the goal of the syncritic exercise, Plutarch invites the reader to reflect and investigate the moral questions posed by the *Lives*.

[234] As Xenophontos (2016: 21) argues, "The teacher is not the only one who guides a student through the textual presentation; the text itself is a living entity, another teacher for Plutarch's readers."

specific type of reader who actively participates in his philosophical project, thereby crafting as an implicit audience for the *Lives* readers who play a critical role in constituting the text.[235]

The *Lives* cover prominent political figures, but their focus is on bringing about moral improvement, rather than just teaching how to rule successfully. Plutarch is asking his readers to assess the decision-making process of each of the statesmen he is covering, and the justifications for their actions, but also demonstrates that success comes to individuals who act abhorrently such as Demetrius and Sulla, and failure to the just and pious, as with Solon and Brutus. Rather than being handbooks on leadership intended only for prominent statesmen in positions mirroring those of the subjects of the *Lives*, as Jacobs argues,[236] the *Lives* instead use history as a model to assess the human condition: what

[235] For discussions of reader-response theory and Plutarch, see Pelling (2002: 247-249), Konstan (2004) and (2006), and Xenophontos (2016) *passim.* Konstan (2004) argues that Plutarch presents texts as having multiple equally valid interpretations in both the *Lives* and *De audiendis poetis*; there may be more or less correct interpretations, but it is more important to use literature as a stepping stone to the truth than to search for the original meaning of the author of a particular text. Additionally, Duff (2011a) argues that Plutarch imagined such sophisticated readers for both the *Lives* and many of the works of the *Moralia.* Konstan (2006) further demonstrates that Plutarch's seemingly high expectations of his readers are not unusual for Greek and Latin authors, who regularly expected readers to wrestle with their texts and play an active role in constituting the text (2006: 15). On reading culture in Plutarch's day see also Johnson (2010), especially 203-205.

[236] E.g. Jacobs (2018: 416-422). I am not convinced that Plutarch would have recognized Jacobs's distinction between philosophical and pragmatic biography: a proper, educated individual was expected to be involved in politics, and philosophy was inherently political throughout Greek history. As Roskam (2002) demonstrates, most of Plutarch's corpus falls under what Jacobs terms "pragmatic", offering advice to leaders and to the emperor in particular as to how they could improve their own characters, and, through them, the lives of the people as a whole. Similarly, Jacobs's distinction between Plutarch's treatises on practical ethics and the *Lives*, claiming that the former "were constructed to effect internal changes in the reader in order to improve his sense of his own well-being" while the latter "focused on enhancing the reader's effectiveness in improving the well-being of his community" (2018: 9), makes a distinction between improvement of the self and that of others that is not clearly visible in Plutarch's philosophy. On this notion of the other in Plutarch's works, see Roskam (2004).

makes success, what brings happiness, and why.[237] Plutarch thus bids his readers to use history for the opposite effect that Livy famously does in the proem to his histories. Where Livy argues that he is turning to the past to escape the present ills, Plutarch enjoins the reader to bring the past into the present, reflecting on the historical vignettes he presents not for idle pleasure but for their own moral improvement.[238]

In the following chapters, I assess what role the Delphic oracle plays in the *Lives*, as well as how Plutarch presents the oracle and the oracular sanctuary. In so doing, I am not evaluating the historicity of Plutarch's accounts or his portrayal of the oracle, but rather his literary and philosophical presentation of the Delphic oracle in the biographies. Consequently, the sources of the oracle stories and their reliability will only be addressed if and when these issues are relevant to understanding Plutarch's text and the narrative that he is presenting. In investigating the Delphic oracle within the works, my approach fits Plutarch's own expectations of the reader as I have argued above: to think deeply about the characters and the events in the *Lives*, and to revisit the biographies and consider new questions and new lines of analysis. Within each chapter, I examine Plutarch's use of the oracle as a narrative motif and the role it plays in his characterization and moral program within each *Life*, as well as the nature of the oracle's involvement in crafting and revealing the characters and how this involvement changes based on historical era, from the mythic past with the *Theseus* down to the dawn of the Hellenistic era with the *Demetrius*. Keeping

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[237]As Roskam (2002) argues, this progress towards virtue is not separate from the life of the politician. Instead, the *Lives* should be viewed as Plutarch advocating for a collaboration between philosophy and politics for the sake of both the ruler and the ruled.

[238] Livy *pr.* 5. On the disingenuity of Livy's claim, see Chaplin (2001: 134-135). Although Livy's history does invite the reader to compare the past with the present, Livy's rhetorical move in his preface is diametrically opposed to how Plutarch presents his biographies to his readers. On the similarities in Plutarch and Livy's approaches to history, see, for example, Pelling (2004: 88-89).

in mind Plutarch's use of implicit moralism, I assess Plutarch's presentation of the oracle through his crafting and presentation of oracle stories, and through his use of the oracle to reveal the characters of his Greek subjects. In so doing, I evaluate how Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle to his contemporary audience, and how this image of the oracle compares to his presentation of the oracle, both in the past and in his own day, in the Delphic dialogues. Ultimately, I demonstrate that the Delphic oracle of the *Lives* shares many, though notably not all, of the characteristics identified and discussed by the interlocutors in the Delphic dialogues, including in particular the oracle's association with philosophical contemplation and the rejection of the notion that the oracle used ambiguous language in the responses maliciously or deceitfully. In the process, as I show, Plutarch tends to minimize the role of the Pythia in crafting the oracular responses, presenting her as a passive mouthpiece for the god and not as someone who is impacting directly the phrasing of the oracular responses except in (rare) cases of corruption. Furthermore, while in the biographies Plutarch does show the oracle playing an important and clearly political role in the archaic and classical periods in particular, he does not depict the Delphic oracle bending to political pressure or altering responses to protect the Delphic priests and priestesses from harm as was theorized in the dialogues.

That the Delphic oracle in the *Lives* shares some of the philosophical characteristics observed in the Delphic dialogues is evident from Plutarch's discussion of Lycurgus's *rhetra*, especially in comparison to the theoretical law codes of Plato and the other Greek philosophers. In defense of Lycurgus's laws, Plutarch declares that not only were the Lycurgan laws the basis for the polities of Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno, but Lycurgus also surpassed the philosophers with his creation and implementation of the Spartan polity:

> ταύτην καὶ Πλάτων ἔλαβε τῆς πολιτείας ὑπόθεσιν καὶ Διογένης καὶ Ζήνων καὶ πάντες ὅσοι τι περὶ τούτων ἐπιχειρήσαντες εἰπεῖν ἐπαινοῦνται, γράμματα καὶ λόγους ἀπολιπόντες μόνον. ὁ δὲ οὐ γράμματα καὶ λόγους, ἀλλ' ἔργῳ πολιτείαν ἀμίμητον εἰς φῶς προενεγκάμενος, καὶ τοῖς ἀνύπαρκτον εἶναι τὴν λεγομένην περὶ τὸν σοφὸν διάθεσιν ὑπολαμβάνουσιν ἐπιδείξας ὅλην τὴν πόλιν φιλοσοφοῦσαν, εἰκότως ὑπερῆρε τῇ δόξῃ τοὺς πώποτε πολιτευσαμένους ἐν τοῖς Ἕλλησι.[239]
>
> This proposal of civil governance Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno adopted, and all those who attempted to say something concerning these matters praise it, although they left behind only letters and words. But Lycurgus, since he produced not letters and words, but implemented an inimitable civil government, and to those assuming that the alleged disposition which inclined towards the wise man does not exist, he showed an entire city that embraced wisdom, he reasonably exceeded in reputation those who had ever founded polities among the Greeks.

Plutarch ends the *Life* with strong praise of Lycurgus. And yet, it is worth remembering, that throughout the *Life,* Plutarch emphasizes that Lycurgus credits not himself, but the Delphic oracle as the source of his laws.[240] The oracle granted permission to undertake a change of the Spartan constitution,[241] provided the core of the polity verbatim to Lycurgus,[242] and gave its approval of the laws to Lycurgus after they were implemented.[243] In this sense, the god is better at philosophy than the philosophers, producing and ensuring the implementation of a law code for the benefit of the Spartan people, a law code which

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[239] *Lycurgus* 31.2.

[240] E.g. *Lycurgus* 5, 6.

[241] *Lycurgus* 5.3.

[242] *Lycurgus* 6.1, 6.5.

[243] *Lycurgus* 29.2-4.

in turn served as the basis for the later philosophical theories of *politeia*. In the subsequent chapters, I will explore how this presentation of the oracle as wise and rational is reflected across the *Lives*, and the role Plutarch gives to the oracle in developing the characters of his subjects.

My discussion is divided into three chapters, with each chapter analyzing a discrete set of *Lives* determined both by historical period and by the type of oracle stories within the *Lives*. Chapter 3 will cover the *Lives* of the lawgivers of the archaic, mythic Greek past: the *Lycurgus, Theseus*, and *Solon.* Chapter 4 will feature the *Lives* of politicians and leaders of the high classical era, split between the Persian Wars (*Themistocles, Aristides,* and *Cimon*), Peloponnesian War (*Nicias, Alcibiades,* and *Pericles*), and the rise of Macedon (*Demosthenes, Alexander,* and *Phocion*). Finally, Chapter 5 will address improper uses of the oracle, most notably seen in the *Lysander, Demetrius,* and *Timoleon.* My decision to group the chapters around historical units follows the approaches of Stadter and Marincola in seeing 'parallels in three dimensions' in the *Lives.*[244] Plutarch presents each book as a comparison between two figures of the past. Nevertheless, the *Lives* function as a series of explorations of character and morality on the political stage that were meant to be taken as lessons for readers to apply to their own lives. Consequently, Plutarch has built into the *Lives* the imperative to go beyond the initial comparison of Greek with Roman and consider other groupings. In analyzing the *Lives* in this way I do not mean to imply that this is the order in which they were written or intended to be read. Rather, by grouping together individuals with similar interactions with the oracle (Chapter 3 and 5), or *Lives* covering the same figures or events (Chapter 4), I reveal underlying truths about Plutarch's

[244] Stadter (2010), Marincola (2010). See also Chrysanthou (2018).

presentation of the oracle and shed light on how Plutarch conceived of the Delphic oracle operating across time in his writings.[245]

[245] See the similar approaches of Pelling (2002: 91-115) for the late Roman Republican *Lives*, Marincola (2010) for the Persian War *Lives*, and Monaco (2013: 22-31) for the Hellenistic *Lives*.

Chapter 3

The Archaic Past: *Lycurgus, Theseus,* and *Solon*

i. introduction

Plutarch's *Lycurgus*, *Theseus*, and *Solon* stand at odds with the rest of the Greek *Lives*, as Plutarch himself acknowledges.[246] These biographies cover cultural heroes whose lives were imbued with legends and who blurred the boundaries between history and myth.[247] Plutarch proceeds with caution in each case, not hiding from the reader the complexity of the tradition he has received with all of its variants and conflicting information, while promising to present a narrative that is as accurate and truthful as possible. These three famous lawgivers, who shaped the nature of the Athenian and Spartan polities, serve as a unique grouping for assessing Plutarch's treatment of the Delphic oracle. The poetic nature of Plutarch's source material, and the legendary qualities attached to each figure, make these *Lives* a key set from which to assess how Plutarch portrays the oracle operating in the archaic Greek past, and how he uses the oracle as a structural motif to shed light on the intricacies of the three lawgivers' characters. In the *Lycurgus, Theseus*, and *Solon*, as I will demonstrate, the oracle plays a critical role in the early lives of these men, and serves as a guide for the reader to determine the validity and appropriateness of their actions. In what follows, I will assess the purpose and presentation of the Delphic oracle in each of the three

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[246] E.g. *Theseus* 1, *Lycurgus* 1.1. Even with Solon, for whom Plutarch had more certain sources including the poems of his protagonist, Plutarch runs into conflicting accounts and questions of legendary materials, as seen in *Solon* 4.7-8, 8.4-9.7, 27.1, and 32.3-4.

[247] Although, as de Blois (2008: 317) notes, Solon, unlike Theseus and Lycurgus, was unquestionably a historical figure, Solon still "gave Plutarch ample opportunity to insert *loci communes*, stereotypes, characteristic anecdotes and edifying stories, because nothing much was known about the historical Solon."

Lives individually. In the process, I will demonstrate that throughout these *Lives* of archaic figures, Plutarch resists presenting the Delphic oracle in a mythical or legendary light, presenting the oracular responses as clear and direct rather than ambiguous, deemphasizing the role of the Pythia in the creation of the oracular responses – including those in verse – and portraying the oracle as guiding kings and leaders to make choices that are for the good of the Greek people. In so doing, Plutarch blurs the distinction between past and present, emphasizing the continuity of the oracle's methods and actions from the earliest moments of Greek history through to his own day.

ii. *Lycurgus*

Plutarch's *Lycurgus* narrates the life and death of the Spartan *politeia*, focalized around the figure of its legendary creator, Lycurgus. Rather than beginning with Lycurgus's birth or youth, Plutarch instead opens the *Life* with an account of his protagonist's ancestors, tracing Lycurgus's lineage back to the mythical founder of his dynasty, Heracles, and the foundation of the Spartan kingship.[248] Plutarch likewise continues his narration of events in the *Life* far beyond Lycurgus's death, directing the reader to reflect on the lifespan of the laws themselves and their ultimate collapse under Agis II, marking the beginning of the end of Spartan power in Greece.[249] This framework expands the scope of the *Lycurgus* beyond its titular figure, positioning the reader to evaluate, upon completion of the *Life*, not only Lycurgus, but the Spartan state as a whole. As I will demonstrate, Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to illuminate the character of Lycurgus, as well as that of his *politeia*,

[248] *Lycurgus* 1.4-3.1.

[249] *Lycurgus* 29.6-30.6. On the corruption of Sparta's *politeia*, see also *Agis* 5.

for which the oracle serves as both a justification and the creative force. In so doing, Plutarch presents the oracle as a philosophical force, guiding leaders and educating humanity.

Plutarch records three oracular consultations at Delphi in the *Lycurgus*, two given in indirect speech, and one prose oracle quoted directly.[250] Beyond these three consultations, the Delphic oracle looms large in the background throughout the *Life*, standing as the source of the Spartan *politeia,* the legitimizing power behind Lycurgus's reforms, and the reason for the longevity of the Spartan constitution. In this way, the oracle structures the *Life*, introducing the main theme of the biography by approving Lycurgus's request to reform the Spartan *politeia*, telling Lycurgus what reforms to undertake, and ensuring that the state lasts beyond Lycurgus's own lifetime. In what follows, I will discuss each oracular consultation in the *Life* in narrative order, analyzing the portrayal of the oracle as well as the nature of the consultation, as I demonstrate how the oracle structures and defines the *Life*.

The Delphic oracle first appears in the *Life* with Lycurgus's application to the oracle for approval to undertake an overhaul of the Spartan polity. He has returned to Sparta at the behest of the people and the current kings not for the express purpose of rewriting the laws, but to serve as a leader and a guiding force in the state.[251] As the reader discovers, Lycurgus must employ force and deception to begin implementing his laws.[252] Plutarch emphasizes throughout the opening chapters of the *Life* that Lycurgus did not desire power – rather, Lycurgus willingly gave up his position as king and went into voluntary exile to

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[250] Oracles in indirect speech: *Lycurgus* 5.4, 29.5-6; quoted oracle: *Lycurgus* 6.1-2.

[251] *Lycurgus* 5.1.

[252] *Lycurgus* 5.4-5.

remove suspicion from himself that he might try to steal his nephew's throne.[253] Consequently, Plutarch must account for why Lycurgus, upon his return from his travels abroad, seized control of the state. It is precisely at this point in the narrative, between Lycurgus's return to Sparta and before he begins his secret solicitations of support from the Spartans, that Plutarch places this consultation of the oracle. The phrasing of the oracle's response to Lycurgus is critical, since it establishes the validity of Lycurgus's actions in spite of the potential evidence to the contrary:

> διανοηθεὶς δὲ ταῦτα πρῶτον μὲν ἀπεδήμησεν εἰς Δελφούς· καὶ τῷ θεῷ θύσας καὶ χρησάμενος ἐπανῆλθε τὸν διαβόητον ἐκεῖνον χρησμὸν κομίζων, ᾧ θεοφιλῆ μὲν αὐτὸν ἡ Πυθία προσεῖπε καὶ θεὸν μᾶλλον ἢ ἄνθρωπον, εὐνομίας δὲ χρῄζοντι διδόναι καὶ καταινεῖν ἔφη τὸν θεὸν ἢ πολὺ κρατίστη τῶν ἄλλων ἔσται πολιτειῶν.[254]

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[253] See in particular *Lycurgus* 3.

[254] *Lycurgus* 5.3, Parke and Wormell §216, Fontenrose Q7. Diodorus Siculus (7.12.1) presents the words of the Pythia in the form of a verse oracle:

ἥκεις, ὦ Λυκόοργε, ἐμὸν ποτὶ πίονα νηὸν Ζηνὶ φίλος καὶ πᾶσιν Ὀλύμπια δώματ' ἔχουσι. δίζω ἤ σε θεὸν μαντεύσομαι ἢ ἄνθρωπον· ἀλλ' ἔτι καὶ μᾶλλον θεὸν ἔλπομαι, ὦ Λυκόοργε. ἥκεις δ' εὐνομίαν διζήμενος· αὐτὰρ ἔγωγε δώσω τὴν οὐκ ἄλλη ἐπιχθονίη πόλις ἕξει.	You have come to my rich temple, Lycurgus, a man dear to Zeus and to all who dwell on Olympus. I am at a loss as to whether I should prophesy you to be a god or a man; but I suppose that you are closer to a god, Lycurgus. You have come seeking good order; but I, at any rate, I will give you good order such as no other city on earth possesses.

Although Plutarch's phrasing is not identical to this verse oracle in Diodorus, it is clear that Plutarch is summarizing this oracular response in *Lycurgus* 5.3. The first four lines of the verse oracle in Diodorus are also quoted by Herodotus (1.65.3). Herodotus's omission of the final two lines corresponds to his presentation of the *rhetra* as a human rather than a divine construct, since he argues that the *rhetra* was not given to Lycurgus by the Pythia, but was brought by Lycurgus from Crete. Crete as the source of the Lycurgan *politeia* is also found in Ephorus (*FGrHist* 70 F 149, Strabo 10.4.16-22). Plutarch, by including the tradition that Lycurgus traveled and observed different methods of governance (*Lycurgus* 4.1-6), including in Crete (*Lycurgus* 4.1-2), but presenting the *rhetra* as a product of the Pythia, rejects clearly Herodotus's version of events in favor of a divine provenance for the Spartan *politeia*. On Plutarch's use of and engagement with Herodotus, see in particular Hershbell (1993) and Marincola (2010). Parke-Wormell (1956.1: 85-93) rejects Diodorus's version in favor of Herodotus's, arguing that the final two lines were added later – possibly by the Spartan king Pausanias – and that Delphi's association with the Spartan *politeia* is a later invention. Plutarch, however, nowhere in his works mentions the possibility that the *rhetra* was not from Delphi, with the exception of a single clause he claims was added later by

> [Lycurgus], resolved to do these things, first travelled to Delphi; after sacrificing to the god and consulting the oracle, he returned, bearing that famous oracular response in which the Pythia called him loved by the gods (θεοφιλῆ) and more god than man, and said that the god granted his desire for good order and promised a constitution that would be by far the greatest, above all other constitutions.

With this oracle, Plutarch establishes Lycurgus's credibility. He is acting not out of his own self-interest, but on behalf of the god in bringing εὐνομία ("good order") to Sparta. Here, although Plutarch does not quote the oracular response, he presents it as if it is the Pythia speaking on behalf of the god, rather than the god speaking directly to Lycurgus through the medium of the Pythia. Nevertheless, Plutarch's phrasing of the oracle emphasizes the Pythia's role as the god's messenger, telling Lycurgus the will of the god and giving him the god's blessing in establishing his new *politeia*.

Plutarch reinforces this divine mandate and the legitimacy it grants to Lycurgus's actions in the next chapter by quoting a prose oracular response from Delphi outlining exactly the form of government that Lycurgus was to implement:[255]

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the kings Polydorus and Theopompus (*Lycurgus* 6.4-5, see also below). Plutarch does, however, admit to there being some ambiguity, intentional on the part of Lycurgus, between the *rhetra* given by the god and those laws created by Lycurgus alone (e.g. *Lycurgus* 13.11, see also below).

[255] The source of this prose oracle is debated, though often traced back to Aristotle's *On the Lacedemonian Constitution.* Raaflaub (2006: 395) argues that Tyrtaeus's elegiac version of the oracle, quoted in *Lycurgus* 6.5, is closer in phrasing to the original hexametric oracular response, while Plutarch has taken this prose version from the Spartan constitution itself. This is possible, but as Maurizio (1997) and Bowden (2005: 36-38) have shown, it is not necessary that the original oracular response was in verse. Regardless of historical reality, Plutarch presents the oracle here as the words of the god and so must be taken as such in this text (on this point, see also Wade-Gery 1958: 37). As Ogden (1994: 85) notes, Plutarch also refers to the *rhetra* as being delivered to Lycurgus by the oracle in prose in *De Pythiae oraculis* 403e, confirming further the divine origins of the *rhetra* in Plutarch's understanding.

οὕτω δὲ περὶ ταύτην ἐσπούδασε τὴν ἀρχὴν ὁ Λυκοῦργος, ὥστε μαντείαν ἐκ Δελφῶν κομίσαι περὶ αὐτῆς, ἣν ῥήτραν καλοῦσιν. ἔχει δ' οὕτως· "Διὸς Συλλανίου καὶ Ἀθανᾶς Συλλανίας ἱερὸν ἱδρυσάμενον, φυλὰς φυλάξαντα καὶ ὠβὰς ὠβάξαντα, τριάκοντα γερουσίαν σὺν ἀρχαγέταις καταστήσαντα, ὥρας ἐξ ὥρας ἀπελλάζειν μεταξὺ Βαβύκας τε καὶ Κνακιῶνος, οὕτως εἰσφέρειν τε καὶ ἀφίστασθαι· δάμω δὲ τὰν κυρίαν ἦμεν καὶ κράτος."[256] ἐν τούτοις τὸ μὲν φυλὰς φυλάξαι καὶ ὠβὰς ὠβάξαι διελεῖν ἐστι καὶ κατανεῖμαι τὸ πλῆθος εἰς μερίδας, ὧν τὰς μὲν φυλάς, τὰς δὲ ὠβὰς προσηγόρευκεν. ἀρχαγέται δὲ οἱ βασιλεῖς λέγονται, τὸ δὲ ἀπελλάζειν ἐκκλησιάζειν· ὅτι τὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν τῆς πολιτείας εἰς τὸν Πύθιον ἀνῆψε.[257]

Lycurgus was so eager for this government that he brought back an oracle from Delphi concerning it, which they call the *rhetra*. It reads as follows: "After you have established sanctuaries to Zeus Syllanios and Athena Syllania, have divided the people into tribes[258] and arranged them into *obai*,[259] and have established a council of thirty men, including the *archegetai*, [you ought] from time to time[260] to hold an assembly between Babyka and Cnacion, in order

[256] This clause is certainly corrupt, and there is little consensus on how it ought to read. As Ogden (1994: 86) notes, nearly all the manuscripts read γαμωδανγοριανημην καὶ κράτος, and there is no agreement on how to separate the words, or what letters have been corrupted. Nevertheless, scholars agree generally on the meaning that it must have based on Plutarch's subsequent commentary, commanding that authority be placed in the hands of the people. For a detailed list of proposed emendations, see Tigerstedt (1965) 352, Ziegler (1973) 9, and Manfredini and Piccirilli (1980) 28. The text here follows Ogden (1994), including Wade-Gery's (1958: 40-41) reading of the genitive δάμω.

[257] *Lycurgus* 6.1-2, Parke and Wormell §21, Fontenrose Q8. The exact phrasing of the original *rhetra* is the subject of considerable debate. I have presented the text of Ogden (1994), rather than Ziegler's Teubner edition, as his justifications for his text are compelling. For general discussions of the text and the various textual issues, see Wade-Gery (1958: 37-85), Manfredini and Piccirilli (1980: 28-29, 232-240), Ogden (1994), and Nafissi (2010). The scholarship on the *rhetra* is vast, and so my discussion is by necessity selective, focusing on Plutarch's text and his use of the *rhetra*.

[258] Or, "having preserved the divisions of the people in tribes." On the question of whether to understand φυλάξαντα as from φυλάσσω or φυλάζω, see Nafissi (2010: 94) and Ogden (1994: 86).

[259] It is not possible in English to preserve the wordplay present in the Greek text. Ogden (1994: 86) suggests using coinages to express the phrase: "tribed the tribes and obed the obes."

[260] i.e. with regularity. On the interpretation of this phrase, see Wade-Gery (1958) 45-47, Hammond (1950) 43, Nafissi (2010) 94-95.

> to both bring in and set aside [proposals]. To the people belongs the authority and power." In these clauses, to divide (φυλάξαι) the tribes (φυλάς) and to arrange (ὠβάξαι) the *obai* (ὠβάς) means to divide (διελεῖν) and to distribute (κατανεῖμαι) the populace into groups, which are called tribes and *obai*. The kings are called *archegetai*, and ἀπελλάζειν means 'to hold an assembly,' because Lycurgus ascribed the source and the cause of the *politeia* to the Pythian god.[261]

Plutarch introduces this interaction between the Pythia and Lycurgus clearly as an oracle, referring to the the *rhetra* as a μαντεία, presenting the text as the words of the Pythia with the phrase ἔχει δὲ οὕτως, and capping off the section following his brief commentary on the oracle's meaning with a reminder that the Spartan *politeia* is the product of Delphic Apollo.[262] Although Plutarch provides commentary on this oracle, his glosses on the meaning of the words should not be interpreted as indicating that the oracle was ambiguous; rather, he is clarifying terminology with which his audience in the second century CE would be unfamiliar. This would have been especially necessary since several of the words are either *hapax legomena*, dialectical variations, refer to specific Spartan places or political offices, or belong to a combination of these categories.

Plutarch reinforces the legitimizing power of having the Delphic oracle as the source of the Spartan polity with his accounts of the subversive actions of later kings and even Lycurgus himself to convince the people to accept their changes or additions to the

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[261] My translation follows Plutarch's interpretation of the *rhetra*, without passing judgement on whether Plutarch's understanding should be viewed as correct.

[262] As Nafissi (2018: 102-103) explains, there appear to have been two traditions governing the relationship between Lycurgus's *rhetra* and the Delphic oracle. In one, Lycurgus simply asked for the god's approval of the laws he wrote and implemented. In the other, the god delivered the laws themselves. Nafissi's conclusion, however, that in Plutarch the oracle just reinforces Lycurgus in the decisions he has already made, is not supported by the text.

constitution. In his presentation of the so-called 'rider' clause of the *rhetra,* Plutarch acknowledges that this clause was associated with the *rhetra*, but argues that, rather than being part of the original oracle, it was inserted into the *rhetra* by the kings Polydorus and Theopompus to curb the power originally granted to the people:

> ὕστερον μέντοι τῶν πολλῶν ἀφαιρέσει καὶ προσθέσει τὰς γνώμας διαστρεφόντων καὶ παραβιαζομένων, Πολύδωρος καὶ Θεόπομπος οἱ βασιλεῖς τάδε τῇ ῥήτρᾳ παρενέγραψαν· "αἰ δὲ σκολιὰν ὁ δᾶμος ἔροιτο, τοὺς πρεσβυγενέας καὶ ἀρχαγέτας ἀποστατῆρας ἦμεν," τοῦτ' ἔστι μὴ κυροῦν, ἀλλ' ὅλως ἀφίστασθαι καὶ διαλύειν τὸν δῆμον, ὡς ἐκτρέποντα καὶ μεταποιοῦντα τὴν γνώμην παρὰ τὸ βέλτιστον. ἔπεισαν δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ τὴν πόλιν ὡς τοῦ θεοῦ ταῦτα προστάσσοντος, ὥς που Τυρταῖος ἐπιμέμνηται διὰ τούτων·
>
> Φοίβου ἀκούσαντες Πυθωνόθεν οἴκαδ' ἔνεικαν
> μαντείας τε θεοῦ καὶ τελέεντ' ἔπεα·
> ἄρχειν μὲν βουλῆς θεοτιμήτους βασιλῆας,
> οἷσι μέλει Σπάρτας ἱμερόεσσα πόλις,
> πρεσβύτας[263] τε γέροντας, ἔπειτα δὲ δημότας
> ἄνδρας,
> εὐθείαις ῥήτραις ἀνταπαμειβομένους.[264]
>
> Later, however, because the people were distorting and doing violence to the propositions [of the council] by removing from and adding to them, the kings Polydorus and Theopompus inserted these clauses into the *rhetra*: "if the people should speak crookedly, the council members and the *archegetai* shall have the power to dissolve the assembly." That is, not to approve the proposition, but to break up and disperse entirely the people, on the grounds that they were changing and altering the proposition contrary to what was

[263] Strabo's version of the poem uses πρεσβυγενέας, which appears in Plutarch's version of the 'rider' clause of the *rhetra*, though is metrically more problematic here.

[264] *Lycurgus* 6.7-10. Here the text is Ziegler's Teubner, with the exception of the manuscript reading of ἔροιτο for Ziegler's αἰροῖτο. As Ogden (1994: 86-88) argues persuasively, even though ἔροιτο as a form is not attested elsewhere, this alone does not on its own disqualify ἔροιτο from being the correct reading, especially because there are so few extant Laconian texts from this era, and the form ἔροιτο is justified linguistially.

> best. And they also persuaded the city that these things were done at the command of the god, as Tyrtaeus perhaps thought in his verses:
>
> 'Having heard Phoebus, they brought home from Pytho
> oracles from the god and sure words;
> that the divinely honored kings,
> for whom the lovely city of Sparta is an object of care,
> and the elderly councilmen rule the council, then the
> common men obey in turn with straight *rhetras*.'

Nowhere in Plutarch's account of this clause does he indicate that it came from Delphi. Rather, the opposite is emphasized: the kings convinced the people to accept their addition to the *rhetra* by persuading them that it came from the god. Plutarch's subsequent quotation of Tyrtaeus reinforces this point, which Plutarch includes for the express purpose of demonstrating the success of the deception carried out by Polydorus and Theopompus. As Wade-Gery notes, 'εὐθείαις ῥήτραις' ("straight *rhetras*")[265] here must be read in direct opposition to 'σκολίαν' ("crooked') in the 'rider' clause in order to make sense of the inclusion of the excerpt from Tyrtaeus's *Eunomia*.[266] The quotation of Tyrtaeus thus presents the rider clause as having been a part of the original *rhetra* given by the god, merging what Plutarch has described as the 'rider' clause, which required the people to

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[265] An additional two couplets of Tyrtaeus's *Eunomia* are preserved in Diodorus 7.12.6 (West *fr.* 4): μυθεῖσθαί τε τὰ καλὰ καὶ ἔρδειν πάντα δίκαια, / μηδέ τι βουλεύειν τῆιδε πόλει ⟨σκολιόν⟩· / δήμου τῇ πλήθει νίκην καὶ κάρτος ἔπεσθαι. / Φοῖβος γὰρ περὶ τῶν ὧδ' ἀνέφηνε πόλει ("both to speak the good things and to do everything that is just, / and not to counsel anything wicked for the city; / to pursue victory and courage for the mass of the populace. / For Phoebus proclaimed thus for the city concerning these matters"). Plutarch's text cuts off before the poem as preserved in Diodorus ends, prompting scholars to question whether the rest of the poem has been excised from Plutarch's text as a consequence of scribal error or similar circumstances, or, alternatively, whether Plutarch's and Diodorus's versions are even the same poem (e.g. Wade-Gery 1958: 58-59, Nafissi 2010: 98-99). Be this as it may, by ending his excerpt of the poem as it is preserved in the manuscripts, Plutarch emphasizes the very line in which his point regarding the 'rider' clause is demonstrated.

[266] Wade-Gery (1958) 54-56.

approve 'straight' or 'uncorrupted' proposals, with the *rhetra*, which Plutarch presented previously as giving more unilateral power to the people. In this way, Tyrtaeus's text serves as proof for Plutarch that the kings' attempt to modify the *rhetra* was successful.[267] Although Polydorus and Theopompus in Plutarch's version of events are clearly using the oracle to legitimize their own change to the laws, the success of this maneuver in the *Lycurgus* serves to accentuate further the Delphic oracle's role in the creation of the *rhetra* as the originator of the *politeia*, and underscores the legitimizing power of the Delphic oracle.

The kings are not alone in their abuse of the oracle's legitimizing power, for Plutarch acknowledges that Lycurgus himself was guilty of, at the very least, misrepresentation of his laws. Following an account of many of Lycurgus's reforms, Plutarch informs his reader that, "therefore laws of such a kind (νομοθετήματα) Lycurgus called '*rhetras,'* as if they were coming from the god and were oracles."[268] This point is reiterated both directly and indirectly throughout Plutarch's description of Lycurgus's laws, which refers to the laws (νόμοι, νομοθετήματα) as "so-called" *rhetras*, rather than being true oracles.[269] Nevertheless, Plutarch presents the god as tacitly approving these

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[267] Plutarch's use of Tyrtaeus as evidence of the kings' deception assumes that Tyrtaeus's *Eunomia* was composed after the 'rider' clause was added to the *rhetra*, but the association between the *rhetra* and Tyrtaeus's *Eunomia* is by no means as clear-cut as Plutarch claims. Van Wees (2009) argues that not only was Tyrtaeus's text earlier, but that the two texts have no relation to each other because the *rhetra* is not a true oracular response. See also Nagy (1990: 272-273), who suggests that there were perhaps two sources for the Spartan *politeia*: Lycurgus's laws from Crete and Tyrtaeus's from the Delphic oracle.

[268] *Lycurgus* 13.11: τὰ μὲν οὖν τοιαῦτα νομοθετήματα ῥήτρας ὠνόμασεν, ὡς παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ κομιζόμενα καὶ χρησμοὺς ὄντα.

[269] E.g. *Lycurgus* 13.1: "Lycurgus did not put the laws down in writing, but one of those so-called 'rhetras' is to this effect" (νόμους δὲ γεγραμμένους ὁ Λυκοῦργος οὐκ ἔθηκεν, ἀλλὰ μία τῶν καλουμένων ῥητρῶν ἐστιν αὕτη). The sentiment of this sentence is clarified further in *Lycurgus* 13.4, where Plutarch sums up the law he has just explained, stating that "therefore one of the *rhetras*

additions. Upon completion of his *politeia*, Lycurgus enacts another deception, convincing the people, council, and kings to swear to abide by his laws until he returns from Delphi where he must consult the oracle regarding a final aspect to the Spartan *politeia*.[270] Instead of another addition, however, Lycurgus's aim was to ask the god, "if the laws were good and sufficient for ⟨the⟩ city's good fortune and prosperity."[271] Plutarch claims that the god responded in the affirmative, promising success and prosperity to the city as long as it abides by Lycurgus's *politeia*.[272] In so doing, Plutarch indicates that the god approved of Lycurgus's *politeia*, even if he had to resort to deception and misrepresentation to ensure its implementation and the people's obedience to it.

While within the *Lycurgus* Plutarch insists on both a divine source of, and divine approval for, the Spartan *politeia*, Plutarch challenges this portrayal in the *Numa,* Lycurgus's Roman counterpart. In the *Numa*, Plutarch describes how the legendary lawgiver of the Romans was also reputed to have had a close relationship with a deity, the *daimon* Egeria:

> ὁ δὲ Νομᾶς ἐκλείπων τὰς ἐν ἄστει διατριβὰς ἀγραυλεῖν τὰ πολλὰ καὶ πλανᾶσθαι μόνος ἤθελεν, ἐν ἄλσεσι θεῶν καὶ λειμῶσιν ἱεροῖς καὶ τόποις ἐρήμοις ποιούμενος τὴν δίαιταν. ὅθεν οὐχ ἥκιστα τὴν ἀρχὴν ὁ περὶ τῆς θεᾶς ἔλαβε λόγος, ὡς

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was just as I have said, that the laws not be written down" (μία μεν οὖν τῶν ῥητρῶν ἦν ὥσπερ εἴρηται, μὴ χρῆσθαι νόμοις ἐγγράφοις).

[270] *Lycurgus* 29.2-4. That Lycurgus is lying to the people is emphasized by the preceding passage, in which Plutarch claims that Lycurgus, surveying his completed creation, was pleased with the result and wished for it to remain unchanged (29.1, see also below).

[271] *Lycurgus* 29.5: εἰ καλῶς οἱ νόμοι καὶ ἱκανῶς πρὸς εὐδαιμονίαν καὶ ἀρετὴν ⟨τῆς⟩ πόλεως κείμενοι τυγχάνουσιν.

[272] *Lycurgus* 29.6: "When the god answered that the laws were established well, and that the city would remain the most renowned while it employed Lycurgus's *politeia*, [Lycurgus], after he had written down the oracle, sent it off to Sparta" (ἀποκριναμένου δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοὺς νόμους καλῶς κεῖσθαι, καὶ τὴν πόλιν ἐνδοξοτάτην διαμενεῖν τῇ Λυκούργου χρωμένην πολιτείᾳ, τὸ μάντευμα γραψάμενος εἰς Σπάρτην ἀπέστειλεν). See also Parke and Wormell §221, Fontenrose Q8.

> ἄρα Νομᾶς ἐκεῖνος οὐκ ἀδημονίᾳ τινὶ ψυχῆς καὶ πλάνῃ τὸν μετὰ ἀνθρώπων ἀπολέλοιπε βίον, ἀλλὰ σεμνοτέρας γεγευμένος ὁμιλίας καὶ γάμων θείων ἠξιωμένος, Ἠγερίᾳ δαίμονι συνὼν ἐρώσῃ καὶ συνδιαιτώμενος, εὐδαίμων ἀνὴρ καὶ τὰ θεῖα πεπνυμένος γέγονεν.[273]
>
> Numa, abandoning the affairs in the city, desired to live primarily in the wilderness, and to wander alone, living in the groves of the gods and holy meadows and solitary places. This above all was the source of the tale concerning the goddess, that Numa did not abandon life with men out of some internal distress and wandering, but, having experienced holier intercourse and having been deemed worthy of divine marriage, having intercourse with the goddess Egeria and living together with her, he became a blessed man and one infused with the divine.

The relationship between Numa and Egeria reemerges at two other points later in the *Life*, where Plutarch attributes the foundation of the Salian priests to Egeria and the Muses, and credits Egeria with providing Numa with the proper response to ward off an unfavorable mandate from Jupiter. While Plutarch does not deny that Numa was devoted to Egeria, he expresses considerable discomfort at the notion of a deity associating herself that closely with a mortal, describing the close relationship as improper and unbefitting the dignity of the goddess.[274] In the digression that follows, Plutarch discusses the role of divine guidance in the creation of both Numa's and Lycurgus's polities:

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[273] *Numa* 4.1-2.

[274] E.g. *Numa* 4.3: "and it is reasonable that the god, not being a lover of horses or of birds, but of men, would wish to associate with those particularly good, and not to dislike or disdain association with a holy and wise man. But that a god and a *daimon* has some intercourse with and care for a human body and human beauty, this, then, can scarcely be believed" (καί που λόγον ἔχει τὸν θεόν, οὐ φίλιππον οὐδὲ φίλορνιν, ἀλλὰ φιλάνθρωπον ὄντα, τοῖς διαφερόντως ἀγαθοῖς ἐθέλειν συνεῖναι, καὶ μὴ δυσχεραίνειν μηδὲ ἀτιμάζειν ἀνδρὸς ὁσίου καὶ σώφρονος ὁμιλίαν. ὡς δὲ καὶ σώματος ἀνθρωπίνου καὶ ὥρας ἐστί τις θεῷ καὶ δαίμονι κοινωνία καὶ χάρις, ἔργον ἤδη καὶ τοῦτο πεισθῆναι).

> ἆρ᾽ οὖν ἄξιόν ἐστι… ἀπιστεῖν εἰ Ζαλεύκῳ καὶ Μίνῳ καὶ Ζωροάστρῃ καὶ Νομᾷ καὶ Λυκούργῳ, βασιλείας κυβερνῶσι καὶ πολιτείας διακοσμοῦσιν, εἰς τὸ αὐτὸ ἐφοίτα τὸ δαιμόνιον, ἢ τούτοις μὲν ⟨οὐκ⟩ εἰκός ἐστι καὶ σπουδάζοντας θεοὺς ὁμιλεῖν ἐπὶ διδασκαλίᾳ καὶ παραινέσι τῶν βελτίστων, ποιηταῖς δὲ καὶ λυρικοῖς μινυρίζουσιν, εἴπερ ἄρα, χρῆσθαι παίζοντας; εἰ δὲ λέγει τις ἄλλως, κατὰ Βακχυλίδην, ‘πλατεῖα κέλευθος.’ οὐδὲ γὰρ ἄτερος λόγος ἔχει τι φαῦλον, ὃν περὶ Λυκούργου καὶ Νομᾶ καὶ τοιούτων ἄλλων ἀνδρῶν λέγουσιν, ὡς δυσκάθεκτα καὶ δυσάρεστα πλήθη χειρούμενοι, προσεποιήσαντο τὴν ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ δόξαν αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις πρὸς οὓς ἐσχηματίζοντο σωτήριον οὖσαν.[275]
>
> Then is it proper… to doubt that the divinity met with Zaleucus, Minos, Zoroaster, Numa, and Lycurgus, men who helmed kingdoms and fashioned constitutions? Or is it ⟨not⟩ possible also that the gods were eager to associate with these such individuals in order to instruct and advise the best people, but that they enjoyed playing, then, with poets and lyric warblers? But if someone should disagree, I would respond as Bacchylides: ‘the path is wide.’ For the other argument is not worthless, which they say concerning Lycurgus and Numa and other such men, that, subduing hard to control and annoying masses, they fabricated the god’s approval for those people, approval that saved those for whom it was contrived.

Plutarch presents a double argument, claiming first that it is entirely reasonable to assume that the god steps in and assists leaders in shaping their states, and second, that even if one does *not* agree with this, then it would still have been justified for the lawgivers to have invented the divine support or inspiration in order to manipulate the people into accepting their reforms.[276] Plutarch’s suggestion that the lawgivers would be justified in using lies

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[275] *Numa* 4.11-12.

[276] As Szegedy-Maszak (1978: 205) argues, “within the legends…such a tradition [of divine communications] forms part of the same set that includes the tales of the legislators’ virtue, voyages and education. All these factors, in whatever combination, ensure that the laws that are finally included in the code will be the best available.” The charge that Lycurgus and other lawgivers either

and deception to trick the people into adopting and maintaining their polities comes directly from Plato, who advocates for the 'noble lie' if it is employed in order to preserve societal order.[277] Nevertheless, Plutarch does not favor this explanation, but rather relies on it as a back-up should readers not agree with his primary position. While, as I demonstrated above, Plutarch allows in the *Lycurgus* that not all of what were called *rhetras* were actually from the god via the Delphic oracle, nowhere in the *Lycurgus* does he suggest that Lycurgus may have invented or fabricated his interactions with Delphi. It thus comes as a surprise in the *Numa* to hear Plutarch not only suggest this as a possibility, and one that people believe, but justify such a position, even if it is not his preferred explanation.

The question of divine inspiration returns one final time in the biographical book, in the *synkrisis* to the *Lycurgus-Numa* pairing. There, Plutarch claims unequivocally that both the Spartan and Roman law codes had divine origins.[278] As I argued in Chapter 2, this direct argument in the *synkrisis* need not, and should not, be taken as the final word on the matter, but rather one possible interpretation of the events, and the readers need to query whether the evidence does indeed lead them to this conclusion. In discussing the divine origins of the Spartan and Roman polities, Plutarch introduces a theme rather

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fabricated or leveraged the divine origins of their law codes for political benefit is found also in Polybius 10.2.8-12, Cicero *Natura Deorum* 3.91, Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.61, Strabo 10.4.19 (citing Ephorus, *FGrHist* 70, F149), and Herodotus 1.65 (cited above).

[277] Plato *Republic* 3, 414b-415d. On the noble lie, see Schofield (2007).

[278] *Lycurgus and Numa* 1.1-3: "But since we have gone through in detail the lives of Numa and Lycurgus, laying out before us both men, we must not shrink from collecting the differences, even if the task is difficult. For the similarities are evident in their deeds, such as the moderation of the men, their piety, their civic leadership, their zeal for education, their both taking the gods as the single source of their laws" (ἀλλ᾽ ἐπεὶ τὸν Νομᾶ καὶ Λυκούργου διεληλύθαμεν βίον, ἐκκειμένων ἀμφοῖν, εἰ χαλεπὸν ἔργον, οὐκ ἀποκνητέον συναγαγεῖν τὰς διαφοράς. αἱ μὲν γὰρ κοινότητες ἐπιφαίνονται ταῖς πράξεσιν, οἷον ἡ σωφροσύνη τῶν ἀνδρῶν, ἡ εὐσέβεια, τὸ πολιτικόν, τὸ παιδευτικόν, τὸ μίαν ἀρχὴν ⟨τὴν⟩ παρὰ τῶν θεῶν ἀμφοτέρους λαβεῖν τῆς νομοθεσίας·).

straightforwardly in the *Lycurgus*, only to complicate the issue in the subsequent *Life of Numa*. This pattern, presenting in the second *Life* a complication of a theme that was introduced in the first *Life*, holds true for different motifs across the *Lives*, as Philip Stadter has demonstrated, producing threads binding each biographical book together while simultaneously suggesting to the readers key themes and questions to consider in their subsequent critical reflection.[279] Additionally, the discussion of this issue in both *Lives* in the book and in the *synkrisis*, with different arguments put forward in each section, reinforces the importance of this question to Plutarch and suggests that Plutarch intended it to be a matter for further contemplation by his readers.

The attention Plutarch gives to emphasizing, questioning, and exploring the divine nature of the Spartan *politeia* demonstrates the importance of Lycurgus's relationship with Delphi for Plutarch. But the divine origins of the *rhetra* are also inherently problematic, as is seen in the *Numa* passages, and prone to misuse, as in the case of the addition of the 'rider' clause to the *rhetra* and Lycurgus's own verbal slippage in calling all of his laws *rhetras*. As Plutarch claims directly in the *Numa*, the divine source of the laws gave them a power and legitimacy that exceeded the authority granted by the lawgiver alone. In this way, by emphasizing the legitimizing power of Delphi in the *Lycurgus* and throughout the biographical book, making the Delphic god the instigator, source, and approver of the laws, Plutarch ties his Lycurgus closely to the oracle, and thus binds the Spartan *politeia* close to the divine.

The close connection between Lycurgus's *politeia* and the divine has further implications for the nature of the god and his interactions with humans. Throughout the

[279] Stadter (1992), (1995).

Lycurgus Plutarch suggests a close association between Lycurgus and the god, as well as between his *politeia* and the oracle: the Delphic oracle declares the *rhetra* to be from the god, and the *politeia* to have garnered the approval of the god. But what is more, Plutarch claims that the Pythia also declared Lycurgus himself to be more divine than human, demonstrating a close relationship between the divine both for the Pythia, as the bearer of the god's messages, and for Lycurgus, as someone blessed by the gods and perhaps sharing in the divine as well. This later suggestion is made even more explicit when Plutarch equates Lycurgus's response to seeing his *politeia* fully implemented with the response of the god in Plato's *Timaeus*, looking with approval over his creation.[280] This slippage in Lycurgus's status as somehow more than human but also not quite at the level of the god (ὁ θεός) both reflects Lycurgus's status in cult and helps to elide the figure of the god who gives and approves of the *politeia* with the mortal figure of Lycurgus who implements the god's desire for εὐνομία.[281] It is in this context that Plutarch inserts a comparison of the

[280] Plutarch *Lycurgus* 29.1: "After the chief measures were integrated into the customs by Lycurgus, and the *politeia* had grown sufficiently to carry and support itself on its own, just as Plato says that the god was pleased at the cosmos coming into being and making its first movement, so too Lycurgus, pleased and satisfied by the beauty and greatness of his lawcode coming into being and being set in motion, was eager, as much as is possible from human foresight, to leave it immortal and unchanging into the future" (κατειλημμένων δὲ τοῖς ἐθισμοῖς ἤδη τῶν κυριωτάτων ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, καὶ τῆς πολιτείας ἐκτεθραμμένης ἱκανῶς καὶ δυναμένης φέρειν ἑαυτὴν καὶ σῴζειν δι' ἑαυτῆς, ὥσπερ ὁ Πλάτων φησὶν ἐπὶ τῷ κόσμῳ γενομένῳ καὶ κινηθέντι τὴν πρώτην κίνησιν εὐφρανθῆναι τὸν θεόν, οὕτως ἀγασθεὶς καὶ ἀγαπήσας τὸ τῆς νομοθεσίας κάλλος καὶ μέγεθος ἐν ἔργῳ γενομένης καὶ ὁδῷ βαδιζούσης, ἐπεθύμησεν, ὡς ἀνυστὸν ἐξ ἀνθρωπίνης προνοίας, ἀθάνατον αὐτὴν ἀπολιπεῖν καὶ ἀκίνητον εἰς τὸ μέλλον). This passage refers to Plato *Timaeus* 37c: "When the creator father set it in motion and perceived the pleasing gift to the immortal gods come into being, being delighted and gladdened, he decided to make it even more similar to the model" (ὡς δὲ κινηθὲν αὐτὸ καὶ ζῶν ἐνόησεν τῶν ἀιδίων θεῶν γεγονὸς ἄγαλμα ὁ γεννήσας πατήρ, ἠγάσθη τε καὶ εὐφρανθεὶς ἔτι δὴ μᾶλλον ὅμοιον πρὸς τὸ παράδειγμα ἐπενόησεν ἀπεργάσασθαι).

[281] Plutarch discusses the worship of Lycurgus in Sparta in *Lycurgus* 31.4-5, describing how the Spartans offer sacrifices to him as a god (ὡς θεῷ). For an overview of scholarship on the figure of Lycurgus, see Nafissi (2018). On Lycurgus's status in Spartan cult practice, see Piccirilli (1978) and Hupfloher (2000: 178-182).

Spartan constitution to the theoretical polities of the philosophers, declaring Lycurgus's to be more philosophical than the conjectured constitutions devised by Plato, Diogenes, and Zeno. The god, working with and through the semi-divine Lycurgus, produced a *politeia* that serves as a guide and a model for the philosophers, while also managing to outshine its derivatives in its utility and practicality: Lycurgus's was proved to work.[282]

Thus, in the *Lycurgus*, Plutarch does more than simply repeat the well-known claim that Sparta's laws came from the god. Plutarch uses the oracle to legitimize Lycurgus's actions, while presenting the oracle as the god speaking clearly and directly to the Spartan leader, helping and guiding Lycurgus and the Spartans.

iii. *Theseus*

Plutarch marks out the *Theseus-Romulus* pairing as unique from the beginning, begging for his readers to humor his attempt to treat fables as history.[283] The *Theseus* marks the furthest chronological limits of his subjects in the *Lives*, and the subject matter blurs the distinction between history and mythology even more so than with Lycurgus. Plutarch himself acknowledges the fundamental difference between his *Lives of Theseus and Romulus* and his other paired biographies in the preface to this pair, opening with an *apologia* to his formal addressee, Sosius Senecio, defending his decision to present myth

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[282] Plutarch's *Lycurgus* is filled with frequent allusions to Plato, as de Blois (2005) has demonstrated clearly. Nevertheless, Plutarch argues that Plato's *politeia* was actually derivative of Lycurgus's, thereby using Plato's own words to prove the degree of his debt to his model. Plutarch praises the Lycurgan constitution elsewhere in his extant works, most notably in *De unius in re publica domination, populari statu, et paucorum imperio* 827a-b, on which passage see Van Nuffelen (2011: 163).

[283] *Theseus* 1.5. On the contract between narrator and reader in this *Life*, see Pelling (2002) 173-189.

(μῦθος) as if it were history (ἱστορία), and asking for his reader's forgiveness if the account strays too far into the realm of the fantastical.[284] Plutarch, it is true, presents a highly rationalized account of Theseus, privileging explanations that remove as many mythological elements as possible.[285] In this process of rationalizing myth, Plutarch elevates the role of the Delphic oracle, which becomes the sole source of divine guidance for the hero in the *Life*.

Plutarch records five Delphic oracles in the *Theseus*, three in which the oracular response is summarized or related indirectly,[286] and two verse oracles in which the Pythia's response is quoted directly.[287] These oracles span the entire length of the biography, beginning before Theseus's birth with the oracle given to his father Aegeus,[288] and ending centuries after his death with the oracle ordering the Athenians to find Theseus's bones and give them an honorable burial.[289] As in the *Lycurgus*, in addition to Plutarch's narration of the oracular responses, Delphi looms in the background throughout much of the *Life*, standing as Theseus's touchstone to the gods through which he receives divine assistance

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[284] *Theseus* 1. For Plutarch's use of μῦθος see Hirsch-Luipold (2014). On the meaning of ἱστορία for Plutarch, see Valgiglio (1987) and Hershbell (1997). Cooper (2007) argues that Plutarch's disclaimer here is actually a misdirection, claiming that rather than distancing himself from myth, Plutarch embraces it in the biography.

[285] See, for example, Plutarch's treatment of Theseus's paternity (2.1, 3.6-4.1, 6.1-3), his explanation for the Minotaur (15.1-16.3, 19.1-7), the tale of Ariadne and Dionysus (20.1-9), and his version of Theseus and Perithous's attempted abduction of Persephone (31.4-5, 35.1-2). Pérez Jiménez (2000: 229-233) argues that Plutarch rationalizes the mythical elements of Theseus's life and image in order to align the poetic traditions with his appearance in oratory, philosophy, and historiography. On Plutarch's treatment of the fantastical see also Pelling (2002: 171-195, 198-199), who gives an excellent discussion of Plutarch's use and manipulation of poetic and historiographical sources, and Hawes (2014: 149-173) who contextualizes Plutarch's rationalization of myth within his broader cultural and literary context.

[286] *Theseus* 18.3, 26.5, 36.1.

[287] *Theseus* 3.5, 24.4-5.

[288] *Theseus* 3.5.

[289] *Theseus* 36.

and in addition to marking important milestones in the hero's life. In what follows, I will discuss the oracles received in the *Life* as well as Theseus's direct interactions with Delphi. As I will demonstrate, in the *Theseus*, the Delphic oracle teaches and guides the young Theseus. In this way, the oracle becomes a tool for Plutarch to develop the character of Theseus as well as of his father Aegeus, punctuating the *Life* and revealing the father-son duo's tragic character arcs.[290] Although Theseus is a far more mythical than historical figure, Plutarch's presentation of the oracle – and Theseus's interactions with it – are far more mundane: the oracle assists Theseus as a leader in carrying out what is best for him and for Athens. In the process, Plutarch rejects any notions of the Delphic oracle's reputed ambiguity, presenting it instead as answering normal queries regarding proper sacrifice, action, and governance; he thus downgrades the role of the Pythia in the oracular process to nothing more than a mouthpiece for the god.

The Delphic oracle first appears in the opening chapters of the *Life* in the tale of the oracle given to Aegeus, Theseus's father, before Theseus was conceived:

> Αἰγεῖ δὲ παίδων δεομένῳ τὴν Πυθίαν ἀνελεῖν λέγουσι τὸν θρυλούμενον χρησμόν, διακελευομένην μηδεμιᾷ γυναικὶ συγγενέσθαι πρὶν ἐλθεῖν εἰς Ἀθήνας, οὐ πάνυ δὲ τοῦτο φράζειν εὐδήλως δοκοῦσαν. ὅθεν εἰς Τροιζῆνα παρελθὼν ἀνεκοινοῦτο Πιτθεῖ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ φωνὴν οὕτως ἔχουσαν·
>
> ἀσκοῦ τὸν προΰχοντα πόδα, μέγα φέρτατε λαῶν,
> μὴ λύσῃς πρὶν δῆμον Ἀθηνέων εἰσαφικέσθαι·

[290] As Pelling (2002: 199) notes, although Plutarch is particularly dismissive of tragedy in this *Life*, "the distancing from tragedy cannot be total: Theseus' life and conduct *were*, in part, tragic." Regarding tragedy and tragic themes in the *Lives* more broadly, see Mossman (1995), (2014).

> ἃ δῆλον ὅτι[291] νοήσας ὁ Πιτθεὺς ἔπεισεν αὐτὸν ἢ διηπάτησε τῇ Αἴθρᾳ συγγενέσθαι.[292]
>
> They say that the Pythia gave to Aegeus, because he was wanting children, the well-known oracle, ordering him to lie with no woman before he returned to Athens, but seemed to explain this not entirely clearly. From there, having gone to Troizen, Aegeus communicated to Pittheus the dictate of the god, which was as follows:
>
> > Don't loosen the jutting-out foot of the wineskin, great leader of the people, before you arrive at the city of the Athenians.
>
> It is clear that Pittheus, having understood these [words], either persuaded or deceived Aegeus into sleeping with Aethra.

In what follows, Aegeus, after realizing that Pittheus has tricked him into sleeping with his daughter Aethra, tells her how to find tokens that will reveal the child, once born, to be his.[293] Plutarch takes pains to emphasize that the reader should not consider this oracle to be ambiguous, but rather a was a clear mandate from the god to Aegeus, told through the Pythia. Plutarch not only interprets the oracle for the reader before recounting it, but also

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[291] ἃ δῆλον ὅτι: the manuscripts are not in agreement on the formulation of this phrase. Here I have printed Amyot's emendation, adopted by Bekker (1855) and Perrin (1914). Ziegler's reading of ἄδηλον οὖν ὅ τι, in which he is followed by Flacelière, Chambry, and Juneaux (1957) and Ampolo and Manfredini (1988), is not convincing, as it dramatically changes the meaning of the sentence. Flacelière, Chambry, and Juneaux translate as: "On ne sait comment Pitthée l'entendit, mais il s'arrangea, soit par la persuasion, soit par la ruse, pour qu'Égée eût commerce avec Aithra." Similarly Ampolo and Manfredini translate the sentence: "No è chiaro come Pitteo abbia inteso queste parole, ma persuase Egeo, o lo ingannò, a congiungersi con Etra." In contrast, Perrin (perhaps overtranslating), reads this as meaning "this dark saying Pitheus apparenty understood, and persuaded him, or beguiled him, to have intercourse with his daughter Aethra." While it is true that Plutarch does not tell us *how* Pittheus understood the oracle's words, Plutarch's declaration of the oracle's meaning immediately before he quotes the response stands at odds with Zigler's emendation.

[292] *Theseus* 3.5, Parke and Wormell §110, Fontenrose L4.

[293] *Thes*eus 3.6-7. Although Plutarch claims that Pittheus either persuaded (ἔπεισεν) or deceived (διηπάτησε) Aegeus, the subsequent narrative requires that Aegeus was unaware that it was Aethra, Pittheus's daughter, with whom he slept.

Plutarch omits the means by which Pittheus carried out this deception, though Pseudo-Apollodorus (3.207) claims that Pittheus made Aegeus become intoxicated.

has Pittheus understand immediately the Pythia's words. Plutarch's presentation of this oracle makes it clear that he does not consider it to have been ambiguous, or at least does not wish the reader to view it as such: Plutarch introduces the oracle as the Pythia bidding Aegeus not to have sex with any woman before returning to Athens (διακελευομένην μηδεμιᾷ γυναικὶ συγγενέσθαι πρὶν ἐλθεῖν εἰς Ἀθήνας), stating the meaning clearly even before the text of the oracle is read; Plutarch does not describe the oracle as ambiguous unequivocally, but rather that the Pythia seemed (δοκοῦσαν) *to Aegeus* to have spoken not entirely clearly (Αἰγεῖ… τὴν Πυθίαν… οὐ πάνυ δὲ τοῦτο φράζειν εὐδήλως δοκοῦσαν); lastly, Pittheus, to whom Aegeus turns for interpretative assistance, has no difficulty understanding the meaning of this oracle. In this way, Plutarch challenges the image of the oracle as delivering ambiguous and unclear messages, while simultaneously using the Delphic oracle to demonstrate the character of Aegeus. Rather than a wise and clear-headed king, Aegeus appears as more of a bumbling fool. He is unable to understand the meaning of the oracle given to him, as he would later be unable to deal with Athens' problems,[294] and unable to wait to confirm Theseus's fate before committing suicide.[295] Aegeus, as Pérez Jiménez has shown clearly, serves as a foil for Theseus, demonstrating how a king should *not* behave, and dying at a conveniently opportune time for Theseus to take up the kingship.[296] By opening with his version of the famous oracle story involving Aegeus, Plutarch calls on his readers to note not only the circumstances surrounding Theseus's

[294] See, for example, his fear over being able to stand up to the sons of Pallas (*Theseus* 3.7), his fears of *stasis* (*Theseus* 12.3), and his desire to protect his son over the good of Athens (*Theseus* 17.2).

[295] *Theseus* 22.1.

[296] As Perez Jimenez (1994: 228) claims, "Aegeus' negative characterization highlights the political personality of Theseus who, from the moment of the ἀναγνώρισις onwards begins to adopt the decisions of a king."

birth, but also what sort of a king his father was, against which backdrop Theseus himself can be judged.

Theseus's personal interaction with the Delphic oracle begins in his youth, when he travels to Delphi to dedicate a lock of hair to the god.[297] Through Theseus's journey Plutarch calls attention to his coming of age and links the young Theseus with Delphi from the moment of his transition into adulthood. Plutarch's associated digression on the haircuts of the Abantes and the Macedonians, while discursive, also emphasizes the transition this κουρά-dedication is marking in the life of the young hero through the theme of military valor: after his return from Delphi, Theseus completes his transition into manhood by removing the stone placed over the sword left for him by his father and travelling to Athens by land, demonstrating his military prowess by defeating the local pests on the road along the way.[298] In this way, the oracle serves a structural purpose, marking an important moment of transition in Theseus's life while simultaneously associating him with the oracle early on in his life, showing him in a positive light, engaging in proper ritual activities.

Plutarch reveals the oracle's role as an advisor and a teacher in the *Life* most clearly with two oracles Theseus receives in his youth, oracles that shape his actions and direct him to the most profitable end result: his consultation of the oracle before sailing to Crete, and the oracle he receives before abolishing the kingship and establishing democracy in

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[297] *Theseus* 5. This story is elsewhere attested at the Delphinium, rather than Delphi, on which see Ampolo and Manfredini (1988: 201-202). The practice of sacrificing hair occurs in Athenian cult practice during the *koureion,* when phratries would acknowledge sons as the legitimate children of their fathers (Cole 1984: 234-235, Vidal-Naquet 1986: 140). Plutarch's juxtaposition of the hair dedication at Delphi with the revelation by Aethra of Theseus's true parentage, the unveiling of the tokens of recognition, and Theseus's acceptance by his father is thus fitting given the context of the *koureion.* As Vidal-Naquet (1986: 149) claims, "the offering of the hair is a ritual of status-transition because it involves a 'before' and an 'after.'"

[298] *Theseus* 6-13.

Athens. Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle as a framing motif for Theseus's Cretan adventure, and presents the oracle as a helper and a guide to the young Theseus, ensuring the success of his mission. After Theseus has determined to go to Crete as a part of the Athenian tribute, Plutarch states that:

> λέγεται δ' αὐτῷ τὸν μὲν ἐν Δελφοῖς ἀνελεῖν θεὸν Ἀφροδίτην καθηγεμόνα ποιεῖσθαι καὶ παρακαλεῖν συνέμπορον, θύοντι δὲ πρὸς θαλάσσῃ τὴν αἶγα θήλειαν οὖσαν αὐτομάτως τράγον γενέσθαι· διὸ καὶ καλεῖσθαι τὴν θεὸν Ἐπιτραγίαν.[299]
>
> It is said that the god in Delphi gave him an oracle bidding that Aphrodite be made his guide and be invited as a travelling companion, and that while Theseus was sacrificing the customary she-goat (τὴν αἶγα) next to the sea, it suddenly became a he-goat (τράγον). It is for this reason that the goddess is called 'Epitragia.'

In this oracle, the god directs Theseus to turn to Aphrodite for aid in his journey to Crete, and Plutarch confirms her assistance of the hero through his account of the goat-sacrifice. Plutarch's use of λέγεται to introduce this oracle and the accompanying miraculous transformation does not cast doubt or suspicion on the anecdote; as Brad Cook has demonstrated, Plutarch uses λέγεται to relate significant information from traditional stories.[300] Cook's conclusion is reinforced here by Plutarch's treatment of the goat's transformation, providing an aetiology for an epithet of Aphrodite and proving that Theseus

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[299] *Theseus* 18.3, Parke and Wormell §212, Fontenrose L47. Plutarch has not included in his narrative the question Theseus put to the oracle. Given the context, and the subsequent response, this oracle should be understood to have been likely in response to a version of the standard question put to oracles before journeys, asking to whom they should sacrifice to ensure a safe and successful voyage, e.g. Fontenrose (1978: 38-39, Table IV #16), though he does not apply this category to this particular oracle (L47), which he lists as a clear command on the topic of sacrifices or offerings. Parke and Wormell (1956.2: 88) classify this oracle rather more generally: "apparently for success on his voyage to Crete."

[300] Cook (2001).

had her support before his expedition to Crete. Plutarch confirms Aphrodite's assistance on the expedition indirectly in his subsequent account. Direct, clear intervention of a specific god would be out of character for Plutarch, particularly in a *Life* where he so strongly disavows tragedy and deliberately avoids tragic versions of events.[301] Nevertheless, Plutarch has fashioned his narrative in such a way to suggest that Theseus's petition to Aphrodite was both successful and fruitful. While Plutarch gives several different versions of what actually happened on Crete, depending on who and what the Minotaur is, Ariadne features in each version, typically as Theseus's love-interest, as the myth generally goes. Plutarch does not claim that Aphrodite intervened directly to secure Ariadne's love for Theseus, but the Cretan woman's passion for the hero plays an integral role in two out of the three versions Plutarch recounts, those which Plutarch indicates are the more plausible.[302] Plutarch does claim in the *synkrisis*, however, that Ariadne's love for Theseus seemed to be the work of a god for the express purpose of helping Theseus.[303] This conclusion is supported further in the text of the *Theseus* through Plutarch's description of Theseus's actions on Delos: after escaping from Crete, Plutarch claims that Theseus sailed to Delos, where he dedicated to Apollo an image of Aphrodite given to him by Ariadne.[304] The dedication focuses the reader's attention back to Theseus's sacrifice to

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[301] On Greek authors' avoidance of connecting specific deities to seemingly divine phenomena, see, for example, Mikalson (1983: 63-68, 117, et passim), Calame (2003), and Feeney (2007).

[302] Plutarch appears to dismiss outright Cleidemus's version (*Theseus* 19.8-10), both with his introduction of it and his subsequent treatment of Ariadne, since Cleidemus does not allow for Theseus's departure from Crete with Ariadne, to which subject Plutarch turns next in the biography. On Plutarch's use of multiple different versions of tales, see Larmour (1988: 365).

[303] *Theseus-Romulus* 1.6-7: ὁ γὰρ Ἀριάδνης ἔρως παντὸς μᾶλλον ἔοικεν ἔργον θεοῦ καὶ μηχανὴ γενέσθαι σωτηρίας ἕνεκα τοῦ ἀνδρός ("for Ariadne's love seemed more than anything to be the work of a god and a device for saving the man [i.e. Theseus]").

[304] *Theseus* 21.1. Callimachus *Hymn to Delos* 307-309 attributes to Theseus the establishment of Aphrodite's cult on Delos. On the symbolism of the dedication, see Calame (1990) 205-206.

Aphrodite per the oracle's instructions before his departure for Crete. This reference forms the inner circle of a double-ring that frames the entire Cretan episode in the *Theseus*: Theseus's vows to Apollo at the Delphinium forms the outermost ring that opens and closes the episode with the choosing of the youths by lot and their safe return,[305] and the Delphic oracle and Theseus's dedication at Delos form the internal ring that delineates Theseus's Cretan adventure, from his departure for Crete to his successful escape from the island.[306] By bringing the reader full-circle twice in this way, both times using Apollo to deliate the boundaries of his narrative rings, Plutarch both marks clearly the end of the episode while also emphasizing the outsized role Apollo and his oracle played in Theseus's success. Through the oracle, the god provided Theseus as the leader of the Athenians with the knowledge he needed to ensure a safe and successful voyage, and receives due thanks for his assistance. In this way, Plutarch transforms Theseus's episode in Crete from a purely heroic adventure into an opportunity to demonstrate the power of the Delphic oracle, and emphasizes the role it played in shaping the hero's success in his formative years.

After Theseus has united Attica under Athens, Plutarch uses another Delphic oracle story to indicate the god's approval of his actions. Plutarch proves that Theseus was following the mandate of the gods in implementing a new polity for the Athenians by citing the oracular response Theseus received from Delphi:

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[305] *Theseus* 18.1-2, 22.4-7. On the centrality of Apollo Delphinios to Theseus and his cult, see Graf (1979: 13-22). The Delphinium appears elsewhere in the *Theseus* at 12.6, and 14.1. As Graf (2008: 89) notes, Plutarch's account of the dedication of the poison-bearing cup at the Delphinium in 12.6 alludes to an aetiology of why the sanctuary hosted a law court that ruled on matters of citizenship and paternity. For Plutarch's use of the Delphinium to structure the Cretan episode see also Calame (1990: 255-258).

[306] *Theseus* 18.3, 21.1-3. Theseus's dedication of a statue given to him by Ariadne is of further interest, for it serves symbolically to shed the last trappings of Crete before returning to Athens, leaving both Ariadne and any love he may have had for her behind.

> ἔθυσε δὲ καὶ Μετοίκια τῇ ἕκτῃ ἐπὶ δέκα τοῦ Ἑκατομβαιῶνος, ἣν ἔτι νῦν θύουσι, καὶ τὴν βασιλείαν ἀφεὶς ὥσπερ ὡμολόγησε, διεκόσμει τὴν πολιτείαν ἀπὸ θεῶν ἀρχόμενος· ἦκε γὰρ αὐτῷ χρησμὸς ἐκ Δελφῶν μαντευομένῳ περὶ τῆς πόλεως ·
>
> Αἰγείδη Θησεῦ, Πιτθηίδος ἔκγονε κούρης,
> πολλαῖς τοι πολίεσσι πατὴρ ἐμὸς ἐγκατέθηκε
> τέρματα καὶ κλωστῆρας ἐν ὑμετέρῳ πτολιέθρῳ.
> ἀλλὰ σὺ μή τι λίην πεπονημένος ἔνδοθι θυμὸν
> βουλεύειν· ἀσκὸς γὰρ ἐν οἴδματι ποντοπορεύσει.[307]
>
> And [Theseus] celebrated also the Metoikia on the sixteenth day of Hekatombaeon, which they still celebrate to this day, and after he dissolved the kingship just as he promised, he organized the state at the direction of the gods; for he requested and received from Delphi an oracle concerning the city:
>
> Theseus son of Aegeus, born of Pittheus's daughter,
> indeed, my father has stored up for many cities
> boundaries and threads [of fate] within your city.
> But you, don't suffer your spirit to deliberate
> excessively;
> For you will cross the sea like a wineskin on swelling waves.

On the one hand, the general meaning of the oracular response is reasonably clear: Athens will prosper, taking in many other *poleis* under her wing. And yet, Plutarch's presentation of this oracle is somewhat at odds with the words of the quoted response. Plutarch introduces the oracular response as if it expressed the direction given by the gods for his reorganization of the state (διεκόσμει τὴν πολιτείαν ἀπὸ θεῶν ἀρχόμενος), and yet the oracle he cites as evidence fails to mention any such information. Instead, the oracle offers a vague promise of power and good fortune for Athens, while delivering a message about Theseus himself.

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[307] *Theseus* 24.4-5, Parke and Wormell §154, Fontenrose L22.

Interpretation of this message is hampered by disagreement over the form of the verb in the concluding line of the oracular response. Most manuscripts print ποντοπορεύσει, which Perrin interprets as a third person singular future active indicative: "the bladder will traverse the sea and its surges."[308] Read in this way, the ἀσκός refers to the Athenian state. Perrin is followed in this interpretation by Parke and Wormell, who interpret the line as a "comparison of the Athenian demos to a leather bottle."[309] In contrast, Ziegler and Ampolo both print ποντοπορεύσεις, which Manfredini translates as "attraverserai il mare come un otre sopra l'onda."[310] While Flacelière, Champry and Juneaux print ποντοπορεύσει, their interpretation is the same as that of Ampolo and Manfredini, reading ποντοπορεύσει as a second person singular future middle indicative: "comme une outre, sur les vagues tu flotteras."[311] It is not possible to determine with certainty which form of ποντοπορεύω Plutarch used here – ποντοπορεύσεις or ποντοπορεύσει – but the interpretation of it as second person verb form is convincing, especially given the presence of second person address in the preceding lines. Thus in Plutarch's text, while this Delphic oracle is purportedly about Theseus, the message is true for both the man and the city: just as Athens suffered turbulent times but ultimately stayed afloat, so too would Theseus. Parke and Wormell argue that this oracle story is a clear example of one in which the oracular response is a later invention, claiming that is "was evidently framed with a reference to the ups and downs of Athens and her empire in the

[308] Perrin (1914: 52-53).

[309] Parke and Wormell (1956.2: 68-69).

[310] Ziegler (1969) 22, Ampolo and Manfredini (1988) 54-55.

[311] Flacelière, Chambry and Juneaux (1957: 33).

fifth century."[312] Indeed, as Pelling has shown, in both the *Theseus* and the *Romulus*, the fortunes of the titular characters resemble closely the fates of their respective cities.[313] Nevertheless, the oracle's reference to an ἀσκός ("wineskin") reinforces the interpretation of the oracle as referring to Theseus himself, fashioning a link between this oracle given to Theseus and the one received by his father preceding his birth. Here, it is not Aegeus but Theseus who is represented by the ἀσκός. While his father was given a warning, Theseus is simply promised that he will weather the coming storm. The Delphic oracle comes at a turning point in Theseus's life, after which he transitions from strings of successes to repeated failure, and Plutarch's tone changes from praise to censure. This timing gives the Pythia's words further weight, since they serve to foreshadow his upcoming misfortunes. Nevertheless, while Theseus's actions ultimately result in his inglorious death, Theseus's reputation is subsequently revived and even augmented in the centuries that follow his death, fulfilling the oracle's promise. As with the oracle regarding Theseus's birth, here too in a situation where the meaning of the oracle could have be subject to interpretation, Plutarch chooses to present the oracular response as not expressing any ambiguity or lack of clarity: Plutarch states the meaning of the oracle clearly before quoting the oracular response, and does not indicate any confusion on the part of the recipient either. This message is also unequivocal in its presentation of the role of the Pythia in giving the oracular responses: the reference to πατὴρ ἐμός can only refer to Zeus in this context,

[312] Parke and Wormell (1956.2) 68.

[313] Pelling (2002) 181-185. See also Chrysanthou (2018) 111.

making the words those of Apollo, not a second-hand account from the mouth of the Pythia.[314]

Plutarch presents an oracle foretelling what is to come for Theseus and Athens as an oracle justifying and advising Theseus's changes to the Athenian constitution. With this oracular response, Plutarch takes a verse oracle and places it within a very normal context: advising a leader of a state whether certain actions would be beneficial to undertake. But in so doing, Plutarch twists the oracular response to fit a mold that it does not occupy comfortably. By presenting the oracle as approving Theseus's plan for Athens, and indeed even orchestrating it, Plutarch aligns Theseus's interactions with the Delphic oracle with those of Lycurgus. Plutarch claims that the Delphic oracle is providing both a didactic and a legitimizing service to Theseus, advising and approving his subsequent reforms of the Athenian state, just as the oracle did for Lycurgus with his reforms to the Spartan state. This emphasis on the god and his support for Theseus's newly created Athenian democracy therefore creates a parallel between the Athenian and Spartan states, both of whose forms of government Plutarch could present as sanctioned by the god.

In spite of his profession that Theseus received divine approval from Delphi in the *Theseus*, Plutarch does not shy away from criticizing Theseus elsewhere in the biographical book for his decision to abdicate royal power and establish a democracy. This criticism comes, however, only at the end of the *Theseus*, after Plutarch has already condemned the hero for his shameless womanizing, and in the *synkrisis*. In the *synkrisis*, Plutarch claims that while both Theseus and Romulus were statesmen by nature (τῇ φύσει πολιτικῶν

[314] Indeed, while the Pythia is named as the source of the oracle given to Aegeus, in Theseus's consultations she is not mentioned at all.

γεγονότων), neither leader maintained a kingly character (βασιλικὸν τρόπον) throughout his life, as Theseus turned to democracy and Romulus to tyranny.[315] Plutarch argues that either remitting or exceeding one's authority is inappropriate for a leader. Even though Plutarch concludes in the *synkrisis* that Theseus acted out of kindness and generosity (ἐπιεικείας καὶ φιλανθρωπίας), he nonetheless calls it an error (ἁμάρτημα) for Theseus to have instituted this change in government for the Athenians.[316] In this way, in the *synkrisis* Plutarch criticizes Theseus for something that he praises or at the very least justifies in the *Life*. As I argue in Chapter 2, Plutarch uses the *synkrisis* to present one way of assessing the relative merits of the figures in question. Here, by giving his reader two separate assessments of Theseus's decision to abdicate the kingship, Plutarch asks his readers to judge for themselves based on the evidence he has presented. Nevertheless, even in the *Life* Plutarch suggests that, however justified Theseus may have been in establishing the democracy, the Athenian hero undermined his own efforts by his subsequent questionable amorous activities, which take up nearly six chapters of the *Life*.[317]

Plutarch opens his account of Theseus's womanizing and the woes it brought to him with an account of the death of Solois and the Delphic oracle associated with it. Plutarch describes how, on his return from seizing the Amazon Antiope, one of Theseus's companions, Solois, fell madly in love with the Amazon and drowned himself in a river out of sorrow for his unrequited and forbidden love:

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[315] *Theseus-Romulus* 2.1

[316] *Theseus-Romulus* 2.2-3.

[317] *Theseus* 29-34. See also *Theseus-Romulus* 6.

τοῦτον οὖν ἐρῶντα τῆς Ἀντιόπης καὶ λανθάνοντα τοὺς ἄλλους, ἐξειπεῖν πρὸς ἕνα τῶν συνήθων· ἐκείνου δὲ περὶ τούτων ἐντυχόντος τῇ Ἀντιόπῃ, τὴν μὲν πεῖραν ἰσχυρῶς ἀποτρίψασθαι, τὸ δὲ πρᾶγμα σωφρόνως ἅμα καὶ πράως ἐνεγκεῖν καὶ πρὸς τὸν Θησέα μὴ κατηγορῆσαι. τοῦ δὲ Σολόεντος ὡς ἀπέγνω ῥίψαντος ἑαυτὸν εἰς ποταμόν τινα καὶ διαφθαρέντος, ἠσθημένον τότε τὴν αἰτίαν καὶ τὸ πάθος τοῦ νεανίσκου τὸν Θησέα βαρέως ἐνεγκεῖν, καὶ δυσφοροῦντα λόγιόν τι πυθόχρηστον ἀνενεγκεῖν πρὸς ἑαυτόν· εἶναι γὰρ αὐτῷ προστεταγμένον ἐν Δελφοῖς ὑπὸ τῆς Πυθίας, ὅταν ἐπὶ ξένης ἀνιαθῇ μάλιστα καὶ περίλυπος γένηται, πόλιν ἐκεῖ κτίσαι καὶ τῶν ἀμφ᾽ αὐτόν τινας ἡγεμόνας καταλιπεῖν. ἐκ δὲ τούτου τὴν μὲν πόλιν ἣν ἔκτισεν ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ Πυθόπολιν προσαγορεῦσαι, Σολόεντα δὲ τὸν πλησίον ποταμὸν ἐπὶ τιμῇ τοῦ νεανίσκου, καταλιπεῖν δὲ καὶ αὐτοῦ τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς οἷον ἐπιστάτας καὶ νομοθέτας, καὶ σὺν αὐτοῖς Ἕρμον ἄνδρα τῶν Ἀθήνησιν Εὐπατριδῶν· ἀφ᾽ οὗ καὶ τόπον Ἑρμοῦ καλεῖν οἰκίαν τοὺς Πυθοπολίτας, οὐκ ὀρθῶς τὴν δευτέραν συλλαβὴν περισπῶντας καὶ τὴν δόξαν ἐπὶ θεὸν ἀφ᾽ ἥρωος μετατιθέντας.[318]

[Solois], therefore, being in love with Antiope and keeping it a secret from the rest, revealed it to one of his companions; after that man made an appeal to Antiope concerning this matter, she rejected strongly the attempt, but she handled the deed both wisely and gently, and she did not denounce him to Theseus. But after Solois, out of despair, threw himself into a river and drowned, Theseus, realizing then the guilt and the suffering of the youth, bore it ill, and in his sorrow he recalled a certain Pythian oracle he had received; for it had been commanded to him by the Pythia in Delphi, that whenever he should be especially distressed while in a foreign land and become very grieved, he should found a city there and leave behind some of those with him as leaders. Consequently, the city which he founded he called Pythopolis after the god, and the neighboring river he called Solois in honor of the youth. He left behind Solois' brothers as commanders and lawmakers, and with them Hermos, one

[318] *Theseus* 26.4-7, Parke and Wormell §411, Fontenrose L102.

> of the Eupatrids in Athens; it is from Hermos that the Pythopolitans also call a place the House of Hermes, not properly pronouncing the last syllable and shifting the honor from a hero to a god.

It is not clear what the original request or the origins of this oracular response were, nor does Plutarch appear to have any interest in explaining the context of the oracle. Instead, Plutarch uses this oracle to call attention to the shift in Theseus's life and circumstances at this point in the narrative. Theseus has turned from actions that support and elevate the status of Athens, to ones that actively undermine it. Plutarch emphasizes that Theseus went after Antiope of his own initiative, luring her onto his boat before setting sail, taking her and the rest of the Amazons by surprise.[319] Blame for the subsequent war between the Amazons and the Athenians lies squarely on Theseus's shoulders, and it stands out as the first of his subsequent series of poor choices that ultimately leads to his ruin. Plutarch's presentation of the Delphic oracle in this episode emphasizes Theseus's emotional state: the oracle purportedly instructed Theseus to found a city in a place where he is especially distressed (ἀνιαθῇ μάλιστα) and very grieved (περίλυπος) over a friend. In this way, Plutarch uses the oracle to focus the reader's attention on Theseus's emotions, pointing out to his readers the change in Theseus's fortunes. By placing this incident at this point in his narrative, Plutarch uses it and the oracular response contained within the story to transition into his narration of Theseus's self-destruction and downfall.

The death of Solois highlights the sorrows to come for Theseus, as his pursuit of women continues to drag down his previously good fortune. As Stadter and Larmour have argued convincingly, Plutarch disapproves highly of Theseus's habit of pursuing and

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[319] *Theseus* 26.

capturing women, in particular because it causes him to abandon Athens and his fledgling *politeia*.[320] Theseus's final attempt at women-stealing – an ill-fated plot to steal "Cora," the daughter of the Molossian king Aidoneus and his wife Persephone – ends in the death of Theseus's companion Perithous at the jaws of Aidoneus's dog Cerberus, and in the imprisonment of Theseus.[321] With Theseus detained, the demagogue Menestheus did not hesitate to capitalize on and augment existing resentment of Theseus among the Athenians, and twist the new *politeia* to his own benefit.[322] Plutarch presents Theseus's exploits – which see him bring military threats down on Athens and ultimately lead to the capture of his mother while he languishes in Aidoneus's dungeon – as not only morally questionable, but also unbecoming of a leader. When he leaves, abandoning the state in order to pursue women, Theseus allows a figure like Menestheus to enter and subvert the newly created democracy. As a final nail in the coffin for Theseus, once he escapes imprisonment – only thanks to Heracles's pity – he adopts Menestheus's tactics of demagoguery in an ultimately vain attempt to regain power. As Aurelio Pérez Jiménez notes, "a su regreso del país de los molosos, liberado por Heracles, se comporta lo mismo que Menesteo, arrastrado por el interés egoísta y olvidado de la justicia y la paz social, objetivos del buen político."[323] Although Theseus received the support of the oracle in founding the Athenian democracy, Plutarch presents him both failing to support his own creation and indeed actively

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[320] Stadter (1995) 229-230.

[321] *Theseus* 31.4-5

[322] As Pérez Jiménez (2000: 238) argues, "la acción de Menesteo es exclusivamente política: convierte en negativos los aspectos positivos de la reforma política de Teseo." Additionally, Plutarch's choice of verb to describe Menestheus's role in the Athenian state is revealing: after Theseus's death, Menestheus ruled the Athenians as a king (ἐβασίλευσε), even though Theseus had purportedly abolished the kingship with his own abdication from the throne (*Theseus* 24) and his establishment of a democracy (*Theseus* 25).

[323] Pérez Jiménez (2000) 239.

undermining it in his attempt to regain power over the Athenian state. In short, while Plutarch grants divine sanction to the founding of the Athenian democracy, he places the blame for the corruption of the democracy squarely on Theseus's shoulders.

The *Life* ends not with Theseus's death, but hundreds of years later, with the king's last interaction with the Delphic oracle. After Plutarch recounts Theseus's murder at the hands of King Lycomedes of Scyros, his narrative leaps ahead to the Classical era as he describes how in 476/5 BCE the Athenians received an oracle from Delphi instructing them to find Theseus's bones and give them a proper burial in Athens.[324] Sometime later Cimon, after subduing Scyros, locates the bones and has them returned to Athens where they become a focal point for Athenian worship of the hero.[325] Plutarch does not explain the purpose of this oracle, or what inquiry it was in response to, either in the *Theseus* or in the *Cimon*. Rather, in the *Cimon* Plutarch uses the story to explain in part how Cimon won the people's favor,[326] and in the *Theseus* Plutarch uses it to explain the change in cult worship of Theseus in Athens: the return of Theseus's bones marks the return of his good fortune as he regains the high status he formerly held among the Athenians. Plutarch's arrangement of the material in the *Theseus* suggests that the Athenians established key aspects of

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[324] *Theseus* 36.1: "After the Persian wars, while Phaido was archon, the Pythia delivered an oracle to the Athenians, ordering them to retrieve the bones of Theseus and to guard them, after giving them an honorable burial among them" (μετὰ δὲ τὰ Μηδικὰ Φαίδωνος ἄρχοντος μαντευομένοις τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἀνεῖλεν ἡ Πυθία τὰ Θησέως ἀναλαβεῖν ὀστᾶ καὶ θεμένους ἐντίμως παρ᾽ αὐτοῖς φυλάττειν). Plutarch describes the oracle similarly in *Cimon* 8.6: "for the Athenians also had an oracle, ordering them to carry Theseus's remains back to the city and to honor him as befitted a hero" (καὶ γὰρ ἦν χρησμὸς Ἀθηναίοις, τὰ Θησέως λείψαντα κελεύων ἀνακομίζειν εἰς ἄστυ καὶ τιμᾶν ὡς ἥρωα πρεπόντως). See also Parke and Wormell §113, Fontenrose Q164.

[325] *Theseus* 36.1-6, *Cimon* 8.3-7. On this episode in the two *Lives*, see Podlecki (1971). For Cimon's motivations behind retrieving the bones, see McCauley (1999).

[326] *Cimon* 8.7: ἐφ᾽ ᾧ καὶ μάλιστα πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡδέως ὁ δῆμος ἔσχεν. Plutarch does not mention any details of Theseus's cult worship in the *Cimon*.

Theseus's cult *after* the return of his bones ordered by the Delphic oracle.[327] Consequently, in the *Life* the oracle appears to be orchestrating a revival for Theseus, returning him to the position of honor he had formerly occupied in Athens.

Plutarch links Theseus and the Delphic oracle one final time in the biographical book, at the end of the *synkrisis* to the *Theseus-Romulus*. There, Plutarch returns to where he began, with the oracle given to Aegeus. In the final sentence of the *synkrisis* Plutarch offers one final suggestion to the reader, capping his comparison of the two heroes:

> ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰ περὶ τοῦ θείου μυθολογούμενα πολλὴν ποιεῖ διαφοράν. Ῥωμύλῳ μὲν γὰρ ἡ σωτηρία μετὰ πολλῆς ὑπῆρξε θεῶν εὐμενείας, ὁ δ' Αἰγεῖ δοθεὶς χρησμός, ἀπέχεσθαι γυναικὸς ἐπὶ ξένης, ἔοικεν ἀποφαίνειν παρὰ γνώμην θεῶν γεγονέναι τὴν Θησέως τέκνωσιν.[328]
>
> Indeed the mythic tales concerning the gods also make a great difference (between the men). For salvation for Romulus came through the great goodwill of the gods, but the oracle given to Aegeus, that he should keep himself away from a woman while in a foreign land, seems to reveal that the birth of Theseus was contrary to the will of the gods.

This passage forms a rather enigmatic ending to the biographical book. Rather than coming to a clear conclusion, Plutarch instead ends with a thought not previously introduced. The *synkrisis* to the *Theseus-Romulus* pairing falls neatly into pro-Theseus and pro-Romulus halves, with Plutarch presenting arguments for Theseus's superiority in chapters 1-3, and for Romulus's in chapters 4-6. The suggestion that the gods disapproved of Theseus's very birth thus serves as the final capstone to the pro-Romulus argument. Nevertheless, it is still striking that Plutarch has chosen to end the *Life* on this note, with a suggestion not made

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[327] *Theseus* 36.3-6.

[328] *Theseus and Romulus* 6.7.

previously in the *Theseus*.[329] In the *Theseus*, Plutarch does not indicate that Theseus's birth was against the will of the gods, and indeed the consequences for Aegeus apparently having failed to interpret and adhere to the prophecy are unclear. David Kovacs has noted this problematic aspect to the oracle, noting how it appears that Aegeus is disregarding the oracle and yet he experiences no clear negative repercussions for his actions, though Kovacs does not offer a solution to this difficulty.[330] Parke and Wormell view Aegeus's punishment in failing to obey the oracle as his sudden death caused, albeit inadvertently, by his son when he forgot to change the sails on his return from Crete.[331] Ampolo takes this reading one step further, arguing that "Pitteo comprende che, se farà avere ad Egeo un figlio contro la volontà degli dei, Egeo sarà causa della sua stessa rovina e il figlio (nipote di Pitteo) in tal modo regnerà presto su Atene."[332] Ampolo's conclusion is not supported definitively in the *Theseus* itself, but does find support in the ending to the *synkrisis*. Plutarch does not support clearly or explicitly any one particular explanation in the *Theseus* itself, but places this speculation instead in the *synkrisis*, where he phrases his conclusions as hypotheses and arguments. Seen in this light, Plutarch's choice to end the biographical book by turning to a new line of inquiry spurs the readers to begin their own process of reflection and analysis. Nevertheless, it is notable here that it is not the meaning of the

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[329] Flacelière (1948: 69-74) admits confusion as to why Plutarch brings up this point, as Plutarch has not indicated elsewhere any notion of consequences falling on the head of the hero because of the nature of his birth, and suggests that this makes Theseus even more of a tragic figure.

[330] Kovacs (2008). Kovacs proposes to solve this for Euripides' *Supplices* by positing two divergent traditions with only one present in the Euripidean play. While this may well be true for the *Supplices*, it does not explain how the oracle's warning is fulfilled, or not, in Plutarch's *Theseus* which is at issue here.

[331] Parke and Wormell (1956.1) 300. Flacelière (1948: 71-74) presents a similar argument, and suggests further that Plutarch shifts blame from Theseus for Aegeus's death because Theseus, like Oedipus, was a pawn of fate in his unintentional killing of his father.

[332] Ampolo (1988) 200.

oracle that is at stake, but rather the consequences for Aegeus having not followed the god's advice that Plutarch calls his readers to note.

In the *Theseus*, Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to shape the narrative. Additionally, although the *Life* contains two verse oracles, Plutarch rationalizes the Delphic oracle, presenting it as Theseus's link to the god, his source of guidance from the divine. Rather than being deliberately ambiguous or deceptive, the oracle, Plutarch claims, is honest in its dealings with both Theseus and his father – it is not the god's fault that Aegeus fails to see the obvious. As in the *Lycurgus*, the Pythia's role in the divinatory process is minimized to the point of disappearing in the *Theseus*; while she appears as the deliverer of oracles, the words she utters are assumed by the recipients of the oracles to be the words of the god himself, rather than a human interpretation. Plutarch's inclusion of Delphic-oracle stories in the *Life* illuminates the shift in Theseus's character over time. Theseus's delinquency and descent into obscurity and ill-repute towards the end of his life is balanced by his apparent piety and upright behavior in the first half of his life. Theseus's piety also traces the hero's fortunes: when he is following the oracle and observing cult (as Plutarch notes frequently), he finds success in his endeavors. These notices disappear when his life slips into disarray and misfortune. In this way, the Delphic oracle, and proper observance of cult, serve as tools for Plutarch to track this shift in Theseus's fortunes. Through the Delphic oracle, Plutarch traces Theseus's development from youth to leader, and foreshadows with the oracle concerning grief his descent into exile and betrayal. The Delphic oracle serves as a guide for Theseus in his formative years, aiding him both personally and politically by offering advice and support which the young hero follows. As he advances in age and becomes increasingly more unstrung, seen in particular with

regard to his problems with women, the oracle disappears and he descends into obscurity. Nevertheless, the *Life* is bookended by ambiguity and uncertainty, the biographical book opening with Aegeus's oracle in the *Theseus*, and closing with the *synkrisis* returning to this same oracle. Instead of telling the audience what to make of it, Plutarch turns it around to the reader and asks them what they think and how they believe this oracle and Theseus's character should be interpreted.

iv. *Solon*

Plutarch's *Solon* is unique in the *Lives* of archaic Greek figures in that unlike Lycurgus or Theseus, Plutarch can and does turn to Solon's own words as evidence.[333] Nevertheless, as with the *Lycurgus* and the *Theseus*, Plutarch frequently struggles in the *Solon* to make sense of contradictory accounts and seemingly implausible information. There are three Delphic oracles recorded in the *Life*, one of which is recorded only in summary, and two in verse presented as direct quotes.[334] In addition to these oracular consultations, the Delphic oracle appears on two other occasions in Plutarch's narrative, at pivotal points in Solon's character development. In what follows, I will demonstrate that in the *Solon,* the Delphic oracle guides Solon's actions and oversees his growth as a leader, while also legitimizing Solon's changes to the Athenian state by indicating approval of Solon's plans to begin his reforms, and by serving as guarantor of the laws once enacted. As with Theseus, the Delphic oracle is prominent in Solon's rise to political power and instrumental in his

[333] Plutarch quotes directly Solon's poetry at *Solon* 2.2-4, 3.3-7, 8.2, 14.8-9, 15.1, 15.6, 16.3-4, 18.5, 26.1, 26.4, 30.3, 30.8 31.7; *Solon-Publicola* 1.5, 2.6. For a catalogue of the quotations in the *Solon* and analysis of Plutarch's sources see Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977) ix-xxxvii.

[334] Summarized oracle: *Solon* 4.3-4.8; verse oracles: *Solon* 9.1, 14.6.

election as leader of Athens, but it disappears in the latter half of the *Life* when Solon watches as his reforms fail and the Athenians abandon his laws for tyranny. As I will demonstrate, Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to legitimize and justify Solon's changes to the Athenian state, while simultaneously demonstrating that the wisdom of the god is superior to that of the famous mortal sage, revealing Solon's shortcomings as a leader.

The Delphic oracle first appears in the preface to the *Life*, in which Plutarch introduces, rather anachronistically, the famous Greek sage to his readers. In this preface, Plutarch gives a sweeping introduction to Solon, laying out his relationship with Peisistratus and his attitudes towards love,[335] his views of wealth and riches,[336] his poetry,[337] and his legendary wisdom.[338] Each of these topics serves as a recurring theme throughout the *Life*, and plays a key role in Solon's rise to power, his *politeia*, his reputation, and both his fate and that of his laws. It is in his discussion of Solon's wisdom that the Delphic oracle first appears, in the tale of a mysterious tripod that was circulated among the seven sages:

> Κῴων γὰρ ὥς φασι καταγόντων σαγήνην, καὶ ξένων ἐκ Μιλήτου πριαμένων τὸν βόλον οὔπω φανερὸν ὄντα, χρυσοῦς ἐφάνη τρίπους ἑλκόμενος, ὃν λέγουσιν Ἑλένην πλέουσαν ἐκ Τροίας αὐτόθι καθεῖναι, χρησμοῦ τινος ἀναμνησθεῖσαν παλαιοῦ. γενομένης δὲ τοῖς ξένοις πρῶτον ἀντιλογίας πρὸς τοὺς ἁλιέας περὶ τοῦ τρίποδος, εἶτα τῶν πόλεων ἀναδεξαμένων τὴν διαφοράν, ἄχρι πολέμου προελθοῦσαν, ἀνεῖλεν ἀμφοτέροις ἡ Πυθία τῷ σοφωτάτῳ τὸν τρίποδα ἀποδοῦναι. καὶ πρῶτον μὲν ἀπεστάλη πρὸς Θαλῆν εἰς Μίλητον, ἑκουσίως τῶν Κῴων ἑνὶ δωρουμένων ἐκείνῳ περὶ οὗ πρὸς ἅπαντας ὁμοῦ Μιλησίους ἐπολέμησαν.

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[335] *Solon* 1.3-1.7.

[336] *Solon* 2.1-3.3.

[337] *Solon* 3.4-3.5.

[338] *Solon* 3.6-7.6.

Θάλεω δὲ Βίαντα σοφώτερον ἀποφαίνοντος αὐτοῦ, πρὸς ἐκεῖνον ἦκεν, ὑπ᾽ ἐκείνου δ᾽ αὖθις ἀπεστάλη πρὸς ἄλλον ὡς σοφώτερον. εἶτα περιιὼν καὶ ἀναπεμπόμενος, οὕτως ἐπὶ Θαλῆν τὸ δεύτερον ἀφίκετο, καὶ τέλος εἰς Θήβας ἐκ Μιλήτου κομισθεὶς τῷ Ἰσμηνίῳ Ἀπόλλωνι καθιερώθη. Θεόφραστος δέ φησι πρῶτον μὲν εἰς Πριήνην Βίαντι τὸν τρίποδα πεμφθῆναι, δεύτερον δ᾽ εἰς Μίλητον Θαλῆ Βίαντος ἀποπέμψαντος· οὕτω δὲ διὰ πάντων πάλιν εἰς Βίαντα περιελθεῖν, καὶ τέλος εἰς Δελφοὺς ἀποσταλῆναι. ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ὑπὸ πλειόνων τεθρύληται, πλὴν ὅτι τὸ δῶρον ἀντὶ τοῦ τρίποδος οἱ μὲν φιάλην ὑπὸ Κροίσου πεμφθεῖσαν, οἱ δὲ ποτήριον Βαθυκλέους ἀπολιπόντος εἶναι λέγουσιν.[339]

For they say that a group of Coans were pulling in a net, and some strangers from Miletus had bought the net without seeing [its contents]. The net was later revealed to have dragged in a golden tripod, which they say that Helen, while sailing from Troy, let sink there, because she recalled some ancient oracle. First, an argument arose among the fishermen over the tripod, then the cities took up the disagreement, until it came to war, and the Pythia told both sides that the tripod should be given to the wisest. And first it was sent to Thales in Miletus, with the Coans gifting willingly to that one the thing over which they waged war on all the Milesians together. But Thales declared that Bias was wiser than he, and gave it to that man, who in turn sent it to another on the grounds that another was wiser than he. Then, going around and being sent away, thus it came to Thales once more, and in the end it was carried from Miletus to Thebes and dedicated to Ismenian Apollo. But Theophrastus says that the tripod was first sent to Bias in Pirene, and then Bias sent it to Thales in Miletus; and in this way it went through all the sages and came back again to Bias, and in the end it was sent away to Delphi. These things, then, are repeated by more accounts, except some say that instead of a tripod, the gift was a cup sent by Croesus, while others say it was a beaker left by Bathycles.

[339] *Solon* 4.3-4.8, Parke and Wormell §248, Fontenrose Q76.

Several different traditions exist with regard to this tripod, the oracular response, and the final resting place of the tripod, as Plutarch himself acknowledges in his account. In contrast to Plutarch and Theophrastus, Diodorus Siculus records a hexametric response given by the Pythia, declaring that the tripod should go to the one "who by his wisdom has seen the things that are and the things that will be" (ὃς σοφίᾳ τά τ᾽ ἐόντα τά τ᾽ ἐσσόμενα προδέδορκεν), and after all the other wise men pass it amongst each other, Solon declares it should go to Apollo, "for he is wiser than all" (τοῦτον γὰρ εἶναι σοφώτερον πάντων).[340] Diogenes Laertius reports a similar story, although he also includes a separate version where the tripod is dedicated by Thales, but to Apollo at Didyma, rather than Ismenian Apollo as in Plutarch's version.[341] Plutarch alone of the extant sources says that Ismenian Apollo was the recipient of the tripod.[342] Pindar, however, calls the Temple of Ismenian Apollo "sanctuary of golden tripods,"[343] and Pausanias says that it is customary to dedicate votive tripods to Ismenian Apollo.[344] Additionally, in *De E apud Delphos* Plutarch-as-narrator presents Ammonius as having argued that Apollo's philosophical nature is revealed through his various names, declaring that "Ismenios is for those who have knowledge,"[345] thus connecting Ismenian Apollo with wisdom, albeit by means of a questionable derivation of Ἰσμήνιος. It is likely, as Paladini argues, that Plutarch here is mixing elements of both Apolline cults in his telling of the tale, presenting a version of the

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[340] Diodorus Siculus 9.3.

[341] Diogenes Laertius 1.28, 1.32.

[342] Fontenrose (1978: 293) claims that this legend originally probably involved an oracle of Apollo at Didyma, and that the tripod was dedicated either to Apollo Didymeus or to Apollo Delphinios at Miletus.

[343] Pindar *Pythian* 11.4: χρυσέων… ἄδυτον τριπόδων.

[344] Pausanias 9.10.4.

[345] *De E apud Delphos* 385c: Ἰσμήνιος δὲ τοῖς ἔχουσι τὴν ἐπιστήμην.

story that blends together different traditions.[346] But regardless of where the tripod ended up, Plutarch indicates that it was given to Apollo – either Pythian, following Theophrastus's account, or Ismenian – and the *poleis* were told to whom it should go by the Pythia.[347]

This tale demonstrates the oracle's role as a conflict-resolver, diffusing tensions between city-states, but also carries a not-so-subtle message: it is the god who is the wisest. Although Plutarch is not as explicit on this point as other extant versions of this tale, the message is still there. In fact, Plutarch's version, in contrast to Diodorus's presentation of the incident, leaves Solon out of the decision to dedicate the tripod to Apollo, emphasizing the wisdom of the god, rather than uplifting any one of the sages as the wisest of the mortals in deciphering the meaning behind the god's words.[348] Plutarch's emphasis on the wisdom of the god comes in the middle of his introduction to Solon's famed wisdom, and, although it is impossible to determine exactly when in his life this incident was supposed to have taken place, it applies more to Solon in his old age than in his youth.[349] Plutarch has dispensed with a strictly chronological presentation to introduce his readers instead to important character traits of his subject in the opening of the biography, at the expense of a more linear narrative structure. By fronting this tale about Solon, Plutarch marks it as important for understanding Solon's character. Solon's wisdom was legendary, and yet, in

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[346] Paladini (1956) 380-381.

[347] This is the only mention of the Pythia in the *Solon.*

[348] Paladini (1956: 379) suggests, "forse la leggenda variava leggermente secondo la maggiore importanza data a Talete o a Solone." It is, however, curious that in a biography of Solon, Plutarch has chosen the version that grants less importance to his primary subject.

[349] *Solon* 1-7. Although some parts of these chapters do appear to refer to events that occurred towards the beginning of Solon's life (e.g. *Solon* 2.1), others clearly refer to his older years (e.g. 1.6-7), or are impossible to place within Solon's life with any degree of certainty as Plutarch jumps from Solon's youth to old age and back within the space of a few sentences.

Plutarch's account, no human can be considered the wisest. This tale positions the reader to understand that not all of Solon's actions will be the shrewdest or best – Solon is not the wisest, after all. Plutarch repeats this message throughout the *Life*, demonstrating that Solon was not a perfect lawmaker or leader, nor was he an ideal philosopher. The Pythia's response is not entirely clear; she did not tell them directly to give the tripod to Apollo, after all. But by responding in this way, the god, through the Pythia, used the opportunity to impart wisdom to the Greeks. Just as Theon argues in *De E apud Delphos* concerning the oracle about the altar at Delos,[350] here too a vague or ambiguous oracle serves to promote philosophical reflection. The Pythia's cryptic reply "to the wisest" (τῷ σοφωτάτῳ) makes even the sages pause and reflect, triggering the very sort of critical thinking Plutarch himself strove to ignite in his readers.

The oracle appears next in the *Life* in Solon's rise to political prominence in Athens, advising Solon on what to do to ensure the most profitable outcome, while also supporting him and serving as the linchpin of his political success. Plutarch's use of the oracle in this way is revealed most clearly in his accounts of two wars in which Solon was engaged early in his political career: the Megarian war for control of Salamis, and first Sacred War to liberate Delphi.

In his account of the Megarian war, Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle as instructing Solon on how to achieve the best outcome, and offering direct support through oracular responses. Plutarch cites conflicting explanations for how Solon won Salamis for Athens: following Solon's successful petitioning of the Athenian people to take back the

[350] *De E apud Delphos* 386e-f.

island through his *Salamis* poem, Plutarch lists a 'popular' (δημώδη) version of events,[351] followed by an alternative version supported by unnamed others (ἄλλοι).[352] In the popular version, Solon employs deception to take control of the island, having a man pose as a deserter and conning the Megarians into thinking that if they sailed off to Colias they could capture all the aristocratic Athenian women. Once the Megarians set off, Solon dresses Athenians youths as women and springs a trap for the Megarians, capturing them and thereby taking control of the island. The second version begins with a verse oracle from Delphi offering Solon instructions for how to proceed:

> ἄλλοι δέ φασιν οὐ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον γενέσθαι τὴν κατάληψιν, ἀλλὰ πρῶτον μὲν αὐτῷ τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς θεὸν χρῆσαι·
>
> ἀρχηγοὺς χώρας θυσίαις ἥρωας ἐνοίκους
> ἵλασο, τοὺς κόλποις Ἀσωπιὰς ἀμφικαλύπτει,
> οἳ φθίμενοι δέρκονται ἐς ἠέλιον δύνοντα. [353]
>
> But others say that the capture [of the island] did not happen in this way, but that first the god in Delphi delivered an oracle to him:
>
> propitiate with sacrifices the founding heroes,
> inhabitants of the land, whom Asopia[354] now
> shelters in her bosom,
> who lie dead facing the setting sun.

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[351] *Solon* 8.4-6.

[352] *Solon* 9.1-7.

[353] *Solon* 9.1. Parke and Wormell §326, Fontenrose Q69. Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 110) connect this oracle directly with Solon's success against the Megarians, describing the oracle as the "magic clue for conquering the island" given to him by Apollo.

[354] i.e. Salamis, the daughter of the river god Asopus. For this reading see Parke and Wormell (1956: 110). This use of Ἀσωπιάς to refer to daughters of Asopus is found also in Euripides *Hercules* 785 in the plural (Ἀσωπιάδες κόραι) to refer to all the daughters of Asopus, and a similar formulation (θύγατρες Ἀσωπίδων) also occurs in Pindar *Isthmean* 8.17 referring to Thebe and Aegina specifically.

Once Solon performed sacrifices to these heroes – Periphemus and Cychreus – he and his men succeeded in taking the city through a two-pronged attack: after capturing a Megarian spy ship, one group used it to sail into the harbor and catch the Megarians there unawares while the rest of Solon's troops fought the Megarian army on land.[355] Although Plutarch lists the women-trick version first, he makes clear in his account that this is not his preferred version of events. Immediately following the second version of events, Plutarch explains a ritual performed by the Athenians that would appear to vindicate the story told by ἄλλοι at the expense of the more popular tale:

> ἔοικε δὲ τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ καὶ τὰ δρώμενα μαρτυρεῖν. ναῦς γάρ τις Ἀττικὴ προσέπλει σιωπῇ τὸ πρῶτον, εἶτα κραυγῇ καὶ ἀλαλαγμῷ προσφερομένων, εἷς ἀνὴρ ἔνοπλος ἐξαλλόμενος μετὰ βοῆς ἔθει πρὸς ἄκρον τὸ Σκιράδιον ⟨ἐπὶ τοὺς⟩ ἐκ γῆς προσαγομένους. [356]
>
> And a ceremony also seems to bear witness to this account, for an Attic ship approaches first in silence, then, while they are attacking with cries and clamor, one man in hoplite armor, leaping out with a shout, runs towards the Skiradion promontory ⟨to those⟩ who were attacking by land.

Plutarch follows his description of this reenactment of Solon's attack on the island with a description of a shrine Solon erected for Enyalius, a god who was invoked through soldiers' battle cries.[357] Because Plutarch connects geographically Enyalius's shrine and the place

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[355] *Solon* 9.1-5.

[356] *Solon* 9.6. Sintenis (1839) identified a lacuna after Σκιράδιον on account of sense, in which he is followed by Ziegler. Neither Sintenis nor Ziegler attempt to fill the lacuna. Here, I follow the proposed emendation of Flacelière, Chambry, and Juneaux (1961): '⟨ἐπὶ τοὺς⟩ ἐκ γῆς προσαγομένους.'

[357] On Enyalius and his cult in general, see Gonzales (2004); for the war-cry as a way to invoke the god, see especially pp. 52-57. Gonzales claims that it is possible that by the Classical era the Athenians no longer remembered the association of Enyalius with battle-cries. Nevertheless, the

where the Athenians perform this ceremony, his reference to the shrine serves as further support of the version told by ἄλλοι, tying the ceremony to Solon's capture of Salamis as told by the second version he presents.[358] Plutarch's explanation of this ceremony as proof of the superiority of the account told by ἄλλοι is needed, for, as he himself admits, the version they tell is not the most widespread. Plutarch's decision to present different explanations allows his readers not only to consider which explanation is more plausible, but also to reflect on what image of Solon would emerge from each explanation. It is notable that in Plutarch's evidently preferred version, he emphasizes that Solon had the god's approval and support through the Delphic oracle he received before he set sail for Salamis.

The Delphic oracle proves important again towards the end of the Megarian war episode, when Plutarch describes how Solon completes his military victory with a legal one, convincing the panel of five Spartans who were appointed to arbitrate the dispute between the Athenians and Megarians over ownership of the island.[359] Among the other arguments made, Plutarch notes how Solon argued that on Salamis the dead are buried facing the west, in the manner of the Athenians.[360] The Delphic oracle Solon received states explicitly that the founding heroes of the island are buried in this way (ἐς ἠέλιον δύνοντα).

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connection Plutarch appears to be making between the ceremony and the temple suggest that he at least may have been aware of it.

[358] *Solon* 9.7: "nearby is the shrine of Enyalius dedicated by Solon. For he conquered the Megarians, and whoever did not perish in the battle, he released under a truce" (πλησίον δὲ τοῦ Ἐνυαλίου τὸ ἱερόν ἐστιν ἱδρυσαμένου Σόλωνος. ἐνίκησε γὰρ τοὺς Μεγαρέας, καὶ ὅσοι μὴ διεφθάρησαν ἐν τῇ μάχῃ, πάντας ὑποσπόνδους ἀφῆκεν).

[359] Higbie (1997: 279-280) identifies two divergent traditions for the capture of the island: military force, or diplomatic and legalistic negotiations. Here, Plutarch has merged the two narratives into one, claiming both military and legal victory for Solon and the Athenians, with the oracle supporting him in both.

[360] *Solon* 10.3-4.

While Plutarch notes that Hereas the Megarian disputes the claim that the Megarians buried their dead facing east, which would nullify Solon's argument by marking it as irrelevant, Plutarch silences Hereas's counterpoint through the attestation of further Delphic oracular responses, which declare Salamis to be Ionian.[361] Plutarch's careful handling of the divergent source traditions here is notable. Instead of presenting only the Athenian perspective, Plutarch shares with his readers the arguments made on both sides, offering an impression of fairness and impartiality. Nevertheless, his presentation of the two sides does not result in total ambivalence: Plutarch ends the debate with the Delphic oracle effectively declaring Solon and the Athenians the rightful rulers of the island. As a result, the reader is left without a doubt as to the outcome and the validity of Athens' claim to the island, since the Delphic oracle supports Solon in both his martial and his rhetorical battles for Salamis.

Following Athens' victory over the Megarians, Plutarch turns next to Solon's subsequent military campaign against the Cirrhaeans in defense of Delphi and the Delphic oracle.[362] Immediately after presenting to the reader an episode in which the Delphic oracle led Solon to victory, Plutarch relates an episode in which the oracle and Delphi itself are quite literally at the heart of the matter:

> ἤδη μὲν οὖν καὶ ἀπὸ τούτων ἔνδοξος ἦν ὁ Σόλων καὶ μέγας. ἐθαυμάσθη δὲ καὶ διεβοήθη μᾶλλον ἐν τοῖς Ἕλλησιν εἰπὼν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ἱεροῦ τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς, ὡς χρὴ βοηθεῖν καὶ μὴ περιορᾶν Κιρραίους ὑβρίζοντας εἰς τὸ μαντεῖον, ἀλλὰ προσαμύνειν ὑπὲρ τοῦ θεοῦ Δελφοῖς. πεισθέντες γὰρ ὑπ'

[361] *Solon* 10.6: "in fact, they say that certain Pythian oracles helped Solon, in which the god called Salamis Ionian" (τῷ μέντοι Σόλωνι καὶ Πυθικούς τινας βοηθῆσαι λέγουσι χρησμούς, ἐν οἷς ὁ θεὸς Ἰαονίαν τὴν Σαλαμῖνα προσηγόρευσε). See also Parke and Wormell §326, Fontenrose Q69.

[362] The identity of this people – called Κιρραίους in Plutarch's text – has been disputed, but I follow the majority of texts and scholars in reading them as the people from Cirrha, rather than from Crisa. For a discussion of the issue, see Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977: 144-146).

> ἐκείνου πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον ὥρμησαν οἱ Ἀμφικτύονες, ὡς ἄλλοι τε πολλοὶ μαρτυροῦσι καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῇ τῶν Πυθιονικῶν ἀναγραφῇ Σόλωνι τὴν γνώμην ἀνατιθείς. οὐ μέντοι στρατηγὸς ἐπὶ τοῦτον ἀπεδείχθη τὸν πόλεμον, ὡς λέγειν φησὶν Ἕρμιππος Εὐάνθη τὸν Σάμιον· οὔτε γὰρ Αἰσχίνης ὁ ῥήτωρ τοῦτ᾽ εἴρηκεν, ἔν τε τοῖς τῶν Δελφῶν ὑπομνήμασιν Ἀλκμαίων, οὐ Σόλων, Ἀθηναίων στρατηγὸς ἀναγέγραπται.[363]
>
> Therefore Solon was famous and powerful from these events.[364] But he was admired and celebrated more among the Greeks for speaking up on behalf of the sanctuary at Delphi, that it was necessary to help and not to watch the Cirrhaeans acting dishonorably towards the oracle, but to aid the Delphians on behalf of the god. For the Amphictyons entered into the war after being persuaded by him to do so, as both many other witnesses and Aristotle attribute the proposal to Solon in the list of Pythian victors. But he was surely not appointed general for this conflict, as Hermippus says that Euanthe the Samion claimed; for Aeschines the orator does not say this, and in the Delphic records Alcmaeon, not Solon, is recorded as being general of the Athenians.

Plutarch uses the First Sacred War to make a dramatic point: the preceding conflict with the Megarians that was won through the assistance of the Delphic oracle made people pay attention to Solon, bringing him fame and power, and the subsequent conflict over the Delphic sanctuary solidified his position among the Athenians as a wise and moral actor, putting him in a position to bring about change in Athens. Plutarch gives no further details of the conflict, which appears to have been included in the narrative for the sole purpose of elucidating Solon's character.[365] Plutarch is cautious not to overstate or misrepresent

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[363] *Solon* 11.1-2.

[364] i.e. the Megarian war.

[365] Plutarch's account of the war is so abbreviated that he leaves out the oracle purportedly given to the Amphictyons instructing them to wage war on the Cirrhaeans. Aeschines says in *Against*

Solon's role in this war: he claims that Solon was the instigator of Athens' involvement in defending Delphi from the Cirrhaeans, and rejects the claim that Solon was the general of the Athenian forces in this conflict. This incident not only marks the culmination of Solon's rise to the top in Athenian politics, but does so in a way that identifies the Delphic oracle as the key instrument through which Solon's success was achieved.

The Delphic oracle appears prominently throughout Plutarch's account of Solon's early career, guiding him and validating his actions, as seen in the Megarian war, and demonstrating his good character, as seen in the conflict with the Cirrhaeans over Delphi. In this way, Plutarch cements in his readers an image of Solon as a wise man who listens to the gods and respects them. This characterization of Solon is crucial to his character arc, since in the subsequent two episodes – the aftermath of the Cylonian pollution and the reform of the Athenian *politeia* – Solon's reputation as a wise and just man is necessary for understanding how Solon is put in a position where he can enact change without personally desiring power.

The oracle next appears in the *Life* granting Solon permission to begin his reforms. Plutarch takes pains to demonstrate that Solon did not desire or actively seek power, but was instead given it because of his reputation among the Athenians, and had the god's

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Ctesiphon 108 that Solon's proposal to the Amphictyons was to attack the Cirrhaeans in accordance with the oracle. That Plutarch was familiar with Aeschines's speech is clear from the *Solon*, for in the passage quoted above Plutarch corrects Aeschines's version of events as expressed in *Against Ctesiphon*. Plutarch also clearly was aware of this other oracle because he quotes a line of it in *Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus* 76e. Fontenrose (Q70) notes that only Aeschines, of extant authors discussing the Sacred War, mentions this oracle, and suggests that this oracle is a later invention created to justify the Amphictyonic League's destruction of Cirrha and seizure of Delphi. It is not clear why Plutarch has omitted this oracle from his text, whether it was because he doubted its historicity or for other reasons, but its absence places more emphasis on Solon: he is not just following the orders of the oracle, but is acting on his own initiative to defend the god.

approval to accept this power and act on it. As with the episodes regarding the Megarians, Plutarch presents testimony from different witnesses, both for and against this portrayal:

> ἐνταῦθα δὴ τῶν Ἀθηναίων οἱ φρονιμώτατοι συνορῶντες τὸν Σόλωνα μόνον ⟨ἢ⟩ μάλιστα τῶν ἁμαρτημάτων ἐκτὸς ὄντα, καὶ μήτε τοῖς πλουσίοις κοινωνοῦντα τῆς ἀδικίας, μήτε ταῖς τῶν πενήτων ἀνάγκαις ἐνεχόμενον, ἐδέοντο τοῖς κοινοῖς προσελθεῖν καὶ καταπαῦσαι τὰς διαφοράς. καίτοι Φανίας ὁ Λέσβιος αὐτὸν ἱστορεῖ τὸν Σόλωνα, χρησάμενον ἀπάτῃ πρὸς ἀμφοτέρους ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ τῆς πόλεως, ὑποσχέσθαι κρύφα τοῖς μὲν ἀπόροις γῆς νέμησιν, τοῖς δὲ χρηματικοῖς βεβαίωσιν τῶν συμβολαίων. ἀλλ' αὐτός φησιν ὁ Σόλων ὀκνῶν τὸ πρῶτον ἅψασθαι τῆς πολιτείας, καὶ δεδοικὼς τῶν μὲν τὴν φιλοχρηματίαν, τῶν δὲ τὴν ὑπερηφανίαν.[366]
>
> Then indeed the wisest of the Athenians, noticing that Solon alone was the most removed from the failures [of the other Athenians], and that he was neither party to the the crimes of the wealthy, nor subject to the needs of the poor, begged him to apply himself to the common cause and to put an end to the disagreements. Phanias of Lesbos, however, records that Solon himself, employing a trick against both parties in order to save the city, secretly promised land distribution to the poor, and to the wealthy confirmation of their loans. But Solon himself says that he was at first hesitant to take control of the state, and that he feared the greed of one party, and the arrogance of the other.

Although Plutarch presents varying accounts, he is not impartial or undecided on the matter: while Phanias the Lesbian accused Solon of orchestrating his rise to power by dangling promises in secret to both sides, he is presented as the only one voicing this opinion, against the words of the "wisest of the Athenians" (τῶν Ἀθηναίων οἱ

[366] *Solon* 14.1-3.

φρονιμώτατοι) and those of Solon himself. In the middle of this debate, Plutarch adds the testimony of the Delphic oracle:

> ἔνιοι δέ φασι καὶ μαντείαν γενέσθαι τῷ Σόλωνι Πυθοῖ τοιαύτην·
>
> ἧσο μέσην κατὰ νῆα κυβερνητήριον ἔργον
> εὐθύνων· πολλοί τοι Ἀθηναίων ἐπίκουροι.[367]
>
> And some say that Solon also received the following Delphic oracle:
>
> sit in the middle of the ship, performing the work of a pilot; many of the Athenians are your allies.

The Delphic response signalling divine advice and approval is strikingly similar to those received by Lycurgus and Theseus, and enables Plutarch to present Solon's law code as implemented with the blessing of the god, even though Solon himself did not wish to be in such a position.[368] While the words of the oracle make no mention of tyranny, Plutarch's framing of it suggests that this is what the god meant. The oracular response comes in the middle of a series of examples of other men urging Solon to take power: in addition to the words of the wisest of the Athenians quoted above, Plutarch also includes the testimony of

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[367] *Solon* 14.6, Parke and Wormell §15, Fontenrose Q67. Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977: 184) are unequivocal in their assessment of the meaning of this oracle: "l'oracolo… indica chiaramente l'appoggio decretato da Delfi alla politica di Solone e a un suo eventuale tentativo di farsi tiranno."

[368] Plutarch includes a similar oracle in *Septem sapientium convivium* 152c, in an exchange between Aesop and Solon. There Solon, as in the *Life*, claims that the best despot is the one who does not wish to rule. Aesop attempts to refute Solon by quoting an oracle Solon supposedly received: "who would be persuaded more by you in this matter than by the god speaking in accordance with the oracle given to you: 'a fortunate city listens to one herald'?" (τίς δ' ἂν… σοὶ τοῦτο πεισθείη μᾶλλον ἢ τῷ θεῷ φράσαντι κατὰ τὸν πρὸς σὲ χρησμόν 'εὔδαιμον πτολίεθρον ἑνὸς κήρυκος ἀκοῦον';). This Plutarchan dialogue is the only source for this oracular response. Although neither Aesop nor Solon identify this oracle as Delphic, both Fontenrose (Q68) and Parke and Wormell (§16) list it in their catalogues of Delphic oracles. While Parke and Wormell (1956: 111-112) claim the oracle as both Delphic and genuine, Fontenrose (Q68) speculates that it was excerpted from one of Solon's poems. It is impossible to prove the provenance of this oracle, though in tone it does resemble the image of Solon that emerges out of the *Life*, in particular with regard to his self-presentation (see especially Solon's poetry quoted in *Solon* 14.9).

the leading men of the opposing parties (οἱ προϊστάμενοι), common citizens owing allegiance to neither side (πολλοὶ… τῶν διὰ μέσου πολίτων), and even Solon's close friends (οἱ συνήθεις), claiming that all urged him to accept the tyranny.[369] Plutarch even presents Solon himself as acknowledging that he was going against the will of the god in rejecting the tyranny, quoting Solon's own poetry:

> ἃ δὲ φυγόντος αὐτοῦ τὴν τυραννίδα πολλοὶ καταγελῶντες ἔλεγον, γέγραφεν οὕτως·
>
> οὐκ ἔφυ Σόλων βαθύφρων οὐδὲ βουλήεις ἀνήρ·
> ἐσθλὰ γὰρ θεοῦ διδόντος, αὐτὸς οὐκ ἐδέξατο…
>
> ταῦτα τοὺς πολλοὺς καὶ φαύλους περὶ αὐτοῦ πεποίηκε λέγοντας.[370]
>
> But in response to those mocking him for spurning the tyranny, Solon wrote thus:
>
> 'Solon was not wise, nor was he a man of good counsel
> for when the god offered blessings, he would not accept them…'
>
> In this way he represented the crowd and the lowly people as speaking of him.

The mocking tone Solon adopts in the poem clearly conveys Solon's refusal to follow the advice of the god and the people. The placement of this quotation, immediately following the string of exhortations to Solon to take up the tyranny and the oracular response discussed above, links Solon's refusal of the god's blessings (ἐσθλά) to the oracle Solon received and the promise of success it contained. And yet, the oracle does not appear to direct Solon explicitly to establish himself as tyrant. The oracle tells Solon that he has many allies, and Plutarch demonstrates this to be true with his series of examples showing how

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[369] *Solon* 14.4-7.

[370] *Solon* 14.9-15.1.

many supporters on all sides Solon truly has, including the god. The oracle tells Solon to take a middle path, which, as Plutarch goes on to demonstrate, Solon does, managing to be "neither yielding to the powerful, nor to the pleasure of those who chose him."[371] Nevertheless, Plutarch uses the testimony of Solon and his fellow Athenians to present the oracle as directing Solon to seize power in Athens, and Solon refusing to do so. By describing Solon's rise to power in this way, Plutarch suggests to his reader that Solon made a mistake: Solon rejects the call of the Athenians and the god. According to Plutarch, the god encouraged Solon to become tyrant of Athens, and Solon and the people understood this to be the meaning of the oracle. While Solon does take a position of power in Athens, he rejects the one Plutarch claims the god endorsed, and Solon ultimately failed to follow Lycurgus's example and secure a stable future for his *politeia*. Solon claimed that he gave the Athenians "the best laws that they would have received" (ὧν ἄν… προσεδέξαντο τοὺς ἀρίστους),[372] and yet he rejected a position of greater power that would have enabled him to impose stricter laws, or at least το ensure they enjoyed a longer life. Indeed, Solon's strategy of taking a middle course did not pay off: by favoring neither side, Solon pleased neither side (ἠρεσε δ' οὐδετέροις), ensuring the speedy demise of his *politeia*.[373] In this way, Plutarch twists an oracular response to fit the needs of the narrative he is constructing, forcing a meaning that does not match clearly the actual words of the oracular response.

Plutarch has Solon, upon completing his laws, turn back to the oracle, whence his approval to undertake his reforms came. After the laws were written up and transcribed

[371] *Solon* 15.1: οὐδ' ὑπείκων τοῖς δυναμένοις οὐδὲ πρὸς ἡδονὴν τῶν ἑλομένων.

[372] *Solon* 15.2.

[373] *Solon* 16.1.

onto *axones*,[374] Plutarch explains that the *boule* swore an oath to ratify the laws, and that each of the *thesmothetai* swore individually while holding the *lithos* that "if he should transgress anything of the laws (τῶν θεσμῶν), he would dedicate a golden statue of equal weight in Delphi."[375] With this move Solon has transformed the god from merely a supporter of Solon and his reform effort to the guarantor of his laws, standing as the one to whom payment is owed if any of the *thesmothetes* should fail to do their duty and uphold the new *politeia*. Unlike with Lycurgus and the Spartan constitution, Plutarch does not present the god as being the source of Solon's reforms. Rather, Solon's interaction with the oracle mirrors Lycurgus's first inquiry to the god, in which he sought permission to begin reforming the Spartan state. But where Lycurgus received subsequent instructions from Delphi – the *rhetra* – on how to go about these reforms, no such advice is given to Solon.

Solon falls far short of Plutarch's ideal statesman. In spite of his legendary wisdom, he fails to see the true nature of the Athenian people, clinging to a lofty ideal that ultimately collapses before Solon's own eyes. Solon's self-imposed exile, in an attempt to preserve his laws, had little effect, since upon his return he witnessed the rise of Peisistratus and Athens' descent into tyranny. Indeed, in spite of Solon's swift rise to power with the

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[374] *Solon* 25.1-2. Plutarch admits to confusion over the distinction beteen *axones* and *kurbeis*. For a discussion of these tablets, see Meyer (2016: 331-343). As Meyer demonstrates, the meaning and form of these terms was discussed and debated as early as the third century BC.

[375] *Solon* 25.3: εἴ τινα παραβαίη τῶν θεσμῶν, ἀνδριάντα χρυσοῦν ἀναθήσειν ἐν Δελφοῖς. As Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977: 261-262) note, this oath also appears in Pseudo-Aristotle *Athenaion politeia* 7.1 and in Plato *Phaedrus* 235d-e, but with important differences. Both the *Ath. Pol.* and Plato's interlocutor Phaedrus say that the oath was taken by the nine archons, and the *Ath. Pol.* and does not specify that the statue be dedicated in Delphi or that it be ἰσόμετρον. Flacelière, Chambry, and Juneaux (1961: 6-7), noting Plutarch and Aristotle's shared use of the unusual verb καταφατίζω to describe the action of swearing done by the *thesmothetes*, suggest that Plutarch used Pseudo-Aristotle's account directly for the oath, together with other sources. Against this view, Manfredini and Piccirilli (1977: 262) claim that it is more likely that Pseudo-Aristotle and Plutarch simply share an earlier source for this oath.

backing of the god, Solon is not as successful a lawgiver as Lycurgus. Lycurgus not only sought and received assistance from Delphi before implementing his *politeia,* but also sought affirmation of its merit afterwards, had the Spartans swear unequivocally to uphold the laws, valued the preservation of the *politeia* over his own life, and even refused to have his body returned to Sparta for burial lest the Spartans interpret the return of his corpse as releasing them from their oath. The oath sworn by the *thesmothetai* pales in comparison, and after the Athenians break from the laws with the rise of Peisistratus, the oath they took to uphold them is never mentioned again in the *Life*. Plutarch foreshadows this outcome earlier in the *Life* with a conversation held between Anacharsis and Solon. In the exchange between the two men, Anacharsis laughs at Solon for believing that written laws would restrain the rich and powerful.[376] As Plutarch notes, Anacharsis's prediction came to pass with the rise of Peisistratus, a man who did not hesitate to seize full control of the state, taking up the tyranny that Solon had refused. Although Plutarch places this in the opening chapters of the biography, he acknowledges that this actually took place much later in Solon's life, after he had already begun fashioning his law code. Plutarch's placement of this anecdote in the opening chapters of the *Life* serves as a warning to readers: Solon will ultimately fail as a statesman, and it is up to the reader to determine where he went wrong. Plutarch presents Solon as acknowledging the limitations of the power he chose to accept and yet also being overly optimistic to the point of naïveté over the longevity and

[376] *Solon* 5.4: "therefore Anacharsis, when he heard, laughed at Solon's undertaking, for thinking that he could restrain the injustices and the greed of the citizens with written laws, which are no different than spiderwebs, which would control the weak and poor who were caught by it, but would be torn apart by the powerful and rich" (τὸν οὖν Ἀνάχαρσιν πυθόμενον, καταγελᾶν τῆς πραγματείας τοῦ Σόλωνος, οἰομένου γράμμασιν ἐφέξειν τὰς ἀδικίας καὶ πλεονεξίας τῶν πολιτῶν, ἃ μηδὲν τῶν ἀραχνίων διαφέρειν, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐκεῖνα τοὺς μὲν ἀσθενεῖς καὶ λεπτοὺς τῶν ἁλισκομένων καθέξειν, ὑπὸ δὲ τῶν δυνατῶν καὶ πλουσίων διαρραγήσεσθαι).

sustainability of his laws. Additionally, Solon had every advantage going in, from divine favor to the assistance of Epimenides of Phaistus who assisted Solon and paved the way for his reforms,[377] and yet, he still fails to live up to Plutarch's ideal for statesmen, falling short of Lycurgus and even of his counterpoint in the *Lives*, Publicola.[378] Unlike Lycurgus, Solon did not ensure that his laws were sufficiently supported and by the time he realized they needed help, it was too late for him to be able to do anything. Ultimately, Solon is made to face the same prediction about which he warned Croesus: his own good fortune does not last until the end either, and he lives out his final years as Croesus does, witnessing the dissolution of his laws and his life at the mercy of a new and more powerful ruler. Seen in this light, as a leader Solon pales even in comparison to his Roman counterpoint in the *Lives*, Publicola, whose laws Plutarch claims were inspired by Solon's: as Plutarch claims in the *synkrisis*, Publicola was not only equal to his Athenian predecessor in virtue, he also outshone him in his good fortune.[379]

In the *Solon*, the Delphic oracle serves to support and uplift the Athenian lawgiver, serving as the primary means of divine communication in the *Life*, directing and guiding Solon to the most profitable outcomes and assisting him in his rise to prominence in Athens. In the process, Plutarch uses the oracle to elucidate Solon's character, demonstrating his piety in protecting and obeying the oracle, while also emphasizing the god's status as a greater philosopher than Solon or any of his fellow sages. Unlike

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[377] *Solon* 12.8: "[Epimenides,] going [to Athens] and having made Solon a friend, he preceded him and he paved the way for much of his legislation" (ἐλθὼν δὲ καὶ τῷ Σόλωνι χρησάμενος φίλῳ, πολλὰ προϋπειργάστο καὶ προωδοποίησεν αὐτῷ τῆς νομοθεσίας). On Epimenides of Phaistus, see aso *De defectu oraculorum* 409e-f, and the discussion of this passage in Chapter 1.

[378] Hershbell (2008: 493-498).

[379] See, for example, *Solon-Publicola* 3.

Lycurgus, Solon did not return to the oracle to ask whether his *politeia* was sufficient; instead, Solon failed to anticipate how quickly the Athenians would turn away from his laws and abandon the equality he had imposed on them. Parke and Wormell describe Solon as "specially interested in the Pythian Apollo."[380] Most of their evidence, however, comes directly from Plutarch. Consequently, I would modify this claim: *Plutarch's* Solon is particularly interested in the Delphic oracle. Although other ancient authors connect Solon in various ways to Delphi, Plutarch himself admits that many of the accounts he gives are not the only versions of events, and not even the most common or popular either. Furthermore, even when describing well-known events or oracle stories, Plutarch often molds the evidence to fit a particular reading, as seen most clearly in his treatment of the oracular response Solon received concerning his reforms to the Athenian constitution. In the process, he presents the oracle as speaking clearly and acting as a guiding force for Solon. By emphasizing the oracle and its role in Solon's life and career, Plutarch subtly emphasizes the philosophical aspect of Apollo as well. Solon famously pities Croesus for not understanding that a man's happiness can only be determined after his death, and yet the sage would also appear to have forgotten this maxim; his return to Athens allows him to watch what he built be destroyed by the very people for whose benefit it was created.[381] While Solon plotted a middle course, he did so in a way that resulted in widespread hatred and resentment of his laws, and his decision to abandon his fledgling *politeia* turned out to be disastrous.[382] Although Solon purportedly gave the Athenians the best laws they would

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[380] Parke & Wormell (1956.1) 110.

[381] *Solon* 27-28.

[382] E.g. in *Solon* 16.1 Plutarch notes that Solon left everyone unhappy for how he handled the cancelling of debts, and describes in 29.1 how they desired to abandon his *politeia*. Plutarch makes a similar charge in the *synkrisis*, calling Solon unfortunate for living to see the destruction of his

have accepted,[383] his failure to sway the hearts of the Athenians is notable. As a result, in his only biography of a famous sage, Plutarch, instead of emphasizing Solon's wisdom, places his subject in second place; no matter how wise Solon may have been, his wisdom paled in comparison to that of the god.

v. conclusion

In these *Lives* of famous lawgivers, Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle as a prominent political player, having a direct impact on the laws in Athens and Sparta, offering support and assistance in military ventures, and serving as an international arbiter between *poleis*. Throughout the *Lycurgus, Theseus,* and *Solon*, the oracle works to direct the people and their leaders towards greater wisdom by promoting good governance and directing both the characters within the biographies and Plutarch's readers towards philosophical reflection. Plutarch places the Delphic oracle at the heart of the formation of two of the most famous polities in Greek history: Theseus's Athenian democracy with its Solonian laws, and the Spartan polity with its Lycurgan *rhetra*. Throughout the *Lives* of the archaic Greek leaders, the oracle appears at pivotal moments in the leaders' careers, guiding the outcome of events while simultaneously shaping the presentation of the men's characters for Plutarch's readers. The oracle was an important and useful tool with which Plutarch

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politeia (*Solon and Publicola* 3.3) and accusing him of abandoning his newly created laws (*Solon and Publicola* 3.4). This charge is supported in the *Solon* itself, as Plutarch notes that by the time Solon returned from his travels, "he was no longer strong enough nor eager to speak and to conduct business in public on account of his old age" (*Solon* 29.2: ἐν δὲ κοινῷ λέγειν καὶ πράσσειν ὁμοίως οὐκέτ᾽ ἦν δυνατὸς οὐδὲ πρόθυμος ὑπὸ γήρως).

[383] *Solon* 15.2: "for which reason, when he was asked later, if he had written the best laws for the Athenians, he said "the best they would have accepted" (ὅθεν ὕστερον ἐρωτηθείς, εἰ τοὺς ἀρίστους Ἀθηναίοις νόμους ἐγραψεν, 'ὧν ἄν' ἔφη 'προσεδέξαντο τοὺς ἀρίστους').

elucidated the characters of his subjects, and a means through which to cast their actions as fulfilling the will of the god. In so doing, Plutarch fashions a role for the oracle as the advisor and supporter of kings and leaders, assisting these leading men in shaping their states. The Delphic oracle is the guarantor of Lycurgus's and of Solon's laws, and supports Theseus's changes to the state as well. Delphi also serves as the primary intermediary between the rulers and the divine, acting as the legitimizer of the state's mode of governance and of the ruler's actions. The dedication of Theseus, Lycurgus, and Solon to the oracle justifies their actions and marks them as pious and just rulers, so long as they continue consulting with the oracle and using it as a means of support and guidance.

In each of the three *Lives* in question, the oracle assists the lawgivers in crafting ideal – or as close as they can come to it – states and modes of governance. Plutarch emphasizes this philosophical ideal especially in the *Lycurgus*, where he claims that the Lycurgan *rhetra* are superior to Plato's laws because Plato, along with Diogenes and Zeno, did not implement his constitution. Because the *rhetra* come from the god, Lycurgus's laws are in effect the god's laws, making the god a better philosopher than Plato. Solon is compared explicitly and unfavorably with Lycurgus in his constitution, his status as a lawgiver, and the success of his laws. Theseus is brought down by the system that supported him, while Solon fails to support his system and he, like Croesus, lives past his good fortune. Theseus too fails to secure a successful end, brought down by his own actions, which lead to the corruption of his newly created democracy. It is only Lycurgus who has the sense to protect his state and his reputation, and in this way bears a stark similarity to the heroes Solon calls blessed to Croesus. The oracle also directs both the subjects within the biographies and Plutarch's readers to engage in critical reflection, as

seen in the ending to the *Theseus-Romulus synkrisis* and the tale of Helen's tripod in the *Solon*: in both cases, Plutarch uses the oracular response to prompt his readers to question and challenge previous assumptions, and consider other lines of reasoning or understanding.

Although these *Lives* are set in the archaic, and even mythical, past, Plutarch resists strongly the reputation of the oracle as ambiguous and deceitful. Although some – although not all – of the oracular responses are in verse,[384] Plutarch does not present these verses as the words of the Pythia, but rather as coming straight from the god, as is made clear by oracles in each of the *Lives*.[385] Furthermore, the poetic nature of some of the oracles does not render the oracles ambiguous: only the oracle to Aegeus is truly misunderstood by the recipient, but even there Plutarch takes pains to demonstrate that it is Aegeus who is to blame for failing to understand the god's message. Rather, instead of serving to confuse and befuddle, the Delphic oracle appears as an aid to the *poleis* and their leaders. The sanctuary and the god are guarantors of the laws of the states, and guide the actions of the leaders. Although the oracle occupies a prominent position on the political stage, Plutarch records no hint of deliberate deception on the part of either the Pythia or the god, and works actively to counter any claims of ambiguity in the oracular responses, even when they are deeply rooted in the tradition of the stories he is retelling. The key exception to this is the oracle regarding Helen's tripod, in which the Pythia employs a cryptic answer designed not to deceive, but to enlighten the Greeks upon realization of the true meaning. Plutarch does, however, manipulate oracles to serve a particular argument, as seen in the oracles

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[384] Verse oracles: *Theseus* 3.5, 24.4-5; *Solon* 9.1, 14.6.

[385] E.g. *Lycurgus* 6.10; *Solon* 10.6; *Theseus* 24.2-5.

received by Theseus and Solon regarding the Athenian state.[386] In both examples, Plutarch interprets the oracles for his readers both before and after the responses are quoted, but the quoted text aligns poorly with Plutarch's use of it. In so doing, Plutarch reveals the power of the Delphic oracle as a literary device, offering comment and perspective on the actions of the characters within his narrative. Although he may not be able to change the wording of famous oracles, he can give them new or different meanings to serve his own purposes within his narratives.

Overall, the oracle serves as the backdrop and bulwark to the lives of these three founder-figures. The oracle is given credit for having supported and guided the creation of the states in the Athenian *Lives*, and bestowed the laws themselves in the Spartan. In spite of these *Lives* being the most mythical and problematic from a historical perspective both according to Plutarch and by modern standards of historicity, Plutarch does not accept poetic tropes about the oracle in these *Lives*. He consistently presents the Delphic oracular responses as not ambiguous, but the clear and direct words of the god himself, fulfilling a role that is both legitimizing and didactic, solving difficulties for the leaders of states on how best to govern. In so doing, however, Plutarch uses the oracle, and human reactions to it, to provide insight into the characters of these three men. Plutarch questions whether Theseus's failure was the consequence of his inauspicious birth; if he was conceived against the advice of the Delphic oracle, should we be surprised at his failure? Solon, the famous sage, fails to heed the oracle's warning and falls prey to the same fate about which he famously warns Croesus: he outlives his good fortune. He leaves his laws insufficiently protected and without a pilot, and watches them crumble almost immediately; it is only

[386] *Theseus* 24.4-5, *Solon* 14.6.

through the good graces of Peisistratus that Solon escapes with his life. Of the three lawgivers it is only Lycurgus who truly succeeds and lives the life Solon calls blessed: his faithfulness to the god and the oracle reveals his piety which ultimately ensures his success.

Chapter 4

Between Persia and Macedon: The Delphic Oracle in Classical Greece

i. introduction

In this chapter I will explore how Plutarch portrays the Delphic oracle in the Classical Greek world in the *Parallel Lives*. Of the nineteen *extant* Greek *Parallel Lives* not yet addressed,[387] Delphi appears in fifteen (all but the *Eumenes, Pyrrhus, Pelopidas,* and *Dion*), and there are oracular consultations or responses in thirteen (all but the *Agesilaus*, in which Delphi appears only as the site of the Pythian games, and the *Philopoemen*, where it is the site of a statue). I will not be addressing the *Timoleon, Lysander, Agis and Cleomenes,* or *Demetrius* in this chapter, since they will be the subject of the subsequent chapter. Within the remaining nine *Lives*, references to the Delphic oracle cluster around three key moments in Greek history: the Persian wars (*Themistocles, Aristides, Cimon*), the Peloponnesian war (*Nicias, Alcibiades, Pericles*), and the Macedonian conquest (*Demosthenes*, *Alexander, Phocion*). My discussion of the *Lives* will be organized according to these three historical moments: I observe the ways in which Plutarch uses and portrays the oracle in each cluster of *Lives* as well as in this period as a whole. I demonstrate that for these *Lives* of Classical Greek leaders Plutarch shows the oracle as offering advice and guidance to the Greeks in some of the most pivotal moments of Greek history,

[387] *Themistocles, Pericles, Alcibiades, Timoleon, Pelopidas, Aristides, Philopoemen, Pyrrhus, Lysander, Cimon, Nicias, Eumenes, Agesilaus, Alexander, Phocion, Agis and Cleomenes, Demosthenes, Demetrius, and Dion.*

supporting and leading them to victory, while simultaneously rejecting narrative of Delphic ambivalence or even animosity towards the Greeks.

ii. The Persian War

Modern scholarship has, until recently, portrayed Delphi's reputation during the Persian war in a very negative light. Parke and Wormell went so far as to suggest that "Delphi consistently discouraged effective resistance to Persia."[388] More recently, scholars such as Immerwahr and Price have argued convincingly that this image of Delphi as operating for the Persians against the Greeks is a modern construct rather than a reflection of ancient belief.[389] After all, why would the Greeks have made dedications at Delphi following their victory if they believed the oracle was undermining their efforts? The notion of Delphi as having been pro-Persian is entirely absent from Plutarch's Persian war *Lives*. As I will demonstrate, Plutarch presents Delphi as actively assisting the Greeks in repelling the Persian invasion, calling for unity among the allied Greek states and revealing to them how to defeat the Persians militarily. In the process, Plutarch presents an image of the oracle as untouched by political or military threats, and as delivering the god's messages without human interference.

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[388] Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 165). Indeed, Parke and Wormell call the response given to the Delphians on behalf of the Greeks advising them to pray to the winds "the only positive contribution of Delphi to the Greek side as a whole." Forrest (1984: 7) argues similarly, claiming that "one absolutely certain fact is that the oracle Medized up to the hilt" although Herodotus tried to mask the oracle's betrayal as much as possible. Parke and Wormell divide their description of Delphi's role in the Persian wars neatly into Herodotean and Plutarchan sections, with the bulk of the evidence for a pro-Persian Delphi coming from Herodotus, and Delphic support for the Greeks coming from Plutarch.

[389] Immerwahr (1966) 235-236 and Price (1985) 152-153. See also Mikalson (2003) 120-121, Bowden (2005) 26-28, and Heinemann (2018) 16-17.

a. *Themistocles*

Plutarch includes one Delphic oracular response in the *Themistocles*: the famous oracle story concerning the "wooden wall" that was to save the Athenians from the Persians.[390] Themistocles's use of this Delphic oracular response in the *Life* indicates clearly his character and his methods as a statesman, and Plutarch presents the oracle in a way that emphasizes its support for the Greek cause against the Persians. Plutarch notably does not quote the oracular response in its entirety, and assumes that his readers are already familiar with the famous tale of the double oracular responses received by the Athenians before Salamis. Plutarch describes how, as Xerxes approached Attica with his army, the Athenians, abandoned by their Greek allies, were conflicted as to how to proceed: to stay and defend the city, or flee.[391] It is in this context that Plutarch introduces the oracular response concerning the wooden wall:

> [1] ἔνθα δὴ Θεμιστοκλῆς, ἀπορῶν τοῖς ἀνθρωπίνοις λογισμοῖς προσάγεσθαι τὸ πλῆθος, ὥσπερ ἐν τραγῳδίᾳ μηχανὴν ἄρας, σημεῖα δαιμόνια καὶ χρησμοὺς ἐπῆγεν αὐτοῖς, σημεῖον μὲν λαμβάνων τὸ τοῦ δράκοντος, ὃς ἀφανὴς ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐκ τοῦ σηκοῦ δοκεῖ γενέσθαι, [2] καὶ τὰς καθ' ἡμέραν αὐτῷ προτιθεμένας ἀπαρχὰς εὑρίσκοντες ἀψαύστους, οἱ ἱερεῖς ἐξήγγελλον εἰς τοὺς πολλούς, τοῦ

[390] The historicity of this oracle story has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 170) view it as certain that the two oracular responses recorded by Herodotus are the verbatim responses given to the Athenians before the battle of Salamis, arguing that "no forger would have perpetrated such a mistake as to show Apollo induced to change his mind about one of the most decisive events of Greek history." Fontenrose (1978: 125-127, 316-317) categorizes both oracular responses as "quasi-historical" whose historicity is "doubtful" because of the length and tone of the recorded hexametric verses, and because the circumstances surrounding the two oracular responses would appear to contradict the traditional framework for oracular consultation at Delphi. Nevertheless, he argues that they cannot be dismissed as wholly fictional because he considers it to be unlikely that the story could have been entirely invented. Bowden (2005: 102-108) echoes Fontenrose's arguments as to some of the problems with the oracle story's historicity, and proposes that Herodotus's account represents a conflation of two entirely separate oracular consultations undertaken by the Athenians.

[391] *Themistocles* 9.3-5.

> Θεμιστοκλέους λόγον ⟨δια⟩διδόντος ὡς ἀπολέλοιπε τὴν πόλιν ἡ θεὸς ὑφηγουμένη πρὸς τὴν θάλασσαν αὐτοῖς· [3] τῷ δὲ χρησμῷ πάλιν ἐδημαγώγει, λέγων μηδὲν ἄλλο δηλοῦσθαι ξύλινον τεῖχος ἢ τὰς ναῦς· διὸ καὶ τὴν Σαλαμῖνα θείαν, οὐχὶ δεινὴν οὐδὲ σχετλίαν καλεῖν τὸν θεὸν, ὡς εὐτυχήματος μεγάλου τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐπώνυμον ἐσομένην.[392]
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> [1] Then indeed Themistocles, being at a loss over how to convince the populace with human arguments, supplied miraculous portents and oracles for them, relying on a *deus ex machina* just as in tragedy. On the one hand, he seized as an omen the situation concerning the snake, which seemed to disappear from the enclosure during those days. [2] And, after they discovered that the daily offerings placed out for it were untouched, the priests announced to the public, with Themistocles supplying the story, that the goddess had abandoned the city and was guiding them to the sea. [3] On the other hand, Themistocles was trying to win over the people again with the oracle, saying that the wooden wall was clearly nothing other than the ships; which is also why the god called Salamis "divine," and not "terrible" or "wretched," because her name would be associated with a great success for the Greeks.

Plutarch's framing of this oracle story is quite unusual. The tale of the famous oracular response about the wooden wall is embedded in Plutarch's description of Themistocles's various machinations and plots to convince the Athenian people to adopt his proposed course of action and flee to Salamis in the face of the Persian advance. In Plutarch's account, Themistocles had evidently already decided that the Athenians should retreat to Salamis before the omens occurred or the oracle was received. Before he even mentions the Delphic oracular response, Plutarch has already presented Themistocles as attempting to drive the Athenians to Salamis by whatever means necessary, acting as a puppet master

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[392] *Themistocles* 10.1-3, Parke and Wormell §95, Fontenrose Q147.

over the people and the priests alike. The words of the oracle from Delphi serve as the second method that Themistocles employs in his attempt to sway the people.[393] Plutarch's direct comparison of Themistocles's actions to the device used in staging tragedies to make the divine appear before the audience is telling of how the reader is intended to view Themistocles as a statesman in this episode. Plutarch employs this simile again later in the *Themistocles*, as well as in the *Lysander*, *De Herodoti malignitate*, and in the *Quaestiones Convivales*, always with a clear negative connotation.[394] Coming at the opening of the passage, Plutarch prepares his readers from the outset to see Themistocles's actions in a negative light. Marincola argues that Plutarch's overall image of Themistocles in this incident is positive, since Themistocles's use of the snake and the oracular response are "evidence of Themistocles' brilliance," showing how he could exploit the people to further the common good.[395] Marincola's interpretation of the episode overall, however, does not account for the negative effect of the *deus ex machina* comparison. If Plutarch were praising Themistocles for his manipulation of people through the omen and oracle, his

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[393] This accusation against Themistocles of feeding the story to the priests is absent from Herodotus's presentation of the same episode. In Herodotus's account (8.41), as Marincola (2015: 63-64) notes, Themistocles is not involved, the snake's disappearance is reported by the priestess, and it is the Athenians who interpret this disappearance as indicating that the goddess had abandoned them. Frost (1980: 116) describes Plutarch's version "obviously just a reworking of Herodotus 8.41, with Themistocles emphasized." This certainly appears to be the case, though the *way* in which Plutarch has emphasized Themistocles and presented his role in the episode is telling. Herodotus relates this episode long after his account of the oracular responses, and by the time the omen appears the Athenians do not need to be tricked into leaving the city. The omen serves as a final push that drives them to leave, rather than an initial justification for doing so.

[394] *Themistocles* 32.4, *Lysander* 25.1, *De Herodoti malignitate* 870c, *Quaestiones Convivales* 724d. On the negative valence the comparison of a leader's actions to the use of a *deus ex machina* appears to have had for Plutarch, see Frost (1980) 115-116 and Marincola (2015) 64-65. It is notable that Plutarch's use of the phrase in *De Herodoti malignitate* is directed against Herodotus himself, and in reference to a passage from the battle of Salamis.

[395] Marincola (2015) 66. Stadter (1984: 358) argues for a similar view of Themistocles emerging from the *Life*, with Plutarch portraying Themistocles as a "hero and savior" and downplaying any of the general's weaknesses.

decision to cast this manipulation in a negative light would be seemingly contradictory to his overall purpose. It is clear here that Plutarch has Themistocles not determining his actions from careful study of the omens and oracles, but rather the opposite: he is using the omens and oracles to convince the people to following his pre-determined course of action. At best, the oracle is merely a tool for Themistocles here, not a source of guidance. Plutarch has incorporated the oracle story about the wooden wall into the *Life* in a way that demonstrates clearly to the reader Themistocles's willingness to use the signs of the divine to further his political aims. Consequently, with this incident, Plutarch demonstrates to his readers how even actions that result in positive outcomes are not always done for the right reasons.

Plutarch's presentation of this oracle story stands in stark contrast to the same episode in Herodotus. First, while the Pythia plays no part in this oracle story in the *Themistocles* (and indeed is entirely absent from the *Life*), Herodotus goes so far as to inform his readers of the name of the Pythian priestess who delivered the prophecies to the Athenians: Aristonice.[396] Herodotus describes in detail the interactions between the Pythia and the Athenians, showing how the Athenians pleaded with the god through the priestess to change his mind and deliver them a less dire response.[397] Plutarch's omission of this detail is perhaps not surprising given Themistocles's actions and motives in Plutarch's text. Within the *Life* Themistocles uses the snake omen and the oracular response to convince the people that the gods are advising them to leave. Plutarch thus keeps the focus of his narrative on Themistocles and the god, rather than the Athenians and the priestess as

[396] Herodotus 7.140.1.

[397] Herodotus 7.141.2.

Herodotus does. In addition to omitting the Pythia, Plutarch also refers only to the second oracular response received by the Athenians regarding whether to leave their city, making no mention of the initial response given to the Athenians advising them to flee for their lives before the Persian advance.[398] By not acknowledging the first oracular response, Plutarch passes over without comment a response universally interpreted as hostile to the Athenians and one that advocated surrender rather than resistance. On the one hand, this could be explained as Plutarch omitting unnecessary information: his audience could be assumed to be aware of the story, so he did not need to go over it in detail.[399] Frost proposes that Plutarch omits the actual oracular response and is so brief in his treatment of the aspects he does cover because the tale of the two oracular responses had already been covered extensively by other authors.[400] Furthermore, in Herodotus's account, Themistocles had little to do with the initial oracle consultation, so Plutarch may have chosen to omit it because it did not pertain directly to his central character. Nevertheless, by omitting the actual contents of the oracular responses, not even summarizing the contents of the oracular responses as Plutarch does frequently elsewhere, and omitting mention of the first oracle in its entirety, Plutarch presents a skewed image of events in the *Life*. Additionally, Plutarch does not only omit the first oracular response. As I will demonstrate, he also deviates from Herodotus in his presentation of the second oracular response. When taken together, the result is a different take on an otherwise familiar story. By presenting a slightly different

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[398] For this first oracular response, see Herodotus 7.140.2-3 (Parke and Wormell §94, Fontenrose Q146).

[399] As Stadter (1984: 359) argues, "Because he is confident that his audience knows Herodotus and Thucydides well, Plutarch can concentrate on the essentials of the portrait."

[400] Frost (1980) 116-117. Frost's proposal is possible, although Plutarch does not comment on his methodology for the *Themistocles-Camillus* in the extant text (this pairing lacks a prologue where such discussions typically occur).

story from the tale his readers would have known already, Plutarch upends his readers' expectations, encouraging them to reconsider even the events they may have thought that they already knew.[401]

Herodotus and Plutarch tell very different stories as to how the second oracular response (the "wooden wall" oracle) was interpreted and the role Themistocles played in convincing the Athenians to abandon Athens for Salamis. Herodotus describes how, after the Athenians received the second oracular response from Delphi, the *chresmologoi*[402] declared that if the wooden wall referred to the Athenian fleet, and should they fight the Persians in a sea battle near Salamis, then they would be defeated.[403] Herodotus presents

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[401] As Pelling (1992: 17) notes, Plutarch does tend to deviate most heavily from his primary source material in particularly intense moments with which his readers would be very familiar. This principle is also at play in Plutarch's description of how the booty was apportioned after the battle. Plutarch's emphasis on the Plataeans receiving the portion of booty for being supreme in the conflict is best understood when seen in contrast to Herodotus's account, in which he claims that "how great an allotment was given to the bravest of those at Plataea is not recorded by anyone, but I believe that something was given to these as well" (Herodotus 9.81.2: ὅσα μέν νυν ἐξαίρετα τοῖσι ἀριστεύσασι αὐτῶν ἐν Πλαταιῇσι ἐδόθη, οὐ λέγεται πρὸς οὐδαμῶν, δοκέω δ' ἔγωγε καὶ τούτοισι δοθῆναι). By including a description of which *polis* was deemed the bravest in battle (the Plataeans) and how much was allotted to them (eighty talents), Plutarch not only expands upon and improves Herodotus's account of Plataea, but does so in a way that places his subject – Aristides – at the center and demonstrates his abilities as a leader to unify the disparate parties.

[402] The exact meaning of the word χρησμολόγος is not entirely clear. Fontenrose (1978: 153-154) defines χρησμολόγοι as figures who "made their livings as mantic experts, either providing or interpreting oracles on demand" from collections or books of oracles reportedly spoken previously by a god or *mantis*. See also Mikalson (2003: 38), who adds that in rank they should be seen as lower than *manteis* in part because of the suspicions with which they were viewed. Bowden (2003) argues that while Herodotus appears to use the term χρησμολόγος in three different ways (as a 'speaker of oracles,' a 'collector of oracles,' and an 'interpreter of oracles' respectively), the term is neither well defined nor is it an official title. Dillery (2005: 184) categorizes the *chresmologoi* as "independent religious experts" who could be called upon by a *polis*, but who operated outside of the political structure. Beerden (2013: 65-66) suggests that the term changed meaning over time, resulting in some of the confusion in the literature on the exact status of the *chresmologos*. The identification of these figures as those who collect, sell, or otherwise deliver oracles does not work in this context, since it is clear that these individuals are putting forth an interpretation of an oracular response received recently from Delphi.

[403] Herodotus 7.142.3: "for the *chresmologoi* interpreted these words in this way: that it was necessary that they, having prepared for a sea battle near Salamis, be defeated" (οἱ γὰρ χρησμολόγοι

Themistocles as challenging this interpretation, and in the process showing Themistocles to be better at interpreting oracles than the *chresmologoi*:[404]

> [1] ἦν δὲ τῶν τις Ἀθηναίων ἀνὴρ ἐς πρώτους νεωστὶ παριών, τῷ οὔνομα μὲν ἦν Θεμιστοκλέης, παῖς δὲ Νεοκλέος ἐκαλέετο. οὗτος ὠνὴρ οὐκ ἔφη πᾶν ὀρθῶς τοὺς χρησμολόγους συμβάλλεσθαι, λέγων τοιάδε, εἰ ἐς Ἀθηναίους εἶχε τὸ ἔπος ⟨τὸ⟩ εἰρημένον ἐόντως, οὐκ ἂν οὕτω μιν δοκέειν ἠπίως χρησθῆναι, ἀλλὰ ὦδε Ὦ σχετλίη Σαλαμίς, ἀντὶ τοῦ Ὦ θείη Σαλαμίς, εἴ πέρ γε ἔμελλον οἱ οἰκήτορες ἀμφ᾽ αὐτῇ τελευτήσειν. [2] ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἐς τοὺς πολεμίους τῷ θεῷ εἰρῆσθαι τὸ χρηστήριον συλλαμβάνοντι κατὰ τὸ ὀρθόν, ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ἐς Ἀθηναίους. παρασκευάζεσθαι ὦν αὐτοὺς ὡς ναυμαχήσοντας συνεβούλευε, ὡς τούτου ἐόντος τοῦ ξυλίνου τείχεος. [3] ταύτῃ Θεμιστοκλέος ἀποφαινομένου Ἀθηναῖοι ταῦτα σφίσι ἔγνωσαν αἱρετώτερα εἶναι μᾶλλον ἢ τὰ τῶν χρησμολόγων, οἳ οὐκ ἔων ναυμαχίην ἀρτέεσθαι, τὸ δὲ σύμπαν εἶπαι οὐδὲ χεῖρας ἀνταείρεσθαι, ἀλλὰ ἐκλιπόντας χώρην τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἄλλην τινὰ οἰκίζειν.[405]
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> [1] But there was a man among the Athenians who was only lately among the leading men, who was called Themistocles, son of Neocles. This man denied that the *chresmologoi* interpreted everything correctly, saying the following: if the oracle was said against the Athenians, then it seemed that it would not have been given so mildly, but would say "O wicked Salamis", instead of "O divine Salamis," if indeed her inhabitants were going to die around her. [2] Certainly to one understanding correctly, the oracular response was given by the god against the enemy, not against the Athenians. Themistocles advised that they should in fact prepare themselves for fighting at sea, because this was the wooden

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ταύτῃ ταῦτα ἐλάμβανον, ὡς ἀμφὶ Σαλαμῖνα δεῖ σφεας ἐσσωθῆναι ναυμαχίην παρασκευασαμένους).

[404] Dillery (2005: 219) suggests that Herodotus chose the *chresmologoi* as Themistocles's opponents here because of a general distaste for and distrust of these figures, making Themistocles appear all the better when his interpretation is favored over theirs. Against this interpretation, see Eidinow (2013: 30), who argues that Dillery overlooks evidence in both Plutarch's and Herodotus's presentation of Themistocles as being both clever and manipulative.

[405] Herodotus 7.143.1-3.

> wall. [3] After Themistocles declared his opinion in this way, the Athenians thought that this explanation was preferable to that of the *chresmologoi*, who were advising against depending on a sea battle, and were saying that they should not offer any resistance at all, but were for abandoning Attica and settling in some other place.

Plutarch's borrowing from Herodotus's account is clear, as is his intention to expand upon Herodotus's version in his biography.[406] But Plutarch's account is not only an expansion of what is found in Herodotus. Plutarch's choice to include how Themistocles used the snake and the priests to his advantage paints the statesman in a distinctly negative light, which stands in sharp contrast to Herodotus's generally favorable image of the man.[407] As Stadter notes, Plutarch's adaptation of Herodotus emphasizes Themistocles's unscrupulous nature and his willingness to use even the gods to achieve his goals.[408] Where Herodotus uses the wooden wall oracle story to demonstrate the power of debate in Athenian democracy,[409] Plutarch eliminates public deliberation from his telling of the oracle story, focusing instead on Themistocles and his manipulation of the people. Unlike Herodotus, Plutarch does not show Themistocles as a clever oracle interpreter, but a crafty politician, using the gods and the Athenians' piety to manipulate the people.

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[406] Plutarch's addition of δεινός as a suggestion for what the oracle could have called Salamis instead of θειός is a clear example of this expansion.

[407] It is interesting to note that in spite of Plutarch's rather mixed presentation of Themistocles in the *Life*, in *De Herodoti malignitate* (869d-870a) Plutarch criticizes Herodotus for his portrayal of Themistocles, accusing him of downplaying the statesman's role in the Athenians' decision to retreat to and fight at Salamis. Elsewhere, there is evidence of Plutarch correcting what he describes as the wrongs Herodotus committed in his version of events. For example, Plutarch (*De Herodoti malignitate* 871c-e) accuses Herodotus of using Delphic Apollo as his mouthpiece to keep the prize for valor from the Athenians, an incident that Plutarch duly omits from the *Themistocles* (*Themistocles* 17).

[408] Stadter (2011) 202-203.

[409] For this argument, see Barker 2006.

This oracle story touches on the issues of ambiguity in oracular responses as well as how they were received and by whom. Scholars do not agree on whether this oracular response is truly ambiguous, and if so, to what end. Parke and Wormell claim that it was ambiguous, and was made so deliberately to allow Delphi to have an excuse in case the battle did not go well for the Greeks.[410] Fontenrose takes a middle position, categorizing it under "ambiguous and obscure predictions," but one that also contained aspects of clear commands and clear warnings.[411] Parker points to this oracular response as an example of one that was phrased in such a way that it would provoke discussion and debate among the Athenians, suggesting deliberate but not malicious ambiguity.[412] Similarly, Burkert claims that this oracular response was deliberately unclear, and was a part of a larger pattern of oracular responses in which "oracles became intentionally enigmatic through their ambiguity."[413] Within Plutarch's text, however, the ambiguous nature of the oracle is minimized, if not erased entirely. Unlike Herodotus, Plutarch shows no interest in describing how the Athenians as a whole responded to the series of oracular responses from

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[410] Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 171) hold a very cynical opinion of the Delphic oracle in this period, seeing the sanctuary as an unabashed political player: "the latter oracle represents a compromise in which Delphi gave qualified support for Themistocles' plan, but guarded itself by the insertion of ambiguities. The 'wooden wall' pointed fairly clearly to the navy; but even it could be interpreted otherwise. The reference to Salamis is almost absurdly equivocal. Themistocles could wring a favourable implication from it, but one can imagine that, if the battle of Salamis had proved a Greek defeat, the oracle would have been taken to have foretold that result."

[411] Modes E3, A1, and C1 respectively. Fontenrose (1978: 20) defines the E3 mode as "predictions [that] may be expressed in obscure terms, or, if seemingly clear, they may intend something other than what they appear to say and so mislead the recipients." Fontenrose does not indicate precisely which aspects of the oracular response he understands to be clear commands or warnings, although he does outline what he considered to be the *unclear* prediction: "Zeus will grant Athens an invincible wooden wall, and Salamis will lose (or destroy) many children of men at sowing time or harvest" (125).

[412] Parker (2000: 80) claims that this oracular response created a "problem not of tactics, but of philology" for the Athenians, as debate turned from discussion of what was best to do militarily to what was most in accordance with the words of the oracle.

[413] Burkert (2005) 39.

Delphi. Instead of showing how the Athenians debated among themselves the meaning of the oracle's words, Plutarch directs his reader's attention towards how Themistocles took advantage of the situation. Plutarch does indicate that there was some disagreement among the Athenians on how to interpret the oracle, since Themistocles had to convince them to follow his interpretation, but he does not dwell on this aspect of the story. Herodotus places the confusion among the Athenians at the forefront of his narrative, describing in detail the two primary interpretations of the wooden wall – the hedge that formerly surrounded the acropolis or the Athenian fleet – and the potential pitfalls of both positions.[414] None of this information is included in the *Themistocles*. Plutarch's primary concern in this episode appears to be showcasing Themistocles and his ability to manipulate the people, rather than the oracular responses themselves. It is clear that Plutarch does not ascribe the lack of clarity in this oracular response to political machinations, and he does not emphasize the public deliberation undertaken by the Athenians over the meaning of the god's words either.

The image of Themistocles that emerges from this oracle story is complicated. His advice did secure victory for the Athenians, but the methods he used to achieve this victory were questionable at best. Ultimately, with the *Themistocles*, Plutarch presents his readers with a highly nuanced picture of the Athenian hero and asks his readers to judge whether the ends can justify the means: were Themistocles's manipulations justified by the results he achieved through them?[415] Aalders argues that for Plutarch, the manner in which a

[414] Herodotus 7.142.1-144.3.

[415] In arguing for a nuanced and complex image of Themistocles in the *Life* I challenge Stadter's (1984: 358) description of Plutarch's purpose in the *Themistocles* as being to present him "as a hero and savior of his country who suffers from envy, yet nevertheless wins great and well-deserved

statesman rules is of the utmost importance, not only the ends that leaders achieve.[416] But as Nikolaidis points out, while in the *Moralia* Plutarch consistently rejects the notion that wrongs can be justified if done for the sake of a *polis*, in the *Lives* he seems to be much more willing to overlook morally questionable actions that are done for the sake of a greater good.[417] While it is true that in the *Lives* Plutarch at times appears to support his subjects when they choose political gain over moral rectitude, these claims come not in the individual biographies, but in the *synkriseis.*[418] Within the biographies, Plutarch does not tell the reader directly what conclusions to draw from the events he narrates. Such direct praise or condemnation typically comes only in the *synkriseis*, where they stand as merely one possible interpretation, not a definitive answer.[419] In the *Themistocles* Plutarch is not interested in praising or condemning unequivocally the Athenian hero. Instead, he lays bare the complexity of Themistocles's life and career and through episodes such as the wooden wall oracle story he asks his readers to judge whether the outcomes Themistocles achieved outweigh the methods he used to achieve them.[420]

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glory," and his assertion that in the *Life* "Themistocles's weaknesses will be downplayed or passed over, not made the meat of the life, as in the *Alcibiades* or *Demetrius*."

[416] Aalders (1982) 33-34.

[417] Nikolaidis (1995). See especially 304: "the *Lives* (and especially the *Comparisons* [the *synkriseis*], which review and evaluate the careers of the heroes *in toto*) provide a great many instances where Plutarch appears to tolerate, condone and even approve of the employment of objectionable means, if they are conducive to a grand accomplishment, in other words, to the attainment of a noble aim."

[418] For example, *Theseus-Romulus* 6.1-6, *Nicias-Crassus* 4.3-4, *Alcibiades-Coriolanus* 2.3, and *Agis and Cleomenes-Gracchi* 2.5.

[419] The *Themistocles* and its paired *Life*, the *Camillus,* lack both a prologue and a *synkrisis*. Larmour (1992: 4174-4177) argues, against Erbse (1956), that we cannot know for certain whether Plutarch ever composed a prologue and *synkrisis* for this pair, or whether they have been lost.

[420] As Zadorojni (2006) argues, Plutarch does present Themistocles in a more positive light elsewhere in his writings (e.g. in *De gloria Atheniensium* 349b-350b Plutarch presents Themistocles as an Athenian hero who helped to secure Greek freedom; see also *De fortuna Romanorum* 320e). Nevertheless, Plutarch also emphasizes Themistocles's ambiguous moral

b. *Aristides*

There are two oracle stories in the *Aristides*, and in both cases the oracular responses are summarized rather than quoted.[421] Both oracular responses appear in the context of the pivotal battle of Plataea, the account of which forms the core of the biography. Plutarch bookends his treatment of Plataea in the *Aristides* with these Delphic oracle stories, one occurring before the battle regarding where the battle should be fought, the other after the fighting is over regarding the post-war sacrifices. I will assess each of these episodes in turn, demonstrating how Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to portray Aristides as a thoughtful leader while offering a version of events different from that described by Herodotus: one in which the Delphic god is responsible for the outcome of the battle that ended the Persian invasion of Greece. In the process I show how Plutarch grants both Aristides and the Delphic oracle much larger roles in the battle than those given to them by Herodotus or other extant sources, depicting both the general and the god as instrumental in securing a Greek victory and in the process portraying the oracle as a force for cooperation and coordination among the allied Greek forces.[422]

Plutarch uses Aristides' Delphic consultation before the battle to demonstrate the benefits of a careful, deliberate, and thoughtful approach to politics and to paint the oracle

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character elsewhere in his writings as well. For example, in *De sera numinis vindicta* (552b-c) Plutarch uses Themistocles, Miltiades, Cimon, and Alcibiades as examples of individuals with great natures (μεγάλαι φύσεις) who were able to do great good for their *poleis* as well as great harm. As Jacobs (2018: 71-72) notes, Plutarch uses Themistocles in the *Moralia* as both a positive and a negative *exemplum* of proper behavior for a statesman.

[421] *Aristides* 11, 20.

[422] Marincola (2012: 92) has demonstrated that Plutarch bestows on Aristides significantly more important roles in all three pivotal battles of the Persian Wars – Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea – than Herodotus does, probably because Aristides is the focus of Plutarch's treatment of these battles in the biography.

as advocating for Greek unity and cooperation. Plutarch records how Aristides consulted the Delphic oracle prior to the battle of Plataea about the location of the battle, and describes in detail the subsequent actions taken by the Greeks as they sought to comply with the oracular response Aristides received. Because of the interconnectedness of the passage, I quote the entire oracle story in full:

> [3] Παυσανίᾳ μὲν οὖν καὶ τοῖς Ἕλλησι κοινῇ Τεισαμενὸς ὁ Ἠλεῖος ἐμαντεύσατο, καὶ προεῖπε νίκην ἀμυνομένοις καὶ μὴ προεπιχειροῦσιν· Ἀριστείδου δὲ πέμψαντος εἰς Δελφούς, ἀνεῖλεν ὁ θεὸς Ἀθηναίους καθυπερτέρους ἔσεσθαι τῶν ἐναντίων εὐχομένους τῷ Διὶ καὶ τῇ Ἥρᾳ τῇ Κιθαιρωνίᾳ καὶ Πανὶ καὶ νύμφαις Σφραγίτισι, καὶ θύοντας ἥρωσιν Ἀνδροκράτει Λεύκωνι Πεισάνδρῳ Δαμοκράτει Ὑψίονι Ἀκταίωνι Πολυείδῳ, καὶ τὸν κίνδυνον ἐν γᾷ ἰδίᾳ ποιουμένους ἐν τῷ πεδίῳ τᾶς Δάματρος τᾶς Ἐλευσινίας καὶ τᾶς Κόρας.[423] [4] οὗτος ὁ χρησμὸς ἀνενεχθεὶς ἀπορίαν τῷ Ἀριστείδῃ παρεῖχεν. οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἥρωες οἷς ἐκέλευε θύειν ἀρχηγέται Πλαταιέων ἦσαν, καὶ τὸ τῶν Σφραγιτίδων νυμφῶν ἄντρον ἐν μιᾷ κορυφῇ τοῦ Κιθαιρῶνός ἐστιν, εἰς δυσμὰς ἡλίου θερινὰς τετραμμένον, ἐν ᾧ καὶ μαντεῖον ἦν πρότερον ὥς φασι καὶ πολλοὶ κατείχοντο τῶν ἐπιχωρίων, οὓς νυμφολήπτους προσηγόρευον. [5] τὸ δὲ τῆς Ἐλευσινίας Δήμητρος πεδίον, καὶ τὸ τὴν μάχην ἐν ἰδίᾳ χώρᾳ ποιουμένοις τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις νίκην δίδοσθαι, πάλιν εἰς τὴν Ἀττικὴν ἀνεκαλεῖτο καὶ μεθίστη τὸν πόλεμον. ἔνθα τῶν Πλαταιέων ὁ στρατηγὸς Ἀρίμνηστος ἔδοξε κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνους ὑπὸ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἐπερωτώμενον αὐτόν, ὅ τι δὴ πράττειν δέδοκται τοῖς Ἕλλησιν, εἰπεῖν· ‘αὔριον εἰς Ἐλευσῖνα τὴν στρατιὰν ἀπάξομεν ὦ δέσποτα, καὶ διαμαχούμεθα τοῖς βαρβάροις ἐκεῖ κατὰ τὸ πυθόχρηστον’. [6] τὸν οὖν θεὸν φάναι διαμαρτάνειν αὐτοὺς τοῦ παντός· αὐτόθι γὰρ εἶναι περὶ τὴν Πλαταϊκὴν τὰ πυθόχρηστα, καὶ ζητοῦντας ἀνευρήσειν. τούτων ἐναργῶς τῷ Ἀριμνήστῳ φανέντων, ἐξεγρόμενος τάχιστα μετεπέμψατο τοὺς ἐμπειροτάτους καὶ πρεσβυτάτους τῶν πολιτῶν, μεθ’ ὧν διαλεγόμενος καὶ συνδιαπορῶν εὗρεν ὅτι τῶν Ὑσιῶν

[423] On the Doric forms present in the reported speech, see below.

πλησίον ὑπὸ τὸν Κιθαιρῶνα ναός ἐστιν ἀρχαῖος πάνυ Δήμητρος Ἐλευσινίας καὶ Κόρης προσαγορευόμενος. [7] εὐθὺς οὖν παραλαβὼν τὸν Ἀριστείδην ἦγεν ἐπὶ τὸν τόπον, εὐφυέστατον ὄντα παρατάξαι φάλαγγα πεζὴν ἱπποκρατουμένοις διὰ τὰς ὑπωρείας τοῦ Κιθαιρῶνος, ἄφιππα ποιούσας τὰ καταλήγοντα καὶ συγκυροῦντα τοῦ πεδίου πρὸς τὸ ἱερόν. [8] ταύτῃ δ' ἦν καὶ τὸ τοῦ Ἀνδροκράτους ἡρῷον ἐγγύς, ἄλσει πυκνῶν καὶ συσκίων δένδρων περιεχόμενον. ὅπως δὲ μηδὲν ἐλλιπὲς ἔχῃ πρὸς τὴν ἐλπίδα τῆς νίκης ὁ χρησμός, ἔδοξε τοῖς Πλαταιεῦσιν, Ἀριμνήστου γνώμην εἰπόντος, ἀνελεῖν τὰ πρὸς τὴν Ἀττικὴν ὅρια τῆς Πλαταιΐδος καὶ τὴν χώραν ἐπιδοῦναι τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις, ὑπὲρ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἐν οἰκείᾳ κατὰ τὸν χρησμὸν ἐναγωνίσασθαι.[424]

[3] Then Teisamenus the Elian delivered a prophecy to both Pausanias and the Greeks, and foretold victory to those acting in self-defense and not being the first to attack; but when Aristides sent to Delphi, the god replied that the Athenians would prevail over their opponents by praying to Zeus, Citharonian Hera, Pan, and the Sphragitic nymphs; by sacrificing to the heroes Androcrates, Leucon, Pisandrus, Damocrates, Hypsion, Actaeon, and Polyidus; and by enduring the danger on their own land, in the plain of Eleusinian Demeter and Kore. [4] This oracular response which had been brought threw Aristides into confusion. For the heroes to whom he was ordered to sacrifice were Plataean founders, and the cave of the Sphragitic nymphs was on a peak of Mt. Citharon, turned towards the setting summer-haunts of the sun, in which there was also an oracle formerly, so they say, and many of the inhabitants were held by it, who were called "caught by the nymphs." [5] But the reference to the plain of Eleusinian Demeter, and to giving victory to the Athenians should they fight on their own land, recalled them back into Attica and changed the location of the war. Then, when the general of the Plataeans, Arimnestus, thought that he was questioned by Zeus the Savior in his dreams about what the Greeks were planning

[424] *Aristides* 11.3-8, Parke and Wormell §102, Fontenrose Q154.

> to do, he said, "Tomorrow, master, we will lead the army back to Eleusis, and we will fight with the barbarians there in accordance with the Pythian oracle." [6] The god replied that they were entirely mistaken, for the places described by the Pythian oracle were around Plataea, and they would discover them by seeking. These things appeared so clearly to Arimnestus that when he woke he immediately sent for the most experienced and oldest of his citizens. After explaining the matter and investigating it with them, he discovered that close to Hysion, under Mt. Citharon, there was a very ancient temple said to be of Eleusinian Demeter and Kore. [7] Then immediately, taking Aristides with him, he led him to the place, which was exceptionally well situated to line up an infantry phalanx against those superior in cavalry because of the slopes of Mt. Citharon, making the borders and the areas of the plain close to the temple unsuitable for cavalry. [8] In this place there was also a heroon of Androcrates nearby, encompassed by a grove of close-packed and thickly shaded trees. And so that the oracle might have nothing lacking for hope of victory, Arimnestus proposed and the Plataeans agreed to remove their Attic-facing boundary stones and to hand over the land to the Athenians so that they might fight on behalf of Greece on their own land in accordance with the oracle.

The oracular response Aristides receives from Delphi is on the surface quite standard and relatively straight-forward, listing those to whom the Greeks should pray and sacrifice and where they should fight in order to ensure a favorable outcome.[425] Nevertheless, Plutarch

[425] Fontenrose (1978: 319-320) categorizes this oracle under the topics of sacrifices (1b) and war (2e), and describes it as a "clear command" (A1 Mode). By placing it in this mode, Fontenrose indicates he believes the oracle to be "either in plain prose or in poetic language that is lucid enough to allow little or no possibility of misunderstanding; in no instance does the inquirer misunderstand" (14). Fontenrose's categorization of this oracle is unusual, since it is very clear in Plutarch's text that the oracle is initially *mis*understood by the Greeks. The only reference to this oracle outside Plutarch's corpus is in Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 35P), but the latter's description is very abbreviated and makes no reference to the interpretation of the oracle, only the list of heroes to whom the Greeks should sacrifice. Given the lack of other sources, it is unclear on what grounds Fontenrose decided to classify this oracular response as a "clear command."

emphasizes Aristides's uncertainty over how to proceed, explaining clearly the seeming paradox of the oracle's bidding – the heroes named by the oracle were Plataean, suggesting a Plataean arena for the contest, but the location named by the oracle as the proper venue appeared to be in Attica – and the misinterpretation of the oracle that results. Plutarch makes clear that the initial Greek response – planning to move the field of battle to Attica – was based on a faulty and hasty interpretation of the oracle, which ignored the oracle's hints that they should remain in Plataea. Indeed, in Arimnestus's dream Zeus reprimands him for failing to understand the oracle's meaning. Nevertheless, Zeus does not reveal the oracle's true meaning to Arimnestus. Instead, he gives him a hint – that the location indicated was in Plataea – and bids him to dig deeper on his own. In this way, Zeus rebukes Arimnestus and the other Greeks: their haste to interpret the oracle led them to a false conclusion that could have cost them the war had Zeus not intervened.

This dream makes it clear that the Greeks initially misunderstood the oracular response, suggesting that it may have been unclear or ambiguous. In the Delphic dialogues, the interlocutors discussed the possibility that unclear or ambiguous responses were the result of either the Pythia attempting to avoid retaliation from the powerful for delivering unfavorable news,[426] using ambiguity to avoid being proven incorrect,[427] or a deliberate choice of the god to deny the recipients the answer they sought.[428] None of these explanations accounts for the circumstances of this oracular response. The oracle was delivering unequivocally good news to the Greek forces, and so the ambiguity cannot be explained as an attempt to protect the Pythia or the priests from harm. Additionally,

[426] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407e (Theon).

[427] *De Pythiae oraculis* 398f (Boethus), 407b (Theon).

[428] *De defectu oraculorum* 409f-410a (Lamprias).

because Zeus himself steps in to assist the Greeks in interpreting the oracle's words, it does not appear that the god is using ambiguity to deny the Greeks an answer here. Indeed, the type of ambiguity employed here is important. The response does not suffer from a lack of clarity or vague directions: the response's *specificity* was actually the source of the Greeks' confusion, since they did not realize that there could be a place in which *all* conditions stated would apply, and did not consider that they would need to create the conditions described by the Delphic oracle.[429] In this way, the oracular response aligns more closely with Theon's suggestion in *De E apud Delphos* that the Delphic oracle delivers seemingly ambiguous responses to prompt the recipients to engage in dialectic and philosophical reasoning, thinking and leaning on each other as they learn how to interpret the god's messages.[430]

Through this oracle story, Plutarch emphasizes in the lead-up to the battle of Plataea the need for the Greeks to engage in thoughtful deliberation and to consider carefully their options before acting. When it is clear that the Greeks have made a critical mistake, Zeus steps in to prevent disaster from befalling them, but does not release them from their obligation to employ logic and reason to work out the proper solution to their problems based on the clues given by the Delphic oracle. As soon as Arimnestus awakes, he does what should have been done initially: he consults with the oldest and wisest Plataeans, and by investigating together (συνδιαπορῶν) the words both of the oracle and of Zeus, he

[429] A similar situation of creating the setting described in a prophecy occurs in *Alexander* 25, when Alexander ensures that a prophecy made by the *mantis* Aristander declaring that he would conquer Tyre that month will be fulfilled by extending the month slightly. Burkert (2005: 39) questions whether this episode shows "strong belief or reckless manipulation." Alexander's actions, however suggest that as with the Plataeans, Alexander is manipulating the circumstances to fit the conditions described by the oracle to ensure that his chances for victory are not jeopardized.

[430] *De E apud Delphos* 386e-f.

discovers the correct course of action, which he subsequently takes to Aristides in order to confirm his assessment with his Athenian counterpart. Plutarch thus presents the oracle as delivering responses that encourage and even require careful deliberation on the part of the recipients, if they wish to understand the god's message properly. Additionally, this oracle story also comes at a point in Plutarch's account where internal conflicts threaten to dissolve the unity of the allied Greek forces and to undermine their ability to resist the Persians. Immediately following his discussion of Aristides's oracular consultation, Plutarch details several instances of Greek infighting that are threatening to ruin the tenuous alliance among the different Greek states. Greek cooperation and unity are themes that run throughout the *Life*, as the various Greek *poleis* oscillate between uniting against the Persians and competing with each other for preeminence.[431] In specifying that the territory where the battle should be fought was to be deemed Athenian, the Delphic oracle demanded that the Plataeans sacrifice some of their own land on behalf of the allied Greeks in order to ensure victory for all.[432] The resulting juxtaposition of the unity created in

[431] For example, the debate between the Tegeans and Athenians over the battle lineup (*Aristides* 12.1-4), the plot of the disgruntled Athenians prior to Plataea (13.1-3), the conflict between the Spartans and the Athenians over the battle lineup (16.1-5), the debate over which *poleis* deserved to be honored after the battle (20.1-3), and Themistocles's scheming to make the Athenians lords over the other Greeks (22.2-4). In most cases, Plutarch uses these moments of dissent to demonstrate Aristides's ability as a leader to reunite the Greeks and end the internal conflicts. While Plutarch is primarily following Herodotus's account in including these incidents, he is not importing them indiscriminately or without modification. For example, as Marincola (2012: 104) notes, Plutarch changes the phrasing of Aristides's response to the Tegeans given in 12.3 from what Herodotus records in a way that emphasizes even further the theme of unity and panhellenism, and other episodes such as the plot of the disgruntled Athenians (13.1-3) are found only in the *Aristides*. Plutarch also reprimands Herodotus harshly in *De Herodoti malignitate* for his depiction of Greek factionalism (see especially 872b-873e). There Plutarch does not disagree that there was *some* medizing and infighting. Plutarch instead claims that Herodotus exaggerated the actual extent of Greek factionalism and betrayal to the extent that in the *Histories* the Persian wars were not glorious magnificent achievements for the Greeks as a whole (on this, see especially 874a-b). On Plutarch's general dislike of Greek infighting, see also Pelling (2019) 95-98.

[432] Plutarch makes clear that it was the Greeks as a whole who were the recipients of the Plataeans' generosity in granting the battlefield to Athens, for he says that Alexander the Great rebuilt the

response to the oracle with internal Greek disunity presents the oracular response as a command for deliberation, cooperation, and self-sacrifice, in addition to bidding the Greeks to fight in a location that would be militarily strategic for their infantry to face the Persian cavalry.

Plutarch's inclusion of this oracle story in the *Aristides* not only increases the prominence of Aristides in the battle, but also transfers credit for the victory to the Delphic oracle, uplifting the Delphic god at the expense of the seer Teisamenus of Elis.[433] Plutarch states repeatedly that what Aristides received was a *Pythian* oracle,[434] and emphasizes that the actions taken by the Greeks to ensure victory were done in accordance with the oracular response.[435] Indeed, Plutarch contrasts the two prophecies, Teisamenus's and the Delphic oracle's, in a μέν…. δέ construction, indicating an adversative relationship between the two prophecies.[436] Marincola argues that the contrast in attention given to Teisamenus as opposed to Delphi here is not meant to elevate Delphi at the expense of Teisamenus, but rather because others, namely Herodotus, had already told the story of Teisamenus's prophecy at length. Nevertheless, Plutarch's presentation here cannot be so easily

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walls of Plataea "because of their bravery and generosity, since they gave their land to the Greeks in the Persian war and showed themselves bearing the most goodwill" (*Aristides* 11.9: τῆς ἀνδραγαθίας καὶ μεγαλοψυχίας χάριν, ἐπειδὴ τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἐν τῷ Μηδικῷ πολέμῳ τὴν χώραν ἐπέδωκαν καὶ παρέσχον αὑτοὺς προθυμοτάτους).

[433] As Marincola (2012: 102; 2016: 856) notes, although Plataea was a Spartan, not an Athenian, victory, Plutarch augments the role of Aristides and the Athenians in the battle, making Aristides a key figure in the ultimate Greek victory. This pattern, visible throughout Plutarch's narrative of Plataea, is exemplified through the Greeks' interactions with Delphi before and after the battle.

[434] *Aristides* 11.3: πέμψαντος εἰς Δελφοὺς; 11.5: τὸ πυθόχρηστον; 11.6: τὰ πυθόχρηστα.

[435] See, for example, *Aristides* 11.8.

[436] Marincola (2016: 855-856) argues that instead of drawing a contrast between prophecies or prophets, here the μέν…. δέ construction should be interpreted as indicating two separate prophecies received by the Greeks, translating the δέ clause as "and when Aristides sent to Delphi." While this is interpretation is possible, it seems unlikely.

dismissed as different simply because it allowed him to fill out the earlier accounts. Within each of the *Lives* Plutarch crafts an image of a statesman and how he navigated the specific political situation(s) in which he found himself. The *Lives* should be judged for what they omit as well as what they contain.

Additionally, Plutarch names the god instead of the Pythian priestess as the speaker of the response received by Aristides, indicating an unequal relationship between the two prophecies: one spoken by a mortal, the other by a god.[437] Although Plutarch does not quote the god's words directly, when relating the response Aristides received from Delphi Plutarch switches to the Doric dialect (e.g. 'γᾶ', 'τᾶς Δάματρος τᾶς,' 'τᾶς Κόρας').[438] The use of Doric gives the reported oracular response, as Flacelière and Chambry argue, an air of authenticity by employing the dialect typical of the Delphic oracle.[439] It is clear that Plutarch's use of Doric here is deliberate, because once he has finished reporting the oracle's response but still within the same oracle story, he switches back to Attic, seen most notably in his switch to Κόρης from his previous Κόρας.[440] Placed immediately following Plutarch's brief nod to Teisamenus's prophecy, this referral to the source of the oracular response and the marked use of Doric forms calls attention to the Delphic prophecy while simultaneously minimizing that of Teisamenus.

Furthermore, Plutarch suppresses the importance of Teisamenus's prophecy throughout his account of Plataea. While Plutarch does acknowledge the role it had in

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[437] *Aristides* 11.3: ἀνεῖλεν ὁ θεὸς.

[438] *Aristides* 11.3.

[439] Flacelière and Chambry (1969) 31.

[440] *Aristides* 11.6.

delaying the battle,[441] he consistently subordinates it to the Delphic prophecy. This is especially clear in Plutarch's note on the Greek casualties and the annual sacrifices made by the Aeantids:

> τῶν δ' ὑπὲρ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἀγωνισαμένων ἔπεσον οἱ πάντες ἐπὶ χιλίοις ἑξήκοντα καὶ τριακόσιοι. τούτων Ἀθηναῖοι μὲν ἦσαν δύο καὶ πεντήκοντα, πάντες ἐκ τῆς Αἰαντίδος φυλῆς, ὥς φησι Κλείδημος, ἀγωνισαμένης ἄριστα· διὸ καὶ ταῖς Σφραγίτισι νύμφαις ἔθυον Αἰαντίδαι τὴν πυθόχρηστον θυσίαν ὑπὲρ τῆς νίκης, ἐκ δημοσίου τὸ ἀνάλωμα λαμβάνοντες·[442]
>
> Of those who were fighting on behalf of Greece, in total one thousand three hundred and sixty fell. Of these fifty-two were Athenians, all from the Aeantid tribe, as Cleidemos says, which fought the bravest; it is for this reason also that the Aeantids used to make sacrifices to the Sphragitian nymphs as ordered by the Pythian oracle for the victory, paid for at public expense.

Here, Plutarch provides his readers with an explanation for why it was the Aeantid tribe that performed the sacrifices to the Sphragitian nymphs. But this anecdote also serves as a reminder to Plutarch's readers of the oracular response from Delphi and to whom the Greeks were indebted for the victory. Mardonius's failure to heed his seer's warning against initiating the battle was not the primary cause of his defeat; rather, the Greeks' adherence to the oracle they received from Delphi was the reason for their victory.

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[441] *Aristides* 15.1: "but after the cavalry fight both sides held off from battle for a long time; for the seers for both the Persians and the Greeks were foretelling victory similarly from the sacrifices if they acted defensively, and defeat if they should make the attack" (μετὰ δὲ τὴν ἱππομαχίαν ἀμφότεροι μάχης ἔσχοντο χρόνον πολύν· ἀμυνομένοις γὰρ οἱ μάντεις νίκην προὔφαινον ἐκ τῶν ἱερῶν ὁμοίως καὶ τοῖς Πέρσαις καὶ τοῖς Ἕλλησιν, εἰ δ' ἐπιχειροῖεν, ἦτταν). Cf. Herodotus 9.33-6 (quoted below).

[442] Plutarch *Aristides* 19.5-6. See also *Quaestiones Convivales* 1 628F, where Plutarch describes this sacrifice in similar language.

Plutarch's subordination of Teisamenus and his prophecy is directly contrary to Herodotus's treatment of this seer and the role he played in the battle's outcome. Herodotus spends considerable time describing Teisamenus and the prophecy he purportedly received from Delphi promising that he would win five contests.[443] Herodotus makes it clear that Plataea is included in this number.[444] Furthermore, it is Teisamenus's prophecy instructing the Greeks not to attack first that leads to the Greek victory in Herodotus. This prophecy is integral to Herodotus's account of both how the battle started and how it was won: it caused a considerable delay in the fighting because both the Persians and the Greeks were warned against making the initial attack,[445] and after the Persians relented and attacked first,[446] they subsequently lost both the battle and the war. Plutarch improves Herodotus's account of

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[443] Herodotus 9.33-36. The prophecy he gives in Herodotus's version is compatible with Plutarch's account of it, although it contains slightly more detail (9.36): "This man, then, was Teisamenus, who, brought by the Spartans, prophesied to the Greeks at Plataea. The sacrifices were good for the Greeks if they acted defensively, but not if they crossed the Asopus and began the fight" (οὗτος δὴ τότε τοῖσι Ἕλλησι ὁ Τεισαμενὸς ἀγόντων τῶν Σπαρτιητέων ἐμαντεύετο ἐν τῇ Πλαταιίδι. τοῖσι μέν νυν Ἕλλησι καλὰ ἐγίνετο τὰ ἱρὰ ἀμυνομένοισι, διαβᾶσι δὲ τὸν Ἀσωπὸν καὶ μάχης ἄρχουσι οὔ).

[444] Herodotus 35.2: "These were the five contests: one, which was the first, was in Plataea; the next in Tegea against both the Tegeans and the Argives, the one after in Dipaea against all the Arcadians except the Mantineians; next the one in the Isthmus ⟨against⟩ the Messenians; and the last in Tanagra against the Athenians and the Argives" (οἱ δὲ πέντε ἀγῶνες οἵδε ἐγένοντο, εἷς μὲν καὶ πρῶτος οὗτος ὁ ἐν Πλαταιῇσι, ἐπὶ δὲ ὁ ἐν Τεγέῃ πρὸς Τεγεήτας τε καὶ Ἀργείους γενόμενος, μετὰ δὲ ὁ ἐν Διπαιεῦσι πρὸς Ἀρκάδας πάντας πλὴν Μαντινέων, ἐπὶ δὲ ὁ ⟨πρὸς⟩ Μεσσηνίους ὁ ἐν Ἰθώμῃ, ὕστατος δὲ ὁ ἐν Τανάγρῃ πρὸς Ἀθηναίους τε καὶ Ἀργείους γενόμενος· οὗτος δὲ ὕστατος κατεργάσθη τῶν πέντε ἀγώνων).

[445] Herodotus 9.37.1: "And for Mardonius, the sacrifices were not favorable to begin battle although he was eager, but were good also for him to act defensively" (Μαρδονίῳ δὲ προθυμεομένῳ μάχης ἄρχειν οὐκ ἐπιτήδεα ἐγίνετο τὰ ἱρά, ἀμυνομένῳ δὲ καὶ τούτῳ καλά).

[446] Herodotus 9.59.1: "After he [Mardonius] said these things, he led the Persians across the Asopus at a run on the trail of the Greeks" (ταῦτα εἴπας ἦγε τοὺς Πέρσας δρόμῳ διαβάντας τὸν Ἀσωπὸν κατὰ στίβον τῶν Ἑλλήνων). As Flower and Marincola (2002: 210) note, although Herodotus does not specify that Mardonius received instructions specifically not to cross the Asopus as the Greeks did, the phrasing in this passage makes it clear that the Persians are the instigators of the fight, acting contrary to the words of their seer.

the battle of Plataea not only by supplying additional information, but also by correcting the record as to who deserved credit for the victory.

Finally, while this oracular response was not understood immediately, Plutarch's explanation does not paint it as deliberately ambiguous. Aristides's and Arimnestus's confusion stemmed from the fact that the conditions described by the oracle had to be created by the Plataeans and did not exist at the time the oracular response was delivered. The oracle was unclear to the Greeks because it described a situation that did not yet exist but would need to be created by the Athenians and Plataeans in order for them to be successful. When they created the circumstances dictated by the god, the oracle was found to be perfectly correct as the Greeks proceeded to win the battle. With this oracular response, Plutarch emphasizes the importance of careful deliberation and consideration of the god's words: the Greeks only understood properly the oracle's meaning once they took the time to assess the situation fully, rather than relying on a hasty first impression.

The Delphic oracle story following the battle of Plataea follows a similar pattern to the pre-battle consultation, painting an image of Greek unity and the god's support for the Greek cause, while also both contradicting and supplementing Herodotus's narrative. Plutarch describes how, after the fighting has ended and the dead were buried, the Greeks consulted the Delphic oracle as to whom they should sacrifice:

> περὶ δὲ θυσίας ἐρομένοις αὐτοῖς ἀνεῖλεν ὁ Πύθιος Διὸς Ἐλευθερίου βωμὸν ἱδρύσασθαι, θῦσαι δὲ μὴ πρότερον ἢ τὸ κατὰ τὴν χώραν πῦρ ἀποσβέσαντας ὡς ὑπὸ τῶν βαρβάρων μεμιασμένον ἐναύσασθαι καθαρὸν ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀπὸ τῆς κοινῆς ἑστίας.[447]

[447] *Aristides* 20.4, Parke and Wormell §104, Fontenrose Q156.

> Regarding the sacrifices, the Pythian god responded that they should build an altar to Zeus Eleutherios, and that they should not sacrifice until they extinguished the fires throughout the countryside (because it was polluted by the barbarians) and rekindled them with pure fire from the common hearth in Delphi.

Structurally, this consultation is a request for knowledge as to whom they should sacrifice following their victory.[448] This Delphic consultation and oracular response do not appear anywhere in Herodotus, who does not discuss this altar or the sacrifices to be made on it. Plutarch's detailed discussion in the *Aristides* of the post-war sacrifices undertaken by the Greeks serves a dual purpose in his account. In addition to supplying information not mentioned by Herodotus, Plutarch's description of this consultation also serves to emphasize both Delphi's position as the primary conduit for communications with the gods and the important role Delphi played in assisting and guiding the Greeks in the conflict. Plutarch's use of the phrasing "ἀνεῖλεν ὁ Πύθιος" calls attention to the Pythian god as the source of the prophecy while also recalling Aristides's Delphic consultation at the opening of Plutarch's Plataea narrative. Through the Greeks' consultations, the oracular responses they received, and the fulfillment of the oracle's mandates, Plutarch presents the Delphic oracle as not only supporting the Greeks and the Greek cause during the war, but also in its aftermath, providing them with the knowledge of who to thank and in what manner, informing them in advance of pollution, and offering them the means by which the

[448] Although Fontenrose (1978: 25, 320) classifies this oracular response as about a cult foundation (Topic 1a: "Cities or individuals are instructed to found cults, festivals, or temples of gods, daimones, or heroes"), this does not appear to have been the topic of the *request*, which would be more properly understood as Fontenrose's Topic 1b, on sacrifices or offerings ("Cities or individuals are instructed to make sacrifices (not human), offerings, or prayers to specified gods, daimones, or heroes"). Nevertheless, as Fontenrose acknowledges, the distinction between his Topics 1a and 1b is often minimal or nonexistent.

pollution could be removed so that they could perform the necessary sacrifices to the gods. Furthermore, where through the pre-battle oracular response Plutarch presents the god as having promoted and encouraged Greek unity, Plutarch uses the post-battle oracle story and the altar the god ordered be erected to show how the Greeks were united and working together after all the squabbling that had occurred previously. As I will demonstrate, in presenting events after the battle of Plataea in this way, Plutarch is engaging polemically with Herodotus and challenging the image of the Greeks and the Greek victory that he presents.

The altar to Zeus Eleutherios makes an earlier appearance in the *Aristides*, when Plutarch quotes the verses inscribed on the altar as part of his discussion of the casualties from the battle of Plataea:

> τόνδε ποθ' Ἕλλανες νίκας κράτει, ἔργῳ Ἄρηος,
> Πέρσας ἐξελάσαντες ἐλευθέρᾳ Ἑλλάδι κοινὸν
> ἱδρύσαντο Διὸς βωμὸν Ἐλευθερίου.[449]
>
> Here the Greeks with the power of victory, by the work of
> Ares,
> After they expelled the Persians, on behalf of a free Greece
> Erected a common altar of Zeus Eleutherios.

With this inscription, Plutarch uses the altar to attack a particular part of Herodotus's account: his claim that the only Greeks who fought at Plataea were the Athenians, the Spartans, and the Tegeans, and that the other burial mounds were filled with earth instead of ashes as other *poleis* attempted to save face for having failed to help defend Greece.[450]

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[449] *Aristides* 19.7.

[450] For Plutarch's accusation, see *Aristides* 19.7. Plutarch here is referring to Herodotus 9.85.3, although he misrepresents slightly Herodotus's account, since Herodotus also names the Megarians and the Phliasians as among those who actually buried dead at Plataea. See also *De Herodoti malignitate* 872f, 873b-c, 874b.

Plutarch claims that the altar's reference to the Greeks proves that Herodotus could not have been correct, since were Herodotus's claim true, the three *poleis* named above would not have allowed honor to go to all equally.[451]

Further differences between the two accounts appear in what events each author narrates in the aftermath of the battle. Herodotus claims that "when the Greeks had buried their dead at Plataea, immediately they decided to march against Thebes and to demand that the city hand over those of them who had medized."[452] In contrast, Plutarch describes how, following the burial of the dead, the Athenians and Spartans were at odds with each other over who should receive the honor for greatest valor (τὸ ἀριστεῖον) in the battle. Plutarch explains how this conflict was resolved through a remarkable display of cooperation: Aristides convinced the Athenians to be reasonable, a Megarian advised the honor go to a third party, and a Corinthian earned the approval of Aristides and the Spartan commander Pausanias when he nominated the Plataeans as fitting recipients of the honor.[453] With this tale, where Herodotus describes armed conflict among the Greeks following Plataea, Plutarch instead depicts them working together to end a conflict, resolving their disagreements in a way that was honorable for all parties.

It is in this context that Plutarch narrates how the Greeks together consulted Delphi and erected a joint altar to Zeus Eleutherios in fulfillment of the oracle's demands. He notes that the oracle was given to an unnamed collective (20.4: ἐρομένοις αὐτοῖς), and the instructions were carried out by leaders of the Greeks (20.5: οἱ... ἄρχοντες τῶν Ἑλλήνων)

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[451] For this charge, see *Aristides* 19.7. Plutarch discusses this issue at length in *De Herodoti malignitate* 872b-873a.

[452] Herodotus 9.86.1: ὡς δ' ἄρα ἔθαψαν τοὺς νεκροὺς ἐν Πλαταιῇσι οἱ Ἕλληνες, αὐτίκα βουλευομένοισί σφι ἐδόκεε στρατεύειν ἐπὶ τὰς Θήβας καὶ ἐξαιτέειν αὐτῶν τοὺς μηδίσαντας.

[453] *Aristides* 20.1-3.

with no further differentiation made. By separating his discussion of the altar's inscription from his explanation of its founding Plutarch is able to use the same altar dedication for two separate, though related, purposes. In the passage containing the dedicatory inscription Plutarch uses the altar as hard evidence to contradict direct claims made by Herodotus. When describing the oracular response that ordered the Greeks to dedicate the altar, Plutarch supplements Herodotus's account to demonstrate both the role played by Delphi before, during, and after the battle of Plataea, while also presenting an image of Greek unity.

Furthermore, in the *Aristides* Plutarch goes on from here to describe how the Greeks, following the suggestions of Aristides, voted to establish a Panhellenic festival at Plataea in honor of Zeus Eleutherios and to commission a Panhellenic force to oppose the Persians together.[454] Through the *Aristides*, Plutarch thus shows the Greeks celebrating together their victory against the Persians, and resolving their conflicts through discussion and deliberation, rather than through violence. In this way Plutarch echoes his harsh rebuke of Herodotus in *De Herodoti malignitate*:

> τί οὖν περίεστιν ἔνδοξον ἢ μέγα τοῖς Ἕλλησιν ἀπ' ἐκείνων τῶν ἀγώνων, εἰ Λακεδαιμόνιοι μὲν ἀόπλοις ἐμάχοντο, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους ἡ μάχη παρόντας ἔλαθε, κενὰ δὲ πολυάνδρια τιμώμενα τοῖς ἑκάστου, ψευστῶν δὲ γραμμάτων μεστοὶ τρίποδες ἑστᾶσι καὶ βωμοὶ παρὰ τοῖς θεοῖς, μόνος δὲ τἀληθὲς Ἡρόδοτος ἔγνω, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους ἅπαντας ἀνθρώπους, ὅσοι λόγον Ἑλλήνων ἔχουσιν, ἐξηπάτηκεν ἡ φήμη τῶν τότε κατορθωμάτων, ὡς ὑπερφυῶν γενομένων;[455]

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[454] *Aristides* 21.1-2. As Marincola (2012: 106-107) notes, here as well as in the preceding episode concerning the prize for valor Plutarch appears to be elevating Aristides's role and presenting him as a wise leader among the Greeks.

[455] *De Herodoti malignitate* 874a-b.

> What honor or greatness is left for the Greeks from these contests, if the Spartans fought with those who were unarmed, and the battle escaped the notice of the others who were nearby, and empty graves are honored by descendants, and tripods and altars stand in the houses of the gods filled with lying words, and only Herodotus knows the truth, but all other men, whoever has heard of the Greeks, the report of these as virtuous actions, that they were extraordinary, has deceived?

Plutarch's insistence in the *Aristides* that the burial mounds were filled with the heroic dead, that the altar did not lie, and that the Greeks actually did join together to defeat the Persians through the help of the god serves to correct what Plutarch identified as a critical flaw in Herodotus's narrative and to celebrate this Greek achievement: the successful defense of Greek freedom.

In the *Aristides*, Plutarch presents the Delphic god as an active player in a crucial moment in Greek history as well as a source of religious knowledge, guiding the Greeks to work together as they sought to expel the Persians and providing them with the necessary information to remove pollution from Greece upon the conclusion of the war. The Athenian Aristides and the Plataean Arimnestus come together through the aid of the Delphic oracle, whose advice produces a dramatic symbol of unity among the Greeks at the same time that Plutarch presents the Greek alliance as being under stress. Similarly, after the war reaches its conclusion, once again the Delphic oracle looks out with a Hellenic view, advising Aristides and the rest of the Greeks as to how to sacrifice, and to whom, after the Persian defeat. In this way Plutarch shows the oracle promoting Greek unity during the war, and Plutarch also demonstrates Greek unity in the aftermath of the battle through the Delphic oracle. At the same time, Plutarch uses the oracle to prompt his readers to reconsider one

of the most famous episodes from Greek history and who or what was responsible for the Greek victory.

c. conclusion

Ultimately, through the Persian war *Lives* Plutarch portrays the Delphic oracle as acting on behalf of the Greek cause, revealing to the Greeks the proper course of action at Salamis, what circumstances they needed to create and whom they should propitiate in order to be victorious at Plataea, and to whom they should sacrifice and how following the conclusion of the war. Through these oracular consultations, Plutarch also reveals crucial differences between the Athenian leaders in their approaches to governance. With Aristides and Themistocles Plutarch presents his readers with two statesmen who met the same threats in vastly different ways.[456] Where Aristides used careful deliberation, honesty, and piety to bring Athens to victory, relying on the strength of his reputation to persuade the Athenians of the justice of his actions, Themistocles consistently applied the opposite tactics: he relied on tricks to bring the people to his side, and used even the gods as pawns in his quest for political power and victory. Where Themistocles is calculating and strategic, Aristides is cautious and deliberative. While Themistocles uses the oracle to persuade the people to agree to his pre-determined plan, Aristides struggled to understand the words of the oracle in order to have his actions reflect the will of the god.

Regarding the presentation of the oracle, the Pythia does not make an appearance in either *Life*, for in both biographies Plutarch keeps the focus on the god as the source of

[456] Plutarch compares Aristides and Themistocles directly both within their respective *Lives* as well as elsewhere in his extant writings. See, for example, *Phocion* 3.6-9.

the oracular responses. In both cases, this decision to name the god makes Plutarch's accounts stand in contrast to Herodotus's depiction of the same events. In the *Themistocles*, Plutarch erases the Pythia who played a key role in Herodotus's tale of the conflicting oracular responses received by the Athenians before Salamis. In the *Aristides*, Plutarch's decision to name the god as the source of the oracular response draws a contrast between the prophecies of Teisamenus, which Herodotus relates in his account, and that of the god, which is the focus of Plutarch's treatment in the *Aristides*, while also emphasizing the role that the god played in securing a Greek victory. Concerning the question of oracular ambiguity, in the *Aristides* Plutarch shows the Delphic oracle making use of ambiguity to supply wisdom and guidance to the Greeks, encouraging careful deliberation and helping the Greeks maintain a proper relationship with the gods. The oracle is a key political player, responsible in part for Greek success against the Persians and a mediator between states. In contrast, in the *Themistocles,* the oracle is merely a tool used by a politician to sway the mob. Plutarch does not question Themistocles's *conclusion* as to the meaning of the oracle, but narrates the wooden wall oracle story in a way that highlights Themistocles's more questionable inclinations as a leader, presenting them to his reader to judge whether Themistocles's use or abuse of the oracle and the people's credulity were warranted by the circumstances.

iii. The Peloponnesian War

Of the *Lives* set during the period of the Peloponnesian war, the oracle appears in the *Nicias* and the *Pericles*, but not in the *Alcibiades*. Plutarch does, however, connect Alcibiades with the oracle in the *Nicias*. As I will demonstrate, as with Themistocles and Aristides in

the Persian War *Lives*, how Nicias, Alcibiades, and Pericles respond to the oracle is indicative of their characters and approaches to politics. In each of these three *Lives* Plutarch changes Thucydides's narrative, granting more prominence to the signs from, and the words of, the gods and using these divine phenomena to shape his presentation of the characters of his subjects. At the same time Plutarch demonstrates that while the oracle expresses the will of the gods clearly, there is a degree of human influence on and control over the oracular sanctuaries and the prophecies they issue.

a. *Nicias* and *Alcibiades*

The *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades*, like the *Aristides* and the *Themistocles*, are an example of a pair of Greek *Lives* that complement each other and reveal Plutarch's diverging focus in each biography through the differences in his portrayal of the same events and people between the two *Lives*. Plutarch's presentation of the Delphic oracle in these two *Lives* stands as a clear case study for this phenomenon. The difference between Nicias's and Alcibiades's reactions to the oracle within the *Nicias* is revealing of their characters and how they operated as leaders, while the difference between Plutarch's presentation of events in the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades* demonstrates the different goals he had for each *Life*, which lay behind his decision on what information to include, and how to present it to his readers.[457] As I will argue, Plutarch includes a Delphic oracle story in the *Nicias* in

[457] It is not evident which *Life* – the *Nicias* or the *Alcibiades* – was composed first, and indeed, as Verdegem (2010: 92-93) argues, it is possible that they were composed, or the material prepared, at roughly the same time. Jones (1966: 68) places both the *Alcibiades* and the *Nicias* among the last of the *Lives* Plutarch composed because they are negative *Lives* (see Chapter 5 for an explanation of this issue), and he reasons that they were published one soon after the other. This latter assumption is based on his conclusion that *Alcibiades* 13.9 refers to the *Nicias*, and *Nicias* 11.2 to the *Alcibiades*. In *Nicias* 11.2 Plutarch indicates that the *Alcibiades* has already been written or is currently being written, since Plutarch refers to that text in the present tense (ὡς μᾶλλον ἐν τοῖς

the lead-up to the Sicilian expedition to reveal differences between the two men's characters and attitudes as leaders, and in the process, Plutarch uses the oracle to reveal the limitations of human leaders as well as to demonstrate the repercussions of attempting to manipulate or influence the divine for political gain.

Throughout the *Nicias* Plutarch traces how Nicias navigated the border between piety and excessive superstition (δεισιδαιμονία),[458] while his counterpart Alcibiades displayed a blithe disregard and disrespect for warnings or advice from the gods. Plutarch opens his narrative of the Sicilian expedition by describing Nicias's and Alcibiades's respective positions, with Nicias opposed from the very beginning, and Alcibiades eager to use it as a tool to further his ambition and greed.[459] After laying out in detail how Nicias

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περὶ ἐκείνου γραφομένοις δηλοῦται). Jones, following Mewaldt (1907: 573), argues that Plutarch in his reference in *Alcibiades* 13.9 to other accounts of the ostracism of Hyperbolus is actually referring to the *Nicias*, with the result that both the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades* would appear to contain references to the other text. As Pelling (2002) has demonstrated, Plutarch appears to have referred to texts in the past tense that were either already in circulation, or would be soon. Either way, it is not possible from the evidence available to prove definitively which text was published first, and any arguments based on the chronology of publication stand on very shaky ground.

[458] As Veyne (1999: 389) notes, δεισιδαιμονία is commonly translated as "superstition" for lack of a better word. While δεισιδαιμονία (along with its cognates δεισιδαιμονεύω and δεσιδαίμων) can, as Teodorsson (2011: 557-558) demonstrates, have a positive connotation, for Plutarch δεισιδαιμονία is always negative, representing an excessive fear of the gods that surpasses reason or rationality, stemming from an ignorance about the nature of the gods (on this see also Bowden 2008: 61-63). Much of the scholarship on δεισιδαιμονία in Plutarch's thought seeks to weave together a unified theory or view of δεισιδαιμονία and the δεισιδαίμων out of Plutarch's various treatises and biographies that touch upon the subject (e.g. *De superstitione, Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum*, and *De Iside et Osiride*, among others). For a catalogue of the different ways in which Plutarch uses δεισιδαιμονία across his writings, see Brenk (1977) 59-64 and Berardi (1990). Pérez Jiménez (1996) suggests that Plutarch's presentation of δεισιδαιμονία in the *Moralia* differs from that in the *Lives*. Teodorsson (2011: 561-562) argues that this difference is not as stark as it may seem, suggesting that Plutarch does not take issue with the concept of omens or portents themselves, but with people viewing them as signs of divine wrath or malice, rather than advice or warnings. Within the *Nicias*, Plutarch clearly groups Nicias with those who are under the thrall of δεισιδαιμονία (23.1: ὑπὸ… δεισιδαιμονίας) and describes him as having to be freed from his δεισιδαιμονία (23.7: τὸ πολὺ τῆς δεισιδαιμονίας ἀφαιρῶν) in order to act as a leader should.

[459] *Nicias* 12.1-6.

tried in vain to convince the Athenians to abandon the expedition, Plutarch describes how the priests and oracles were also issuing dire predictions:

> [1] καίτοι λέγεται πολλὰ καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἱερέων ἐναντιοῦσθαι πρὸς τὴν στρατείαν· ἀλλ᾽ ἑτέρους ἔχων μάντεις ὁ Ἀλκιβιάδης ἐκ δή τινων λογίων προὔφερε παλαιῶν μέγα κλέος τῶν Ἀθηναίων ἀπὸ Σικελίας ἔσεσθαι, [2] καὶ θεοπρόποι τινὲς αὐτῷ παρ᾽ Ἄμμωνος ἀφίκοντο χρησμὸν κομίζοντες, ὡς λήψονται Συρακουσίους ἅπαντας Ἀθηναῖοι· [3] τὰ δ᾽ ἐναντία φοβούμενοι δυσφημεῖν ἔκρυπτον. οὐδὲ γὰρ τὰ προῦπτα καὶ καταφανῆ τῶν σημείων ἀπέτρεπεν, ἥ τε τῶν Ἑρμῶν περικοπή… καὶ τὸ πραχθὲν περὶ τὸν βωμὸν τῶν δώδεκα θεῶν… [5] ἐν δὲ Δελφοῖς Παλλάδιον ἔστηκε χρυσοῦν ἐπὶ φοίνικος χαλκοῦ βεβηκός, ἀνάθημα τῆς πόλεως ἀπὸ τῶν Μηδικῶν ἀριστείων· τοῦτ᾽ ἔκοπτον ἐφ᾽ ἡμέρας πολλὰς προσπετόμενοι κόρακες, καὶ τὸν καρπὸν ὄντα χρυσοῦν τοῦ φοίνικος ἀπέτρωγον καὶ κατέβαλλον. [6] οἱ δὲ ταῦτα μὲν ἔφασαν εἶναι Δελφῶν πλάσματα, πεπεισμένων ὑπὸ Συρακουσίων· χρησμοῦ δέ τινος κελεύοντος αὐτοὺς ἐκ Κλαζομενῶν τὴν ἱέρειαν τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς ἄγειν, μετεπέμψαντο τὴν ἄνθρωπον· ἐκαλεῖτο δ᾽ Ἡσυχία. καὶ τοῦτ᾽ ἦν ὡς ἔοικεν ὃ παρῄνει τῇ πόλει τὸ δαιμόνιον, ἐν τῷ παρόντι τὴν ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν.[460]

> [1] And yet it is said that there were many things also from the priests which were in opposition to the campaign; but Alcibiades, who had other seers in his employ, cited from some ancient prophecies that there would be great glory for the Athenians from Sicily, [2] and certain messengers sent to consult the oracle of Ammon reported to him an oracular response declaring that the Athenians would capture all of the Syracusans. [3] But, fearing to bear ill news, they concealed words indicating the opposite. For not even the obvious and evident signs served as deterrents [for the Athenians]: there was the mutilation of the Herms… and the affair concerning the altar of the twelve gods… [5] and in Delphi there was a golden Palladium standing on a bronze palm tree, a votive offering from the city made from their

[460] *Nicias* 13.1-3 and 5-6, Parke and Wormell §166, Fontenrose Q193.

> rewards for valor in the Persian wars.[461] Crows, flocking to the monument, after pecking at it for many days, bit off the golden fruit of the palm tree and let it fall.[462] [6] But others say that these things are lies spread by the Delphians, who were persuaded to do so by the Syracusans; but when a certain oracle ordered them to lead the priestess of Athena from Clazomenae, they sent for the woman, who was called Peace (Ἡσυχία). This was, as it seemed, what the divine advised for the city, to maintain peace at that time.

Plutarch's description of the omens and oracles provides the reader with the divine's perspective on the affair while also revealing how the leaders and the people alike were responding to and respecting the advice of the gods. Plutarch is quite explicit in his assessment that the gods disapproved of the expedition. Plutarch contrasts Alcibiades's sunny promise of victory with a series of five ominous omens and portents that suggested doom for the Athenians.[463] Plutarch ends his list with an omen involving the Palladium dedicated by the Athenians at Delphi and an oracular response advocating for peace.

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[461] That is, from Athens.

[462] In *De Pythiae oraculis* Philinus (the narrator of the dialogue) uses a slightly different version of this event as an example of a miracle involving a votive offering to support his conclusion that the votive offerings at Delphi are filled with a divine spirit (398a: πεπλῆσθαι πάντα θειότητος). Philinus describes how "in the midst of the Athenian misfortunes on Sicily the golden dates were falling from the palm tree, and ravens were mutilating the shield of the Palladium" (397f: ἐν δὲ τοῖς Σικελικοῖς τῶν Ἀθηναίων ἀτυχήμασιν αἵ τε χρυσαῖ τοῦ φοίνικος ἀπέρρεον βάλανοι, καὶ τὴν ἀσπίδα τοῦ Παλλαδίου κόρακες περιέκοπτον). The story of the ravens and the Palladium is also found in Pausanias 10.15.4-6, who ascribes the story to Cleitodemus (*FGrHist* 323). That Plutarch was familiar with Cleitodemus (whom he refers to as Cleidemus), is evident because he refers to him and cites his writings in both the *Lives* (*Theseus* 19.8-10, 27.2-7; *Themistocles* 10.6-7; *Aristides* 19.5-6) and the *Moralia* (*De gloria Atheniensium* 345e). Although the three passages - Plutarch *Nicias* 13 and *De Pythiae oraculis* 397f-398a, and Pausanias 10.15.4-6 – all tell slightly different versions of the incident, their core point and interpretation of the omen is the same: prior to the Sicilian expedition, ravens alighted on the Palladium at Delphi dedicated by the Athenians and pecked at the statue, and some of the golden dates fell to the ground, serving as an ominous warning for the Athenians about the upcoming campaign.

[463] The five omens include: 1) the words of the priests, 2) the mutilation of the Herms, 3) the affair concerning the altar of the twelve gods, 4) the affair with the ravens and the Palladium, and 5) the oracle from Delphi regarding the priestess of Athena.

Plutarch does not specify in the *Nicias* that this oracle came from Delphi, but Theon describes it as Delphic in *De Pythiae oraculis*.[464] In the dialogue Theon uses this oracle story as an example of a prose oracular response from the distant past that concerned important affairs.[465] In the *Nicias*, Plutarch makes no mention of the form of the oracular response, but instead uses the oracle story to make clear the folly of the Athenians in undertaking the Sicilian expedition: he presents the god as indicating to the Athenians that they should pursue peace, and yet they chose war instead. This message in turn has strong implications for how the characters of both Nicias and Alcibiades should be interpreted within the biography. If the gods were against the campaign from the beginning, blame for Nicias's failure does not fall entirely on his shoulders. Both in this passage and indeed throughout the *Nicias* Plutarch emphasizes Nicias's piety as well as his *deisidaimonia*. This latter trait frequently causes him to slip into folly, since Nicias's fear of the gods paralyzes him and prevents him from acting as an effective leader.[466] Nevertheless, Nicias, as

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[464] *De Pythiae oraculis* 403b. Although in the dialogue Theon says the priestess was from Erythrae, rather than Clazomenae as in the *Nicias*, it is clear that it is the same oracle story.

[465] *De Pythiae oraculis* 402e-403a.

[466] As Nikolaidis (1988) has catalogued, Plutarch is quite critical of Nicias as a leader, in particular for his cowardice. Nevertheless, Nikolaidis argues that Nicias still manages to come out better than Crassus in the *synkrisis* to the pair of *Lives*, even though Plutarch tried to emphasize Nicias's defects in order to balance the playing field between the Greek and Roman in the pair. Against this view, Titchener (1991) argues that Plutarch did not like Nicias because of his excessive *deisidaimonia*, but he needed a figure to pair with the Crassus and did not believe in negative examples, so tried to make Nicias palatable. More recently, Verdegem (2010) and Sapere (2016) have argued, following Nikolaidis (1988), that Nicias was a negative example for Plutarch, not a poor attempt at a positive one (in this, see also Titchener 2008, in which she modifies her earlier position). I would argue, however, that by attempting to categorize leaders as positive or negative *exempla*, scholars overlook the actual purpose of the *Lives*. While it is true that most of Plutarch's *Lives* are generally positive in their assessment of the statesmen under study, they are far from encomiastic, and Plutarch does not hesitate to point out the flaws as well as the merits of his subjects. See also Verdegem (2010: 23-24), who notes that even Demetrius and Antony, figures Plutarch explicitly identifies as negative, have good characteristics as well as bad. It is the job of the reader to assess what aspects of the characters are worthy of imitation, and which should be avoided. Nicias is not a wholly bad leader, but rather one with a mixture of positive and negative characteristics. Plutarch's juxtaposition of Nicias with Alcibiades reveals the importance of this

Plutarch emphasizes, was correct in that the gods advised Athenians *not* to go to Syracuse. But Nicias did not make the best use of his appointment, no matter how much he disagreed with it. At the same time, Plutarch represents Alcibiades as being willing to stoop to manipulating both gods and men in order to achieve his goals. Rather than respecting the gods and their messages – as well as messengers – he consistently pushed for the expedition even in the face of clear warnings from the gods that doing so would go against the Athenians' interests.

In contrast to the *Nicias,* in the *Alcibiades* Plutarch does not mention the priests, seers, or oracles prior to the Sicilian expedition.[467] Similarly in his description of the negative omens in the *Nicias,* Plutarch makes no mention of the charge of impiety made against Alcibiades, or indeed the incident concerning the Eleusinian mysteries at all, noting only that the Athenians recalled Alcibiades to Athens to stand trial, apparently expecting his readers to be familiar enough with the story to know to what he was referring without having to name the charge or explain the circumstances further.[468] Plutarch, however, lays out this episode in detail in the *Alcibiades*.[469] There, Plutarch describes how "at that time the demagogue Androcles persuaded some slaves and metics to accuse Alcibiades and his friends of mutilating other statues and of imitating the mysteries while drunk."[470] As a

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balance: Plutarch shows how Nicias's good intentions but poor leadership skills failed to protect Athens from Alcibiades's poor intentions but exceptional ability to rally the people behind him. With these *Lives* Plutarch emphasizes the importance of moderation and morality for statesmen, as well as the ability to lead the people.

[467] Plutarch does discuss the mutilation of the Herms in the *Alcibiades*, though to different effect, but passes over the incident regarding the altar to the twelve.

[468] *Nicias* 14.4.

[469] *Alcibiades* 19.1-7.

[470] *Alcibiades* 19.1: ἐν δὲ τούτῳ δούλους τινὰς καὶ μετοίκους προήγαγεν Ἀνδροκλῆς ὁ δημαγωγός, ἄλλων τ' ἀγαλμάτων περικοπὰς καὶ μυστηρίων παρ' οἶνον ἀπομιμήσεις τοῦ Ἀλκιβιάδου καὶ τῶν φίλων κατηγοροῦντας. Here Plutarch's description is very close to that of Thucydides (6.28.1), but

result of this accusation, Alcibiades had a charge of impiety (ἀσέβεια) made against him in the assembly for profaning the Eleusinian mysteries.[471] Plutarch describes in detail how this charge was made by Alcibiades's political enemies,[472] and how the entire process was determined not by religious scrupulosity but by political interest: Alcibiades fought unsuccessfully to have his trial take place immediately when he would be buoyed by support from the navy and from popular support for the Sicilian expedition, while Alcibiades's enemies wanted to delay the trial until the war was over in the hopes that popular sentiment would have turned against him.[473] Plutarch goes on to explain that while Alcibiades was in Sicily his enemies continued to fan the flames of public indignation, linking the mutilation of the Herms with the profaning of the mysteries and thus increasing public anger against Alcibiades to such an extent that he was recalled from Sicily in the middle of the expedition.[474] It is at this point in Plutarch's narrative that Alcibiades abandons Athens, rejecting the city that had turned her back on him.

Plutarch's presentation of the events leading up to the departure of the Sicilian expedition in both the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades* departs considerably from Thucydides's account, which Plutarch clearly consulted and modeled his narratives after in both *Lives*.[475]

Plutarch has supplied the figure and the name of the person supposedly behind the accusations of the slaves and metics. No such person is mentioned or even hinted at by Thucydides.

[471] *Alcibiades* 19.3.

[472] For example, Plutarch describes Androcles, who he claims was the mastermind behind this charge, as Alcibiades's chief enemy (*Alcibiades* 19.3), and throughout this episode mentions repeatedly the actions of Alcibiades's enemies.

[473] *Alcibiades* 19.3-7.

[474] *Alcibiades* 20.1-21.9. Here Plutarch diverges slightly from Thucydides (6.28.2), who presents the connection between the mutilation of the herms and the incident involving the mysteries as having been made prior to Alcibiades's departure.

[475] On Plutarch's use of Thucydides, see in particular de Romilly (1988), Pelling (1992), and Titchener (1995). De Romilly argues that while Thucydides was interested in telling the history of Athens and the complex political situation, Plutarch was interested in telling the story of the

Thucydides details the political battle between Alcibiades and Nicias: nearly half of Thucydides's account comprises speeches between the two men,[476] while in the rest Thucydides describes the Athenians' political motivations in undertaking the expedition and Alcibiades's personal reasons for supporting it.[477] Thucydides does mention briefly the mutilation of the herms and the charges brought against Alcibiades, but does not mention the Delphic oracular response or any of the other omens named by Plutarch in the biographies. Indeed, the gods are almost entirely absent from Thucydides's version of events, and he even downplays the religious implications of the mutilation of the herms, which Plutarch includes in his catalogue of negative omens in the *Nicias*.[478] Thucydides acknowledges that this incident was interpreted as an omen (οἰωνός) concerning the fleet's imminent departure, but then returns the focus to the political sphere, arguing that the Athenians believed the perpetrators to have been conspirators plotting to overthrow the democracy.[479] This theme continues in what follows, for in the subsequent passages Thucydides turns to the charges brought against Alcibiades regarding the mysteries, which he claims were political and were brought on and promoted by Alcibiades's enemies.[480] In

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individuals, rather than the whole community, and that this divergence in agendas reveals itself in what details each author includes in his writings. In contrast, Pelling argues that Plutarch's account differs from Thucydides's not just because of a different motive for writing, but because Plutarch was aware of his belatedness, and was deliberately differentiating his account from that of his predecessor. Finally, Titchener notes that Plutarch uses and refers to Thucydides in different ways in the biographies as opposed to the *Lives*, pointing out how Plutarch's differing aims between his works resulted in different presentations and uses of Thucydides.

[476] That is, thirteen out of thirty chapters: Thucydides 6.9-14 (Nicias's first speech), 6.16-18 (Alcibiades's speech), and 6.20-23 (Nicias's second speech).

[477] E.g. Thucydides 6.1, 6, 8, 15, 19, 27-30.

[478] For the entire episode, see Thucydides 6.1-30. On Thucydides's tendency to avoid mention of the gods, see Hornblower (1992).

[479] Thucydides 6.27.3.

[480] Thucydides 6.28.1-29.3.

shaping his biographies, therefore, Plutarch has carried over the political focus of Thucydides's account in the *Alcibiades*, though he places slightly more emphasis on the divine than his predecessor. The *Nicias*, however, represents a sharp contrast to Thucydides's account: Plutarch presents an entirely different image of how Nicias acted and for what reasons prior to the expedition's departure.

Plutarch calls attention to his reliance on Thucydides in the opening of the *Nicias* (1.1-5), where he gives an *apologia* for writing a *Life* of someone whose deeds had already been treated extensively and famously by another. Plutarch claims that, to avoid telling the same story as his predecessors, his account will contain instead alternative versions of events. Plutarch's addition of the omens fits neatly into this category, but should not only be understood as a way for Plutarch to differentiate his account. Plutarch's inclusion of the omens, and his decision to do so in different ways between the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades* results in a different story, with different implications about the characters of his subjects.

Plutarch's selective use of evidence and starkly different interests between the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades* results in two separate portrayals of the events in Athens prior to the Sicilian expedition:

In the *Nicias* Plutarch tells how the Athenians were so riled up beyond reason by the false promises of Alcibiades that they ignored Nicias and the clear warnings of the divine about the folly of their proposed undertaking. Nicias stands in contrast to Alcibiades, who saw the gods as a tool to sway the people, rather than as a source of guidance.

In the *Alcibiades*, Plutarch declares that the omens only appeared after the fleet was on the verge of departing for Sicily, and names only the Adonia, the mutilation of the Herms, and the accusation of ἀσέβεια against Alcibiades for the matter concerning the

Eleusinian mysteries. There was no heavy aura of divine disfavor looming over the expedition, but rather one of political conspiracy and machinations.

On the one hand, Plutarch's selective use of evidence between the two biographies allows him to avoid repeating information he gave elsewhere. Nevertheless, the choice of what information to include in which biography reveals how Plutarch used each set of paired *Lives* to explore different aspects of morality and leadership. With Alcibiades and Nicias Plutarch presents two leaders on opposing ends of a spectrum: where Alcibiades was bold, Nicias was timid; where Alcibiades was willing to use anything at his disposal to achieve political victory, Nicias's *deisidaimonia* held him back. Nevertheless, as the Delphic oracle reveals, the failure of the expedition was not entirely Nicias's, since the gods themselves advocated against it. Nicias's fault lay in failing to make the most of the situation in which he found himself. The gods wanted peace, as the Delphic oracle made clear, and when the Athenians chose war, Nicias became a pawn. He could have fought for a better end for himself and Athens, as Plutarch tells his reader directly in the *synkrisis* to the *Nicias*-*Crassus*, but no good was going to come of the war either way.[481] In contrast, in the *Alcibiades*, Plutarch removes any reference to the oracle. By removing the oracle and Alcibiades's use of *manteis*, Plutarch deemphasizes Alcibiades's apparent disregard for the gods that he showcases in the *Nicias*, focusing instead on his relationship with the Athenian and Spartan people.

Regarding the portrayal of the oracle in these *Lives*, the oracle story in the *Nicias* touches upon the questions of oracular ambiguity, proper responses to oracles, and the influence of politics on the phrasing of the oracular responses. Fontenrose places this

[481] *Nicias*-*Crassus* 5.2. See also *De superstitione* 169a.

oracular response in the category of "ambiguous and obscure commands and instructions."[482] Plutarch is quite emphatic in his presentation of this oracle story that the god was not masking his advice for the Athenians. Rather, the Delphic oracle was expressing clearly the will of the gods. This oracle story is the last in a list of signs that Plutarch describes as "obvious" (προῦπτα) and "evident" (καταφανῆ). While the Delphic oracle does not give the Athenians a direct command, Plutarch suggests that the true meaning of the god's message was nonetheless unmistakable: in telling the Athenians to bring the priestess named Peace (τὴν ἱέρειαν…ἄγειν), the god was instructing them to live in peace (ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν). Thus Plutarch makes clear in the *Nicias* that the Delphic oracle was not misunderstood: it was ignored. The eagerness of the people, urged on by Alcibiades, led them to ignore the warnings of the gods, with disastrous results. In contrast, in the *Alcibiades*, Plutarch does not emphasize divination or the will of the gods. The embassy to the oracle at Ammon and Alcibiades's use of *manteis* are not mentioned in that *Life* in spite of Alcibiades' role in the same affairs in the *Nicias*, and the Delphic oracle warning against the Sicilian expedition is erased entirely.[483] Instead, Plutarch focuses on Alcibiades' character and his manipulation of the Athenian and Spartan people. Finally, the Pythia is not present in this oracle story, but through the *theopropoi* sent to consult Ammon, Plutarch touches upon the issue of human interference in the divine messages. In *De Pythiae oraculis*, Theon suggested that the Delphic oracle might employ ambiguity as a way to protect the lives of the human servants of the god.[484] While the god may be

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[482] Fontenrose (1978: 330-331) Mode A3.

[483] Arnush (2006: 102-103) argues that the Athenians consulted Ammon at Siwah because Delphi was controlled by the Spartans at this time, preventing the Athenians from consulting the Delphic oracle. On this issue see also Hornblower (1992: 194).

[484] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407d-e.

immortal and untouchable, the priests and priestesses are not, and so, Theon hypothesized, they shrouded the god's harsh words in ambiguity to avoid becoming victims of a powerful ruler's wrath.[485] There are parallels between the situation imagined by Theon in *De Pythiae oraculis* and that described by Plutarch in the *Nicias*, although with some crucial differences. Plutarch declares that the *theopropoi* were fearful of the repercussions for being the bearers of bad news, and so altered the oracular response they were bringing back, making it sound positive when it was in fact negative. It is not the priests of Ammon or the god himself, however, who add this layer of obscurity to the response, but the messengers sent to consult the oracle. Thus the misunderstanding that ensued was the fault not of the god or his human servants, but the fault of the Athenians themselves.

b. *Pericles*

The Delphic oracle appears once in the *Pericles*, although not in the form of an oracular consultation. Instead, it appears in the context of Pericles's opposition to the Spartans during the Second Sacred War. As I will demonstrate, this episode highlights an aspect of Pericles's statesmanship that Plutarch identifies for his readers as potentially problematic. At the same time, the episode shows how Delphi could be a political tool for states and their leaders.

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[485] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407e: "because he is making use of mortal servants and prophets, whom it is fitting for him to protect and to guard, in order that those serving the god not be killed by wicked men, while he is not willing that the truth be concealed, but turning aside the revelation of it just as a light takes many refractions and is split, the god takes away the truth's harsh appearance" (χρώμενος δὲ θνητοῖς ὑπηρέταις καὶ προφήταις, ὧν κήδεσθαι προσήκει καὶ φυλάττειν, ὅπως ὑπ' ἀνθρώπων οὐκ ἀπολοῦνται πονηρῶν ⟨τῷ⟩ θεῷ λατρεύοντες, ἀφανίζειν μὲν οὐκ ἤθελε τὸ ἀληθές, παρατρέπων δὲ τὴν δήλωσιν αὐτοῦ καθάπερ αὐγὴν ἐν τῇ ποιητικῇ πολλὰς ἀνακλάσεις λαμβάνουσαν καὶ πολλαχοῦ περισχιζομένην ἀφῄρει τὸ ἀντίτυπον αὐτοῦ καὶ σκληρόν).

Plutarch recounts how, during the Second Sacred War, Pericles was so focused on opposing the Spartans at every turn and curbing their power, that he handed Delphi back to the Phocians after the Spartans had given it to the Delphians, receiving the right of *promanteia*, or the right to consult the Delphic oracle first, for the Athenians in the process:[486]

> [1] ἀλλ' ὁ Περικλῆς… τὰ πλεῖστα τῆς δυνάμεως ἔτρεπεν εἰς φυλακὴν καὶ βεβαιότητα τῶν ὑπαρχόντων, μέγα ἔργον ἡγούμενος ἀνείργειν Λακεδαιμονίους καὶ ὅλως ὑπεναντιούμενος ἐκείνοις, ὡς ἄλλοις τε πολλοῖς ἔδειξε καὶ μάλιστα τοῖς περὶ τὸν ἱερὸν πραχθεῖσι πόλεμον. [2] ἐπεὶ γὰρ οἱ Λακεδαιμόνιοι στρατεύσαντες εἰς Δελφοὺς Φωκέων ἐχόντων τὸ ἱερὸν Δελφοῖς ἀπέδωκαν, εὐθὺς ἐκείνων ἀπαλλαγέντων ὁ Περικλῆς ἐπιστρατεύσας, πάλιν εἰσήγαγε τοὺς Φωκέας, [3] καὶ τῶν Λακεδαιμονίων ἣν ἔδωκαν αὐτοῖς Δελφοὶ προμαντείαν εἰς τὸ μέτωπον ἐγκολαψάντων τοῦ χαλκοῦ λύκου, λαβὼν καὶ αὐτὸς προμαντείαν τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν λύκον κατὰ τὴν δεξιὰν πλευρὰν ἐνεχάραξεν.[487]
>
> [1] But Pericles… turned the majority of the forces to defense and the security of that which they already controlled, considering it a great feat to restrain the Spartans and being entirely in opposition to them, as he showed through many other deeds and especially in his actions regarding the Sacred War. [2] For after the Spartans marched on Delphi while it was being controlled by the Phocians and returned the sanctuary to the Delphians, Pericles, as soon as they left, launched an expedition and handed the sanctuary back to the Phocians. [3] And since the Spartans had carved *promanteia* which the Delphians gave them on the forehead of the bronze wolf, Pericles also, taking *promanteia* for the Athenians, engraved in on the right side of the same wolf.

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[486] On the right of *promanteia* and its application at Delphi during the Classical period, see Pouilloux (1952), Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 31), Bowden (2005) 17.

[487] *Pericles* 21.1-3.

Plutarch nowhere else in his extant works mentions *promanteia*, and it is clear that here Plutarch's focus in the episode is not the Athenians receiving this right, but Pericles's single-minded drive to meet the Spartans blow for blow. This is revealed in particular through contrast with Thucydides's presentation of the same episode: "But the Spartans, after these things, engaged in a war called Sacred, and having seized the sanctuary in Delphi they handed it over to the Delphians; and later again the Athenians, after the Spartans withdrew, marched to Delphi and after seizing it handed it over to the Phocians."[488] First, as Stadter has noted, where Plutarch credits Pericles with the decision to return control of Delphi to the Phocians, Thucydides places responsibility on the Athenians as a group.[489] Plutarch has also supplemented Thucydides's narrative by adding how the Athenians received *promanteia* and engraved this on the wolf statue. This omission by Thucydides is consistent with what Hornblower argues is a theme throughout Thucydides's history, that Thucydides largely omitted religious aspects of the conflict from his account.[490] Additionally, where Thucydides does not explain why the Athenians acted as they did, Plutarch informs his readers directly that Pericles's actions were undertaken with the explicit goal of thwarting the Spartans and reducing their power. There is another small but crucial difference between Plutarch's and Thucydides's versions of this incident. Plutarch emphasizes the immediacy of Pericles's response to Sparta's actions (εὐθύς) in

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[488] Thucydides 1.112.5: Λακεδαιμόνιοι δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα τὸν ἱερὸν καλούμενον πόλεμον ἐστράτευσαν, καὶ κρατήσαντες τοῦ ἐν Δελφοῖς ἱεροῦ παρέδοσαν Δελφοῖς· καὶ αὖθις ὕστερον Ἀθηναῖοι ἀποχωρησάντων αὐτῶν στρατεύσαντες καὶ κρατήσαντες παρέδοσαν Φωκεῦσιν.

[489] Stadter (1989) 224. As Stadter notes, "Focus on the individual subject also meant that Plutarch often ascribed to Pericles actions that his sources attributed to the Athenians generally" (xlix). For other examples of this in the *Pericles* see *Pericles* 25.2, 25.5, and 29.1. Regarding the addition of *promanteia* to the narrative, Stadter (1989: 224) theorizes that Plutarch may have found this information from Philochorus (*FGrHist* 328 F34) or Theopompus (*FGrHist* 115).

[490] Hornblower (1992).

contrast to Thucydides's more moderate description of sequential action (αὖθις ὕστερον). This small shift in phrasing underscores what Plutarch describes both here and elsewhere as Pericles's obsession with opposing the Spartans: immediately after the Spartans left, Pericles reversed their action, and then went even further, carving proof of the Athenian receipt of *promanteia* onto the same statue that bore proof of the Spartan's right of *promanteia*. In the *synkrisis* Plutarch identifies Pericles's single-minded drive against the Spartans as responsible for Athens' ultimate defeat.[491] This criticism in the *synkrisis* serves as a hint to readers that Pericles's actions against Sparta are one lens through which to interpret him and his career. Thus the emphasis on Pericles's motives in restoring Delphi to the Phocians connects this episode directly with a core aspect of Pericles's character as a leader that Plutarch is scrutinizing in the *Life*. Consequently, here Plutarch appears to be using the Delphic oracle and his subject's interactions with it to comment on his worthiness as statesmen. Finally, while this passage in the *Pericles* does not relate an oracular consultation, it does show that one aspect of oracular consultation – the order in which states were allowed to approach the oracle with questions – is highly political. Bowden suggests that for the Athenians, the restoration of Delphi to the Phocians "will have been seen as a sacred obligation, and the granting of *promanteia* afterwards will have been proof for the Athenians that their action had the approval of the Delphians… and presumably of Apollo himself."[492] Plutarch does not name who granted the Athenians *promanteia,* but the god is notably absent from this episode, and in the *Pericles* it is clear that Pericles's actions

[491] *Pericles-Fabius Maximus* 3.1: "The war was a large ground for complaint against Pericles for his statesmanship. For it is said that it was his decision not to grant any concessions to the Lacedaimonians" (τῆς δὲ πολιτείας μέγα μὲν ἔγκλημα τοῦ Περικλέους ὁ πόλεμος. λέγεται γὰρ ἐπακτὸς ὑπ' ἐκείνου γενέσθαι, Λακεδαιμονίοις ἐρίσαντος μὴ ἐνδοῦναι).

[492] Bowden (2005) 136-137.

were motivated not by piety but out of a desire to counter the Spartans at every turn. In this way, Plutarch shows very human and political concerns as controlling and influencing certain aspects of Delphic rituals.

Plutarch does not discuss directly Pericles's views of the Delphic oracle in the *Pericles*, but he does describe Pericles as being above feelings of superstition (δεισιδαιμονίας… καθυπέρτερος).[493] While Plutarch appears to forgive Pericles's lack of belief in omens, he makes it clear in a parenthesis to the reader that one can believe in the prophetic power of omens while still remaining rational.[494] It is important that Plutarch discusses Pericles's views in relation to the declaration of a *mantis* that a one-horned goat indicated that Pericles would come out victorious in his later political conflict with Thucydides son of Melesias.[495] Plutarch repeats similar claims in the *Demosthenes*, although with a crucial difference. There, Plutarch claims that Demosthenes, trying to persuade the Athenians to oppose Philip in spite of the Delphic oracle's words of warning, reminded them that Pericles considered omens to be "cowardly excuses" (δειλίας... προφάσεις).[496] This passage is problematic for several reasons. First, Plutarch here is explaining what Demosthenes told the Thebans and Athenians, and Demosthenes has at this point in the narrative already proven himself to be a not entirely trustworthy narrator: Demosthenes was using this comparison to convince the Athenians that they should ignore the Pythia. Second, while in the *Pericles* Plutarch does discuss Pericles's rationalism, he

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[493] *Pericles* 6.1. Pericles's disbelief in omens places him in direct contrast with Nicias (see above) as well as with Pericles's Roman counterpart, Fabius Maximus. In the *Fabius Maximus* Plutarch uses his subject to demonstrate how a leader can be pious without falling prey to superstition. See, for example, *Fabius Maximus* 4.4-7.

[494] *Pericles* 6.4-5.

[495] *Pericles* 6.2-3.

[496] *Demosthenes* 20.1. For the entire passage, see below.

connects this to an omen, not an oracle. In the *Demosthenes* the orator appears to suggest that Pericles did not listen to, or did not want the Athenians to heed, the Delphic oracle. If this were the case, Plutarch makes no mention of it in the *Pericles*, although he does make a point of showing his readers how Pericles used the oracular sanctuary as a political pawn in the ongoing conflict between Athens and Sparta.

c. conclusion

In the *Lives* of statesmen who lived during the Peloponnesian war, Plutarch demonstrates how the Delphic oracle played a key political role in the fifth-century Greek world. The oracle was used by politicians for political gain, as seen in Pericles's use of Delphi as a tool in his fight against the Spartans, and through its responses commented directly on key political decisions, as seen in the lead-up to the Sicilian expedition in the *Nicias*. Plutarch's emphasis on the divine in these *Lives* runs contrary to the approach of Thucydides, whose account Plutarch otherwise largely follows. Additionally, throughout these *Lives*, Plutarch presents the oracle as expressing the will of the gods clearly. Nevertheless, humans are still very closely involved in both the operation of the oracle and in the transmission of oracular responses, as seen in the episode involving the messengers to Ammon. Regarding the oracle's role in revealing the subjects' characters, in the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades* Plutarch uses the same figures and incidents to impart two different lessons on statecraft to his readers, with the *Nicias* through his inclusion and use of the Delphic oracle, and in the *Alcibiades* through his omission of it. In the *Nicias*, Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to present the pair as two polar opposite examples of how to respond to divine portents. Additionally, the Delphic oracular response helps lessen Nicias's responsibility for the

failure of the Sicilian expedition because the gods recommended against it from the outset. In the *Alcibiades*, Plutarch leaves out the oracle, because where Nicias was against the expedition, Alcibiades was strongly for it, making him culpable in a way that Nicias was not. By removing the oracle, Plutarch deemphasizes Alcibiades's disregard for the gods, focusing instead on his relationship with the Athenian and Spartan people. Finally, through his description of Pericles's actions against Delphi in the Second Sacred War Plutarch shows to his readers the extent to which Pericles would go while pursuing his vendetta against the Spartans, asking his readers to assess whether Pericles's actions brought more harm or good to the Athenians.

iv. The Macedonian Conquest

The period during which the Greek states saw Macedon rise and which brought an end to Greek political freedom is also the last one in which Plutarch shows the oracle playing a key role in Greek affairs. In the *Demosthenes*, *Phocion,* and *Alexander*, the subjects' interactions with the Delphic oracle bring out some of the most important aspects of the characters as they appear in Plutarch's texts, and raise questions about how the oracle could be used as a political tool by the powerful.

a. *Demosthenes*

The *Demosthenes* contains two references to Delphi, both referring to the same oracular response(s) received by the Athenians before the battle of Chaeronea.[497] This oracular response is hinted at, but neither given nor summarized, nor does Plutarch include what

[497] *Demosthenes* 19.1, 20.1.

question was put to the oracle.[498] Nevertheless, in his discussion of this response in the *Demosthenes* Plutarch defends the Delphic oracle against the accusation of political bias while also showing Demosthenes to be a statesman whose actions could not live up to his words.

In the *Demosthenes* Plutarch foreshadows the calamity to come for the Greeks at Chaeronea by relating how the Greeks received dire warnings from the gods from both the Pythia and the Sibylline books:

> τύχη δέ τις [ὡς] ἔοικε δαιμόνιος ἢ περιφορὰ πραγμάτων, εἰς ἐκεῖνο καιροῦ συμπεραίνουσα τὴν ἐλευθερίαν τῆς Ἑλλάδος, ἐναντιοῦσθαι τοῖς πραττομένοις καὶ πολλὰ σημεῖα τοῦ μέλλοντος ἀναφαίνειν, ἐν οἷς ἥ τε Πυθία δεινὰ προὔφερε μαντεύματα, καὶ χρησμὸς ἤδετο παλαιὸς ἐκ τῶν Σιβυλλείων·
>
> τῆς ἐπὶ Θερμώδοντι μάχης ἀπάνευθε γενοίμην,
> αἰετὸς ἐν νεφέεσσι καὶ ἠέρι θηήσασθαι.
> κλαίει ὁ νικηθείς, ὁ δὲ νικήσας ἀπόλωλε.[499]
>
> But it seems [that] some supernatural fate or course of events, which was at that time bringing the freedom of Greece to a close, opposed what was being done and revealed many signs of what was to come, in which the Pythia was uttering terrible oracular responses, and an ancient oracle was recited from the Sibylline books:
>
> May I be far away from the battle on Thermodon,
> To view it as an eagle in the clouds and the ether.
> The conquered weeps, and the conqueror perishes.

[498] Parke and Wormell (1956.2: 107-108) speculate that it was the Delphic Amphictyony that made the inquiry to the oracle. Plutarch omits any such information from his account.

[499] *Demosthenes* 19.1, Parke and Wormell §265, Fontenrose H22.

Here, Plutarch alludes to dire warnings (δεινὰ… μαντεύματα) issued by both the Pythia and the Sibyl after Philip's entry into the Fourth Sacred War.[500] Plutarch does not tell his readers exactly what the Pythia said, although he implies that it was similar at least in tone to the Sibylline oracle that he quotes. Plutarch presents the warnings of the Pythia and the Sibyl as expressing the true views of the gods, warning about the calamity that would befall the Greeks at Chaeronea.[501] Even Plutarch's detailed explanation for why the Sibyl's reference to Thermodon indicated Chaeronea,[502] which Parke refers to as "a most unconvincing piece of special pleading,"[503] shows the lengths to which Plutarch went to convince his reader of the veracity of these dire predictions. The result is a sharp contrast between how Plutarch presents the prophecies and how he represents Demosthenes' views, in particular regarding the oracle.

Plutarch describes how Demosthenes was so confident in the Greeks that he went as far as to reject the ominous warnings and the words of the Pythia as nothing but superstitious nonsense and Macedonian propaganda:[504]

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[500] It is unclear what, if any, Delphic oracle these warnings refer to, since Aeschines (*Against Ctesiphon* 130) accuses Demosthenes of preventing the Athenians from consulting Delphi.

[501] Plutarch emphasizes the veracity of the Sibyl's and the Pythia's words even further through the oracular response (source unknown) that Plutarch quotes at the end of *Demosthenes* 19, predicting carnage on the banks of the Thermodon: "Wait for the battle on Thermodon, all-black bird; there you will have an abundance of human flesh" (*Demosthenes* 19.3: τὴν δ' ἐπὶ Θερμώδοντι μάχην μένε, παμμέλαν ὄρνι· τηνεί τοι κρέα πολλὰ παρέσσεται ἀνθρώπεια).

[502] *Demosthenes* 19.2-3.

[503] Parke (1988) 119-120. Parke argues that this oracle was originally about the battle of Plataea instead of Chaeronea.

[504] This is not the only episode in the *Life* in which Demosthenes's attitude towards the divine is questionable. For example, Plutarch describes how Demosthenes, upon learning of Philip's death in secret, pretended that he had been promised in a dream a great boon for Athens so that he might benefit personally from Philip's death once all Athens received news of it (*Demosthenes* 22.1-3).

> ὁ δὲ Δημοσθένης λέγεται, τοῖς τῶν Ἑλλήνων ὅπλοις ἐκτεθαρρηκὼς καὶ λαμπρὸς ὑπὸ ῥώμης καὶ προθυμίας ἀνδρῶν τοσούτων προκαλουμένων τοὺς πολεμίους αἱρόμενος, οὔτε χρησμοῖς ἐᾶν προσέχειν οὔτε μαντείας ἀκούειν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν Πυθίαν ὑπονοεῖν ὡς φιλιππίζουσαν, ἀναμιμνήσκων Ἐπαμεινώνδου τοὺς Θηβαίους καὶ Περικλέους τοὺς Ἀθηναίους, ὡς ἐκεῖνοι τὰ τοιαῦτα πάντα δειλίας ἡγούμενοι προφάσεις ἐχρῶντο τοῖς λογισμοῖς.[505]
>
> But Demosthenes, it is said, because he had confidence in the Greek forces and was clearly encouraged by the strength and zeal of so many men challenging the enemy, would not allow them to consult oracles or to listen to seers, but suspected even the Pythia of 'Philippizing,' reminding the Thebans of Epaminondas and the Athenians of Pericles, because those men, since they considered all such things as merely cowardly excuses, acted based on reason.[506]

Demosthenes's accusation that the oracle sided with Philip also appears in an extant speech by Aeschines, in which Aeschines accuses Demosthenes of preventing the Athenians from consulting Delphi because he claimed the oracle favored Philip, an anecdote that Cicero repeats in *De divinatione*.[507] Demosthenes's accusation of the Pythia having pro-Philip sympathies is the only accusation of that nature that appears in the *Lives*. Although Plutarch does not inform the reader directly of the false nature of this claim, he has structured the *Life* in such a way that leads the reader to this conclusion: Plutarch introduces the section on oracles with the claim that it appeared that the gods had chosen to end Greek freedom,

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[505] *Demosthenes* 20.1

[506] On this passage, and the mention of Pericles in particular, see also above.

[507] Aeschines *Against Ctesiphon* 130, Cicero *De divinatione* 2.57.118. Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 233-238) claim that the oracle was entirely in Philip's pocket at this point, and accuse him of having control over the oracular responses as well. Bowden (2005: 56-58) notes, however, the respect with which Demosthenes mentions Delphi in his other extant speeches, suggesting that the situation was more complicated than Parke and Wormell acknowledge.

he quotes oracles promising doom at Chaeronea that he then goes on to show were fulfilled,[508] and he emphasizes consistently Demosthenes's unswerving belligerence towards Macedon and his unwillingness to compromise,[509] which resulted in the devastating loss at Chaeronea.[510] It is important here to note Plutarch's emphasis on the Pythia in both passages. By presenting the Pythia as the source of the dire warnings and the subject of Demosthenes's attack Plutarch both reveals the fear that the human servants of the god could be corrupted and rejects Demosthenes's claim that this had actually happened.

Even after the oracle's words proved true, however, Plutarch describes how Demosthenes still refused to accept that the oracle was not in Philip's pocket. After Demosthenes fled Athens and sought sanctuary in the temple of Poseidon at Calauria in the face of Antipater's invasion, a certain treacherous Archias attempted to persuade him to leave the temple and surrender to Antipater. When Demosthenes refused and Archias, dropping the friendly façade, began to make threats, Demosthenes declared "now… you are speaking things from the Macedonian tripod" (νῦν... λέγεις τὰ ἐκ τοῦ Μακεδονικοῦ τρίποδος).[511] As Flacelière notes correctly, this reference to the tripod is best understood

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[508] For example, in *Demosthenes* 21.4 Plutarch explains how Philip's death shortly after the battle of Chaeronea was foretold by the Sibylline oracle quoted in 19.1 (κλαίει ὁ νικηθείς, ὁ δὲ νικήσας ἀπόλωλε). As Mossman (1999: 9) notes, while two years elapsed between the battle of Chaeronea and Philip's death, Plutarch here has collapsed this time to draw the events closer together. This temporal manipulation also allows Plutarch to make clearer the meaning of the Sibylline oracle promising death to the victor in the battle.

[509] E.g. *Demosthenes* 16-17, 23. This is a recurring theme across both the *Demosthenes* and its Roman pair, the *Cicero*. Indeed in the *Cicero* (e.g. 38.1), Plutarch criticizes Cicero for being too rigidly consistent in his politics.

[510] For the tragic and epic aspects to Plutarch's characterization of Demosthenes here, see Mossman (1999) 91-92.

[511] *Demosthenes* 29.3.

as an allusion to Demosthenes's earlier criticism of the Delphic oracle, which Demosthenes had claimed issued ominous threats at the bidding of Philip of Macedon.[512] In this way, Plutarch shows how even when faced with evidence that the oracle's words were not merely empty threats, Demosthenes refused to acknowledge that he may have been wrong.[513]

Plutarch juxtaposes Demosthenes's bold claims about Greek victory and his rejection of divine warnings with Demosthenes's own true cowardice when asked to translate his words into deeds. Before the battle, Demosthenes was urging on the Greeks to have courage and to fight on behalf of Greek freedom; in the battle itself, Demosthenes dropped his shield and fled.[514] A man's failure to understand his limits and to promise more than he is able to deliver is a recurring theme across the *Lives* of both Demosthenes and Cicero, as Plutarch explores the power and the limits of oratory through two of the most famous Greek and Roman orators. Indeed Plutarch announces this theme in the prologue to the two *Lives* through the use of a famous Delphic maxim: "know yourself" (γνῶθι σαυτόν).[515] As Beneker has demonstrated, Demosthenes and Cicero failed spectacularly to

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[512] Flacelière and Chambry (1976) 46. Perrin's (1919: 73) explanation, "i.e. thy real sentiments, in obedience to Antipater," fails to capture the significance of the reference to the tripod.

[513] Mossman (1999: 97-98) calls attention to how Plutarch makes use of tragic undertones in describing Demosthenes's suicide, though she does not connect Demosthenes's comment about the tripod to this tragic framework. Rather than being auxiliary, however, Demosthenes's comment demonstrates to the reader that he has not learned from his mistakes, and even at the moment of his death is still blinded by his own rhetoric. See also Cooper (2014: 394), who notes parallels to Sophocles' *Antigone* specifically, and Chrysanthou (2019: 50-51), who argues that the deaths of Demosthenes and Cicero in the *Lives* are reminiscent of Socrates's death in the *Phaedo*.

[514] *Demosthenes* 20.2. Plutarch notes this cowardice also in the prologue to the *Demosthenes-Cicero* pair, identifying it as a trait shared by both orators (*Demosthenes* 3.3). Mossman (1999) documents comprehensively how the *Cicero* and the *Demosthenes* are constructed around the juxtaposition of rhetoric and reality, a contrast that Plutarch establishes in the prologue and follows throughout each *Life*.

[515] *Demosthenes* 3.2.

live up to this charge, resulting in disaster and death for both men.[516] Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that throughout the *Life* Plutarch does at times apologize for the Athenian orator. For example, Plutarch carefully skirts the question of the religious violation committed by Amphissa that sparked the Fourth Sacred War. In seizing and using for their own benefit lands belonging to the Delphic sanctuary, the Amphissans clearly committed sacrilege against the god.[517] Demosthenes, however, led both Athens and Thebes to support the Amphissans against Philip, and Plutarch describes this stance as the proper path (τὸ καλόν).[518] By calling attention to the virtue of Demosthenes's position, but also Demosthenes' inability to succeed in his efforts with his words alone, Plutarch prods his reader to consider Demosthenes's actions more carefully.[519]

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[516] Beneker 2016. Plutarch does acknowledge the difficulty of adhering to this maxim, as he suggests "but perhaps, if to 'know thyself' was easy for everyone, it would not seem to be a divine command" (*Demosthenes* 3.2: ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἴσως, εἰ παντὸς ἦν τὸ "γνῶθι σαυτὸν" ἔχειν πρόχειρον, οὐκ ἂν ἐδόκει τὸ πρόσταγμα θεῖον εἶναι).

[517] McInerney (2006: 51-53) notes that the Amphissans' decision to seize the land for their own use violated not only sacred law, but also centuries-long tradition of abiding by this mandate.

[518] *Demosthenes* 18.2: "The orator's power… fanning their spirits and kindling their ambition, concealed all other concerns, so that they cast out their fear, their reasoning, and their sense of obligation, being inspired by his words to do what was honorable" (ἡ δὲ τοῦ ῥήτορος δύναμις... ἐκριπίζουσα τὸν θυμὸν αὐτῶν καὶ διακαίουσα τὴν φιλοτιμίαν, ἐπεσκότησε τοῖς ἄλλοις ἅπασιν, ὥστε καὶ φόβον καὶ λογισμὸν καὶ χάριν ἐκβαλεῖν αὐτούς, ἐνθουσιῶντας ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου πρὸς τὸ καλόν). Plutarch's use of the verb ἐνθουσιάζω here is notable. This verb appears seven times in his extant corpus: *Cato Maior* 22.4; *Demosthenes* 9.4, 18.2; *Aratus* 38.12; *De audiendis poetis* 14f; *Quaestiones Romanae* 278c; *Amatorius* 765d. In each case, Plutarch uses the verb to describe a person or group of people whose rationality has been completely overwhelmed by the powers of another. Within each context, with the exception of the *Quaestiones Romanae* where it is used literally to describe the divine inspiration of a Roman oracle, ἐνθουσιάζω carries a negative connotation, describing youths seduced away by pleasure or pretty words (*De audiendis poetis, Cato*), an author showing blind favortism to a particular subject (*Aratus*), an orator so crazed he appeared as one possessed (*Demosthenes* 9), lovers seduced by the objects of their affection so that they see them as embodying ideal beauty (*Amatorius*). Consequently, it does not appear to be a compliment to the orator when in *Demosthenes* 18.2 Plutarch declares that he possessed the people, even if it was to pursue what was honorable.

[519] Mossman (1999: 91) suggests that Plutarch softens his condemnation of Demosthenes by portraying him as a victim of his own eloquence, rather than as a villain.

In the *Demosthenes-Cicero* pair Plutarch asks his readers to consider whether the hardline positions taken by the two orators were justified, and whether as a leader one should advocate for what is right even in the face of certain failure. Demosthenes advocated for what Plutarch presents as a worthy cause – Greek freedom – but did so with a vehemence that was perhaps uncalled for, and resulted in considerable death and destruction for the Athenians and the other Greeks. When warned by the gods of the near-certainty with which they would be defeated, Demosthenes chose to slander the oracle and deceive the people rather than listen to the warnings.[520] In the process, Plutarch shows Demosthenes accusing the Delphic oracle, and the Pythia in particular, of being subject to the same risks and temptations as human politicians.[521] Plutarch presents these claims of Demosthenes as demonstrably false, since the warnings from the Pythia, the Sibyl, and the third unnamed oracle all prove to have been correct. In this way, Plutarch shows a politician treating the oracle as a political player who could also become a political pawn, acknowledging the power the oracle had over political affairs while simultaneously denying the charge that the oracle could be corruptible.

[520] As Beneker (2016: 157) notes, "there is great irony in Plutarch's characterization of events, for he has devoted much of the earlier chapters to documenting Demosthenes' timidity… The reader thus knows that Demosthenes is beyond his depth and, in tragic fashion, does not realize it."

[521] Plutarch does not say in what way the Pythia had become compromised, whether through bribery or through the threat of violence or some other such means. Either way, this vulnerability is reminiscent of the pressures put on Demosthenes himself by others, including the repeated attempts made to bribe him (see, for example, *Demosthenes* 20.4-5 and 25.1-6).

b. *Phocion*

The Delphic oracle appears only once in the *Phocion*, in the early chapters in which Plutarch establishes key elements of Phocion's character, in particular his refusal to be swayed by the mob and his general severity. Plutarch spends the early chapters of the *Life* painting an image of Phocion as a statesman and a general, noting in particular his commitment to advocating for what was true and correct even in the face of public opposition, and the respect he earned from the Athenians as a result. Plutarch comments directly on this contrary aspect of Phocion's nature with a Delphic oracle story:

> χρησμοῦ μὲν γὰρ ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀναγνωσθέντος, ὅτι τῶν ἄλλων Ἀθηναίων ὁμοφρονούντων εἷς ἀνὴρ ἐναντία φρονοίη τῇ πόλει, παρελθὼν ὁ Φωκίων ἀμελεῖν ἐκέλευσεν, ὡς αὐτὸς ὢν ὁ ζητούμενος· μόνῳ γὰρ αὐτῷ μηδὲν ἀρέσκειν τῶν πραττομένων.[522]
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> For when an oracle from Delphi was read aloud, saying that when the rest of the Athenians were in agreement one man should favor contrary things for the city, Phocion, coming forward, ordered them to be at ease, because the one they were seeking was him; for he alone approved of none of their actions.

It is worth noting, first, that Plutarch describes the Athenians receiving the oracle as a citizen body, and indicates that they were discussing as a group the oracle's meaning. Second, Fontenrose categorizes this oracular response as being in his category of "extraordinary and obscure statements of past or present fact," which he describes as "revelations, perhaps obscure, of hidden knowledge, events and facts that the speaker could not know without clairvoyant or other superhuman powers."[523] It is unclear, however, on

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[522] *Phocion* 8.4, Parke and Wormell §264, Fontenrose Q210.

[523] That is, Mode D2. On this mode, see Fontenrose (1978) 18, 437.

what grounds Fontenrose makes this categorization, since in the oracle story, Plutarch makes it clear that Phocion, at least, understood the oracle's meaning immediately, recognizing himself in the oracle's words. Parke and Wormell suggest that this oracular response, which appears only in Plutarch and with no indication as to what the Athenians had asked the oracle, "may be a mere invention to illustrate Phocion's character."[524] The fact that Plutarch does not include any other information about the oracle story, including why the Athenians consulted the oracle, or what the man indicated was supposed to provide them, further supports Parke and Wormell's conclusion.[525] Regardless of the historicity of this oracular response, however, Plutarch is certainly using this passage to illustrate Phocion's character. Plutarch inserts the oracle story within a larger discussion of Phocion's qualities as a leader: he always favored peace and frequently voiced opinions contrary to those favored by the majority, and yet was elected general more than any other figure. The Delphic oracle thus stands as testimony to Phocion's staunch refusal to bow to the whims of the crowd or to seek their approval. Phocion's unswerving adherence to his own counsel and refusal to seek the approval of the crowd stands in sharp contrast to the actions of both Demosthenes and Cicero in their respective *Lives*. Indeed, in the *Cicero,* Plutarch describes how Cicero was instructed directly by the oracle to conduct himself in the manner that he claims Phocion acted.

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[524] Parke and Wormell (1956.2) 107. Fontenrose (1978: 337) similarly describes this oracle as "Not genuine." See also Bowden (2005: 119), who suggests that Plutarch used this oracle to draw a contrast between the upright Phocion and the otherwise corrupt nature of Athenian politics in his day.

[525] Fontenrose (1978) classifies this oracular response as belonging to his Topic 3g, indicating or naming "the person who will bring fulfillment of the consultant's purpose or who caused his difficulty or whose identity provides the answer to the question asked" (26). This is certainly possible, although since we lack any other information about this oracle story it is not possible to determine this with certainty.

Plutarch describes how Cicero, while still a young man, traveled to Greece where he studied under various teachers in Athens, Rhodes, and Asia Minor while he was waiting for the political turmoil in Rome to settle.[526] During this time in Greece, Cicero visited the Delphic oracle, where he received advice on his future career:

> ὁ δ' οὖν Κικέρων ἐλπίδων μεστὸς ἐπὶ τὴν πολιτείαν φερόμενος, ὑπὸ χρησμοῦ τινος ἀπημβλύνθη τὴν ὁρμήν. ἐρομένῳ γὰρ αὐτῷ τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς θεὸν ὅπως ἂν ἐνδοξότατος γένοιτο, προσέταξεν ἡ Πυθία τὴν ἑαυτοῦ φύσιν, ἀλλὰ μὴ τὴν τῶν πολλῶν δόξαν ἡγεμόνα ποιεῖσθαι τοῦ βίου.[527]
>
> But then Cicero, filled with hope as he was being carried towards a political career, had his eagerness blunted by a certain oracular response. For when he inquired of the god in Delphi how he might win the most renown, the Pythia commanded him to make his character, not the opinion of the masses, his guide in life.

As Plutarch goes on to demonstrate in detail, while Cicero initially appeared to take this advice to heart, ultimately he was not able to abandon his ambition and his love of praise.[528] This desire to stay in the spotlight, Plutarch argues, made Cicero vulnerable to being used

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[526] Plutarch describes in *Cicero* 3.4-7 how Cicero defended successfully the case of Roscius against Sulla, after which he fled to Greece purportedly to improve his health, but in reality to avoid suffering retribution at the hands of Sulla. If, as Flacelière and Chambry (1976: 147) and Lintott (2013: 137) argue, Cicero did not leave for Greece until 79 BCE (a year after Roscius's case and also the year in which Sulla abdicated the dictatorship), the reason Plutarch ascribes for Cicero leaving Rome is unlikely to be correct.

[527] *Cicero* 5.1, Parke and Wormell §435, Fontenrose Q248. Fontenrose, arguing against the conclusion of Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 407-408) that this oracle story may well be historical, does not consider this oracle story to be genuine, declaring "Cicero's silence about having received such an oracle is conclusive… it is the sort of event that he would have referred to at every opportunity" (1978: 349).

[528] For example, it did not take long for Cicero to revert back to his previous course after receiving the response from the Pythia, driven on by his ambition to seek glory and primacy in Rome (*Cicero* 5.3). See also *Cicero* 24.1-3 and 40.3-5, and *Demosthenes-Cicero* 2.1-3.

and betrayed by Octavian, resulting in Cicero's murder to appease Antony.[529] In this aspect, Plutarch paints Cicero as the polar opposite of Phocion: where Phocion rejected the praise and acclaim of the people and made, to quote Plutarch's words from the *Cicero*, "his character, not the opinion of the masses, his guide in life," Cicero was not able to keep himself so aloof from the crowds, but sought out their approval to satisfy the demands of his ambition.[530] Nevertheless, even though Cicero struggles to follow the oracle's advice, Phocion and Cicero both treat the oracle and thus the warnings of the gods with more respect than Demosthenes in Plutarch's biographies. Additionally, here Plutarch takes the unusual step for him of implicating both the god and the Pythia in discussing the source of the oracular response Cicero received, when typically in the *Lives* only one figure is mentioned. Here Plutarch presents the god as the one to whom Cicero is putting his request for information, and the Pythia as the one voicing the god's response.

In both the *Phocion* and in the *Cicero* Plutarch uses oracle stories to bring out and identify key aspects of the subjects' characters for his readers. In the *Cicero*, the oracle highlights something that will be a constant struggle for Cicero throughout his life: keeping his ambition in check. In contrast, with Demosthenes, his responses to the oracle's warnings stand as clear examples of his *hubris* and how he was unable to carry out the bold claims he made, leading the Athenians and the rest of the Greeks headlong into disaster.

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[529] *Cicero* 45.1-46.6.

[530] Plutarch also criticizes Demosthenes in this respect in both the *Demosthenes* (see above) and in the *Phocion.* For example, shortly prior to the oracle story in the Phocion, Plutarch not-so-subtly contrasts Demosthenes with Phocion, lumping Demosthenes in with those who only served Athens with words, while Phocion (like Pericles) choose to serve with both words and deeds (*Phocion* 7.5-6).

c. *Alexander*

There are two Delphic oracle stories in the *Alexander*, one in which the oracular responses are summarized, and one in which Plutarch quotes a response directly.[531] As I will argue, Plutarch uses these oracle stories as a way to discuss the problems of both Alexander's divine birth as well as his rashness and impulsivity, and in the process shows how oracles and oracle stories can become twisted to fit the needs of the powerful.

Plutarch begins the *Life* of Alexander with the fabulous tales told about his conception, and the various explanations sought by Philip. After describing Olympias's and Philip's dreams foretelling the birth of Alexander,[532] Plutarch relates how Olympias was spied sleeping with a snake, which Philip initially interpreted as evidence either of magic, or that a more powerful being had chosen his wife as a sexual partner.[533] Plutarch

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[531] *Alexander* 3.1-2 and 14.6-7, respectively. There is a third Delphic oracle story in the *Alexander* (*Alexander* 37.1-2, Parke and Wormell §271, Fontenrose Q217), which occurs in the middle of his Persian campaigns. Plutarch describes how Alexander, seeking to enter Persia via the Persian Gates and capture Persepolis, found a bilingual guide to help him and his troops navigate the tricky terrain that lay between them and the city: "But with Persia being difficult to enter and guarded by the noblest of ⟨the⟩ Persians (for Darius had fled), Alexander found for a guide a bilingual man from a Lycian father and a Persian mother who led him on a short detour; they say that he was the one that the Pythia spoke of when Alexander was still a child, when she said that a Lycian would be a guide for Alexander on his campaign against Persia… (*Alexander* 37.1-2: τῆς δὲ Περσίδος οὔσης διὰ τραχύτητα δυσεμβόλου καὶ φυλαττομένης ὑπὸ ⟨τῶν⟩ γενναιοτάτων Περσῶν (Δαρεῖος μὲν γὰρ ἐπεφεύγει), γίγνεταί τινος περιόδου κύκλον ἐχούσης οὐ πολὺν ἡγεμὼν αὐτῷ δίγλωσσος ἄνθρωπος, ἐκ πατρὸς Λυκίου, μητρὸς δὲ Περσίδος γεγονώς· ὅ φασιν ἔτι παιδὸς ὄντος Ἀλεξάνδρου τὴν Πυθίαν προειπεῖν, ὡς Λύκιος ἔσται καθηγεμὼν Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῆς ἐπὶ Πέρσας πορείας…). The remainder of the explanation of the oracle as well as a description of Alexander's conquest of Persepolis appear to have been lost in a lacuna (Ziegler 1968: 203; Flacelière and Chambry 1975: 79, 237-238), and the extant text is widely accepted to be corrupt. Scholars disagree in particular on whether in Plutarch the text read ὡς Λύκιος (as printed in the Teubner and the Budè editions) or ὡς λύκος (as printed in Perrin's Loeb). This discrepancy is significant, for it shifts the oracle from a literal to a metaphorical meaning. Consequently, I will not be discussing this oracle story in further detail, since the text is too problematic to serve as a base for larger conclusions. For discussion of the issues in the passage, see Parke and Wormell (1956.1) 241, Flacelière and Chambry (1975) 79, 237-238; Fontenrose (1978: 339); Hamilton (1999) 97.

[532] *Alexander* 2.3-5.

[533] *Alexander* 2.6: "at that time, a snake was also seen stretched out next to the sleeping Olympias, and they say that it was this in particular that lessened Philip's desire and the attentions he paid to

offers as an explanation for his readers, first, Olympias's supposed connection to Orphism and its corresponding use of tame snakes.[534] Following this explanation, however, Plutarch offers a contrary explanation, narrating how Philip sought an answer from the Delphic oracle to the meaning of his vision of his wife lying with a snake:

> οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ Φιλίππῳ μὲν μετὰ τὸ φάσμα πέμψαντι Χαίρωνα τὸν Μεγαλοπολίτην εἰς Δελφοὺς χρησμὸν κομισθῆναι λέγουσι παρὰ τοῦ θεοῦ, κελεύοντος Ἄμμωνι θύειν καὶ σέβεσθαι μάλιστα τοῦτον τὸν θεόν· ἀποβαλεῖν δὲ τῶν ὄψεων αὐτὸν τὴν ἑτέραν, ἣν τῷ τῆς θύρας ἁρμῷ προσβαλών, κατώπτευσεν ἐν μορφῇ δράκοντος συνευναζόμενον τῇ γυναικὶ τὸν θεόν.[535]
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> However, they say that Philip, after his vision, sent Chairon of Megalopolis to Delphi, who carried back an oracular response from the god that ordered Philip to sacrifice to Ammon and to honor that god above all, and told him that he would lose one of his eyes, the one he had applied to the doorjamb when he spied the god lying with his wife while in the form of a snake.

This oracle story is remarkable for several reasons. First, Plutarch frames this oracle story in a way that does not question or cast doubt on the conclusion of the Delphic oracle that Ammon slept with Olympias: the oracle's words are explicitly clear on this point.[536]

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her, so that he even stopped sleeping with her frequently, either because he feared she would use some magic and drugs against him, or because he was avoiding her embrace out of religious scruples, on the grounds that she was partnered with a more powerful being" (ὤφθη δέ ποτε καὶ δράκων κοιμωμένης τῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος παρεκτεταμένος τῷ σώματι, καὶ τοῦτο μάλιστα τοῦ Φιλίππου τὸν ἔρωτα καὶ τὰς φιλοφροσύνας ἀμαυρῶσαι λέγουσιν, ὡς μηδὲ φοιτᾶν ἔτι πολλάκις παρ' αὐτὴν ἀναπαυσόμενον, εἴτε δείσαντά τινας μαγείας ἐπ' αὐτῷ καὶ φάρμακα τῆς γυναικός, εἴτε τὴν ὁμιλίαν ὡς κρείττονι συνούσης ἀφοσιούμενον). For the possible origins and history of the tale connecting Olympias with a snake, see Ogden (2009).

[534] *Alexander* 2.7-9.

[535] *Alexander* 3.1-2, Parke and Wormell §269, Fontenrose Q211.

[536] Fontenrose (1978: 337) categorizes this in Mode A1, or "clear commands," though he also describes it as "not genuine."

Although Plutarch does not have the oracle say explicitly that the as-of-yet unborn Alexander was fathered by Ammon, gods do not have sex with mortal women fruitlessly, so the implication is clear. This stands directly at odds with how Plutarch treats the question of Alexander's parentage elsewhere in the *Life*, most clearly in his presentation of Alexander's consultation of the oracle of Ammon at Siwah.[537]

In relating the oracular response Alexander received at Siwah, Plutarch presents a series of rationalizations for Alexander's actions and those of the priest of Ammon. First, he explains the most commonly told story of Alexander's consultation:[538] "the prophet of Ammon greeted him on behalf of the god, addressing him as a father would,"[539] told Alexander that his father was none other than Ammon, assured the young king that Philip's death had been avenged, and promised to Alexander that he would become the lord and master over the world.[540] Next, Plutarch contrasts this explanation of events with Alexander's own account to his mother: the god told him secret responses (μαντείας ἀπορρήτους), which Alexander would tell her alone upon his return to Macedonia.[541] Plutarch does not speculate as to the content of these secret messages, though he does contrast them with the most common version he relates first, suggesting that this should be

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[537] Alexander's association with Ammon, including the reason(s) for his visit to Siwah, what was said to him by the priests, and what he believed his relationship with the god to be, has been the subject of considerable scholarly scrutiny and debate. For the major positions in this debate, see Bosworth (1977), Badian (1996), Anson (2003), Fredricksmeyer (2003), Howe (2013), and Collins (2014). In this dissertation, I will follow the approach of Asirvatham (2001: 94): "I have no intention of retreading the many controversies surrounding Alexander's religiosity here." Rather, my discussion will address how Plutarch presents Alexander in his *Life*, not the views or actions of the historical Alexander.

[538] *Alexander* 27.8: ταῦτα περὶ τῶν χρησμῶν οἱ πλεῖστοι γράφουσιν.

[539] *Alexander* 27.5: ὁ μὲν προφήτης αὐτὸν ὁ Ἄμμωνος ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ χαίρειν ὡς ἀπὸ πατρὸς προσεῖπεν.

[540] *Alexander* 27.5-7.

[541] *Alexander* 27.8.

viewed as truly contrasting, not supplementary, information. As a third explanation, Plutarch adds that some authors explain the prophet's greeting to Alexander as a linguistic mistake by a non-native Greek speaker:

> ἔνιοι δέ φασι τὸν μὲν προφήτην Ἑλληνιστὶ βουλόμενον προσειπεῖν μετά τινος φιλοφροσύνης "ὦ παιδίον," ἐν τῷ τελευταίῳ τῶν φθόγγων ὑπὸ βαρβαρισμοῦ πρὸς τὸ σίγμ' ἐξενεχθῆναι καὶ εἰπεῖν "ὦ παιδίος," ἀντὶ τοῦ νῦ τῷ σίγμα χρησάμενον, ἀσμένῳ δὲ τῷ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τὸ σφάλμα τῆς φωνῆς γενέσθαι, καὶ διαδοθῆναι λόγον ὡς παῖδα Διὸς αὐτὸν τοῦ θεοῦ προσειπόντος.[542]
>
> But some say that the prophet, wishing to address [Alexander] in Greek out of a desire to be friendly, tried to say "o *paidion*" ("o child") but on the final letter was carried away by his barbarian pronunciation toward sigma and said "o *paidios"* ("o child of Zeus"), using a sigma instead of a nu. Alexander was pleased with this pronunciation mistake, and the tale was spread that the god had addressed him as "child of Zeus."

Plutarch follows up this philological explanation for the story with a philosophical interpretation: Alexander was a follower of the Egyptian philosopher Psammon, who declared Zeus was a common father to all, and in particular to the noblest humans.[543] Seen in this light, Alexander's declaration that he was a child of the god was not meant to be

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[542] *Alexander* 27.9

[543] *Alexander* 27.11: "[Psammon], saying that the god was the common father of all humans, and that he made the best (ἀρίστους) attached to him personally" (λέγων ὡς πάντων μὲν ὄντα κοινὸν ἀνθρώπων πατέρα τὸν θεόν, ἰδίους δὲ ποιούμενον ἑαυτοῦ τοὺς ἀρίστους). Plutarch presents this information differently in his *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* 180d, where he states that, after the prophet of Ammon addressed Alexander as "son of Zeus" (παῖς Διός), Alexander replied to the priest "that is not surprising, for Zeus is by his nature the father of all, and he makes the best his own" (οὐδὲν γε... θαυμαστόν, πάντων μὲν γὰρ ὁ Ζεὺς φύσει πατήρ ἐστιν, ἑαυτοῦ δὲ ποιεῖται τοὺς ἀρίστους). On this passage, see also Andreotti (1956: 289) and Badian (1958: 426-427), both of whom who cast doubt on the historicity of both this incident and the otherwise unknown figure of Psammon.

understood literally, but philosophically indicating the fatherly nature of the relationship between the god and humanity. Finally, Plutarch ends his discussion of Alexander's divine paternity with a series of examples showing how Alexander did not truly believe that he was the child of a god, but used this information to deceive the weak-minded and foolish: among the barbarians Alexander pretended to be convinced fully of his divine parentage, but among the Greeks he toned down his rhetoric, calling Philip his father and calling attention to the very human blood that flowed through his veins.[544] Consequently, Plutarch concludes that "it is clear therefore from what has been said that Alexander was neither affected nor deluded by the rumor of his divinity, but was using it to enslave others."[545]

Rather than giving only one version of Alexander's encounter with the oracle at Siwah, Plutarch instead offers his readers a selection of different interpretations. By providing a catalogue of explanations, Plutarch leaves the matter up to the reader to decide which appears the most reasonable. This is not to say that Plutarch presents each case equally. He tells his readers directly his personal assessment of the situation: that the tale of Alexander's divinity was nothing more than that – a tale that Alexander used to manipulate the weak and foolish. But with this crucial issue, as with the interpretation of the incident involving Olympias and the snake in the opening chapters of the *Life*,[546]

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[544] *Alexander* 28.1-5. Plutarch repeats this anecdote in *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* 180e. Elsewhere in the *Alexander* Plutarch has Alexander speculate about his parentage (e.g. 33.1), or has others accuse Alexander of proclaiming his father to be Ammon (e.g. 50.11) and does not have Alexander refute or contradict them directly on this point. Nevertheless, these episodes do not go against what Plutarch says here about Alexander's use of his reputed divinity.

[545] *Alexander* 28.6: ὁ δ' οὖν Ἀλέξανδρος καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰρημένων δῆλός ἐστιν αὐτὸς οὐδὲν πεπονθὼς οὐδὲ τετυφωμένος, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἄλλους καταδουλούμενος τῇ δόξῃ τῆς θειότητος. Plutarch's insistence here on Alexander's disbelief in his divinity stands in stark contrast to the treatment of this topic in other extant sources. On this issue, see Frank (2017) 213-214.

[546] Against Asirvatham (2001: 97-99), I do not read Plutarch's discussion in *Alexander* 2.7-9 of Olympias's possible engagement in Orphic rites and Dionysian orgies as Plutarch believing this explanation over the others he gives. First, he introduces this section with the phrase ἕτερος δὲ περὶ

Plutarch uses multiple versions to highlight for his readers both the disagreement in his own day regarding these events, and to nudge them to consider the evidence and judge each case for themselves.[547]

In his discussion of Alexander's trip to Siwah, then, Plutarch presents a rationalized explanation for the tale that Alexander was the son of Zeus Ammon, casting doubt on his supposed divine parentage, while Philip's consultation of the Delphic oracle over his vision Plutarch presents as the oracle affirming Olympias's relationship with Ammon through the curse to Philip's eye. The attention Plutarch devotes to the question of Alexander's divinity, and the variety of explanations and perspectives he records, suggests that this issue was one of prime importance for him in the *Life*. As with the divine nature of Lycurgus's laws, Plutarch leaves open the question of Alexander's divinity for the reader; although he may well be biased, his presentation invites the readers to consider for themselves what to believe given the evidence he has presented.

The second Delphic oracle story in the *Alexander* comes as Alexander prepared to depart on his campaign against Persia. Plutarch describes how Alexander travelled to Delphi and attempted to force a prophecy out of the Pythia:

> βουλόμενος δὲ τῷ θεῷ χρήσασθαι περὶ τῆς στρατείας, ἦλθεν εἰς Δελφούς, καὶ κατὰ τύχην ἡμερῶν ἀποφράδων οὐσῶν, ἐν αἷς οὐ νενόμισται θεμιστεύειν, πρῶτον μὲν ἔπεμπε παρακαλῶν τὴν πρόμαντιν. ὡς δ' ἀρνουμένης καὶ προϊσχομένης τὸν νόμον αὐτὸς ἀναβὰς βίᾳ πρὸς τὸν ναὸν εἷλκεν αὐτήν, ἡ δ' ὥσπερ ἐξηττημένη τῆς σπουδῆς εἶπεν·

τούτων ἐστὶ λόγος (*Alexander* 2.7). By juxtaposing first the interpretation of the snake as a tame snake kept by Olympias for these rituals with the explanation that Philip receives from Ammon, Plutarch asks his readers to consider which explanation is more reasonable.

[547] The *Alexander* is not the only *Life* where the question of a human's possible divinity is raised: Plutarch addresses similar tales in the *Life* paired with the *Alexander*, the *Caesar*. For the parallels, as well as the differences, between how the matter of divinity is treated between the two *Lives*, see Frank (2017).

> "ἀνίκητος εἶ ὦ παῖ," τοῦτ' ἀκούσας ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος οὐκέτ' ἔφη χρήζειν ἑτέρου μαντεύματος, ἀλλ' ἔχειν ὃν ἐβούλετο παρ' αὐτῆς χρησμόν.[548]
>
> Wishing to consult the god about the expedition, Alexander came to Delphi, and when it chanced to be a day that was inauspicious, on which is it not permitted to deliver oracles, first he sent for the priestess, summoning her. But when she refused, putting forth the law as a reason, he seized her with force and dragged her to the temple, and she, overpowered by his zeal, said "you are invincible, child." Hearing this, Alexander said that he no longer desired another prophecy, but he had from her the oracular response he wanted.

Plutarch is explicit that it was not a proper day for a consultation and that doing so was forbidden, but Alexander attempted to force the priestess to do so anyway. As a result, the Pythia's words cannot properly be called an oracular response, since the proper conditions for oracular consultation were not met. Indeed, in *De defectu oraculorum* Lamprias reminds the other interlocutors of the importance of following Delphic rituals and cult practice, which included only having the Pythia issue prophecies on the proper days to help ensure that the recipient would receive a response from the oracle as well as to safeguard the life of the Pythia.[549] It is important to note here, however, that in the text Plutarch's Alexander refers to the words of the Pythia as an oracular response (χρησμόν), but Plutarch as narrator does not use such language. Nevertheless, although Alexander's interactions with the Pythia do not encompass a proper oracular consultation and response, Plutarch

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[548] *Alexander* 14.6-7, Parke and Wormell §270, Fontenrose Q216. Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 240) argue that this oracle story is entirely fictional, created by merging the tale of another forced consultation (Philomelus's) with Alexander's later epithet of ἀνίκητος. Fontenrose (1978: 338-339), citing Diodorus Siculus 17.51.3 and 17.93.4, argues instead that this story was originally associated with Alexander's consultation of the oracle at Siwah, not Delphi. Against this argument, see Tarn (1948) 338-346 and Hamilton (1999) 34-35 defend the story as it appears in Plutarch's *Alexander*.

[549] *De defectu oraculorum* 438b-c.

does suggest elsewhere that her assessment of Alexander as ἀνίκητος may be correct. In his narration of Alexander's birth, Plutarch describes how the seers tell Philip that his son would be ἀνίκητος because his birth coincided with three other victories.[550] Nevertheless, in the *Life* as a whole, Plutarch presents a very mixed image of Alexander's success and career. Although he was never defeated in battle and was clearly the recipient of divine favor, his downfall was neither noble nor glorious, for he was defeated by none other than himself.[551] Rather, this oracle story captures a fundamental element to Alexander's character that is at the forefront of Plutarch's presentation of the young Macedonian king throughout the *Life*: his rashness and impulsivity, together with his refusal to follow the rules set by others, including the gods.

Turning to the presentation of Delphi in the *Alexander*, several points emerge. First, the oracle's responses are clear and direct. Philip has no trouble understanding the meaning of the oracular response he receives, and Alexander certainly believes he understands the meaning of the Pythia's words declaring him ἀνίκητος, even if he is in error in assuming this to be a proper oracular response. Regarding the topics of consultation, they are twofold: Philip sought the explication of a vision, while Alexander was inquiring about his upcoming military campaign. Although Philip's consultation is on the surface about a private matter, his status as the Macedonian king elevates the matter into the political sphere. Faced with Alexander's and Philip's actions at Delphi, Heineman and Boulet suggest that these oracle stories reveals what Boulet terms the "political Apollo," a god who was the "puppet of statesmen" who used him and his oracles for their own ends. By

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[550] *Alexander* 3.8-9. These victories were: Philip's capture of Potidaea, Parmenio's conquest of the Illyrians, and the victory of Philip's race-horses at the Olympic games.

[551] See in particular the ending chapters of the *Alexander*: *Alexander* 73-77.

this reading, Alexander was merely using the Delphic oracle to rubber-stamp his own agenda, suggesting that he did not so much believe in the divine powers of the oracle as he strove to use others' belief to bolster his power.[552] Plutarch, however, portrays Philip's interactions with the oracle as perfectly normal: Philip had a confusing vision, and was seeking the god's advice as to what he should do. Since visions pertain to the divine, it is they who ought to be consulted as to their meaning. Likewise, Plutarch describes Alexander's purpose in going to Delphi as not to pull a political stunt, but to ask for the god's blessing upon his departure for Asia Minor. What is unusual is Alexander's actions after the Pythia refused to prophesy, not the matter about which he was going. Thus Alexander's interaction with the Pythia in the *Alexander* should not be viewed as a calculated political move or an example of a political rubber-stamp of his expedition as Heineman and Boulet argue. Throughout the *Alexander* Plutarch does present the young king as both rash and impetuous, creating his own solutions to every problem he faced.[553] At the same time, however, Plutarch consistently shows him to be religiously scrupulous, constantly consulting seers and oracles and biding by their advice and dedicating altars and elaborate offerings to the gods.[554] In the episode with the Pythia, Plutarch combines these two aspects of Alexander, showing Alexander to be rather unorthodox and forceful in his actions while also believing the Pythia's words to constitute a prophecy declaring his future success. Finally, regarding the Pythia, the priestess is not mentioned in connection to Philip's consultation, but is a central figure in Alexander's. If the Pythia's words are

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[552] Heineman (2018) 21-22, Boulet (2008) 166.

[553] E.g. *Alexander* 4.8, 6.1-7.1, 16.1-5, 18.1-3, 51.1-11.

[554] E.g. 15.7, 25.1-8, 29.1, 50.4-7, 57.4-8, 62.8. Plutarch claims that Alexander's attitude towards the divine changed towards the end of his life from piety to *deisidaimonia*, which was in part responsible for his demise (see *Alexander* 75.1-5).

interpreted as a true oracular response, this would be a remarkable departure from how Plutarch's interlocutors present the oracle in the Delphic dialogues, since Plutarch makes it clear that the Pythia's cry was a result of Alexander's use of physical force in dragging her, as opposed to being a message from the god relayed through the Pythia. Plutarch, however, as I argue above, does not present the Pythia's words as a proper oracular response: it is only Alexander who appears to interpret them as such.

d. conclusion

During his *Lives* covering the period that marked of the rise of Macedon and the end of Greek political freedom, Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to emphasize key aspects of his subjects' characters. For Demosthenes, his anti-Philip drive and his overconfidence in the Greek forces lead him to overlook and dismiss the oracle, revealing both how his bloated rhetoric obscured his ability to view the situation rationally and his inability to follow through on his grandiose words with equally glorious deeds. For Phocion, the oracle reveals his sense of duty as well as his honesty. This aspect is made even clearer when contrasted with Cicero's interactions with the Delphic oracle in his *Life*, where the oracle bids Cicero to conduct himself in the manner Plutarch presents Phocion as having acted, a standard that Cicero failed miserably to meet. Finally, for Alexander, his interactions with the oracle stand as a clear case study in his character: he is extremely rash, but also seemingly invincible, and he may have been willing to stoop to manipulating the foolish to achieve his political aims as seen in the matter of Alexander's divinity.

In the *Demosthenes* and *Phocion,* the recipients of oracular responses are not individuals, but states, and Plutarch hints at public debates over the oracle's meaning and

how to respond, although this is not a main focus of the oracle stories in either case. Demosthenes's outright rejection of the Delphic oracle, however, is unique and addresses a concern voiced in the Delphic dialogues about political influence over the oracle. Plutarch's assessment is, however, unambiguous: the oracle's words before Chaeronea were not empty threats, and the Pythia was not simply acting as a puppet for the Macedonian king. In contrast in the *Alexander* Plutarch does show how the very human Pythia could be quite literally overpowered by someone like Alexander, but the result is not what Demosthenes had assumed. Rather than serving as a puppet for the Macedonian king, the Pythia's words spoken as herself, not on behalf of the god, are taken and misrepresented by Alexander as a proper oracular response, the result of oracular consultation.

v. conclusion

In the *Lives* of the Classical Greek statesman, the Delphic oracle appears in Plutarch's discussions of pivotal moments in Greek history, enhancing Plutarch's characterization of the politicians under study. While the Delphic oracle is not the only means by which Plutarch demonstrates the characters of his subjects, its appearances in these *Lives* come in particularly heightened narrative moments, coinciding with key moments both in the lives of Plutarch's subjects and in Greek history. The oracle introduces and often frames key events (Plataea, Salamis, the Sicilian expedition, Chaeronea), foreshadowing the outcomes and implicating the characters of the leaders based on their actions taken in light of – or in spite of – the oracular responses. In each set, the oracle helps distinguish between politicians, and how they respond to the oracle helps reveal some critical aspect of them as

leaders: Aristides's deliberation and the behavior of the Greeks as a whole towards the end of the Persian war; Themistocles' craftiness and willingness to exploit even the gods to see his political plans carried out; Nicias's piety and Alcibiades's impiety, and the degree of responsibility they each held for the Sicilian expedition; Pericles's determination and hostility to the Spartans; Demosthenes's hostility to Macedon and his overconfidence in his own abilities; Phocion's sense of duty and honesty and commitment to following his own counsel rather than the whim of the mob; and Alexander's rashness and possible willingness to put political expedience over morality. In each case, the oracle stories serve as evidence for conclusions that could be made by the reader, with differing levels of clarity. Ultimately, Plutarch leaves it up to the reader to decide whether, for example, the outcome at Salamis justified Themistocles' use of the oracle; whether blame for the Sicilian expedition should rest on the shoulders of Nicias, Alcibiades, or the Athenian people; or whether Demosthenes's desire to protect Greek freedom forgives his mistakes, including his decision to accuse the oracle of corruption.

Most of the oracles in these *Lives* are sought by *poleis* or by leaders on behalf of the *polis,* over questions about how the *polis* as a whole should act, in particular in relation to other states. There is a notable drop off in the use of the oracle in the *Lives* following Chaeronea: the oracle does not appear at all in the *Eumenes*, *Pyrrhus*, or *Cleomenes*, and is only the location of a statue in *Philopoemen*.[555] Out of all the Hellenistic *Lives*, the oracle only figures as such in the *Demetrius* and the *Agis*, the use of which will be discussed in

[555] Mikalson (2016: 177) notes that this pattern is not unique to Plutarch: the last recorded oracle sought from Delphi by the Athenians dates to the 330s.

Chapter 5.[556] Plutarch does not quote any Delphic verse oracles in this set of *Lives*, although there are verse Sibylline oracles,[557] which would appear to support the claim that verse oracles decreased in frequency over time.[558]

The Delphic oracle appears as a powerful political force in the Classical Greek world within Plutarch's *Lives*, operating as a political player in some of the most decisive moments in Greek history. Plutarch frequently increases the role of the oracle in these episodes from that which it held in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, making Delphi the key source of guidance for the Greek leaders as they faced the Persian threat at Salamis and Plataea. Had the Greeks listened to the god's advice given through the oracle, they would not have departed on the disastrous expedition to Sicily during the Peloponnesian war, nor would they have followed Demosthenes into total defeat at Chaeronea in the conflict with Macedon. Plutarch thus positions the Delphic oracle within his narrative as a powerful voice of the divine that leads mortals to glorious victory when heeded, and utter defeat when ignored.

With great power comes great risk, and Plutarch does address the problems that Delphi's clout could pose for both the sanctuary's reputation and the safety of the god's human servants. The oracle's ability to influence and even dictate political and military actions made Delphi vulnerable to accusations from figures like Demosthenes that the

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[556] There is one Delphic oracle story in the Aratus, which is often included in lists of the Hellenistic Lives, but as a biography outside of the Parallel Lives project, it is also outside of the scope of this project.

[557] *Demosthenes* 19.

[558] The one exception to this is in the Aratus, where a verse oracle is given (53). Plutarch does refer to verse Delphic oracles (e.g. the responses received by the Athenians before the battle of Salamis, which Herodotus records as lengthy verse oracles), but does not quote any directly in the *Lives* discussed in this chapter.

oracle was not a political player, but a pawn, and that the Pythia could be corrupted, forced or swayed to utter responses that were not from the god, but from a figure like Philip. Through the accusations of 'Philippizing' in the *Demosthenes* as well as with the incident involving the *theopropoi* sent to the oracle of Ammon in the *Nicias* Plutarch rejects the accusation that the god's human servants were actually bribed, and points to others instead as the truly guilty parties: Demosthenes, who claimed falsely that the Pythia's words were Philip's instead of the god's, and the messengers to Ammon who lied in their reporting of the oracular response they received, misrepresenting the god's words. Plutarch does, however, show the human weakness of the god's servants through Alexander's attempt to force the Pythia to prophesy contrary to the law, though even here it is clear that the Pythia's cry was spontaneous, not a response planted by Alexander as Demosthenes suggests the Pythia did for Philip. In these episodes the oracle is used as a political tool, but Plutarch does not present this as having an effect on the *responses*. Instead, it manifests in how the responses are used and interpreted by the recipients. In this way, Plutarch pushes back against the narrative of anti-Greek Delphic bias, emphasizing instead throughout the Persian War *Lives* the Delphic oracle's support for the allied Greeks and showing how the oracle was not supporting Philip, but trying to help the Greeks by warning them of what would happen should they meet Philip in battle.

The source of the oracular responses varies across the *Lives* depending on Plutarch's focus in each oracle story. In the *Themistocles* and the *Aristides* Plutarch, unlike Herodotus, keeps the focus on the god and human interpretation or use of the god's words. In contrast, in the *Demosthenes* and *Alexander* the Pythia is featured prominently. Within the *Demosthenes,* this helps to refute Demosthenes's accusation that she was corrupt by

showing her prophetic words to be true. In the *Alexander* the Pythia helps demonstrate an important aspect of Alexander's character, although if her words are taken as a proper oracular response this would contradict the conclusion of the interlocutors in the Delphic dialogues as to the importance of the rituals surrounding Delphic consultation. Additionally, through the episode involving the oracle at Ammon Plutarch shows how the human servants can interfere – albeit unintentionally – in delivering the god's messages. Among the many interpretations of the meaning behind the priest of Ammon's greeting to Alexander, Plutarch includes the possibility that the priest's thick accent resulted in a botched message. Although this is not at the Delphic oracle, it is still suggestive given the implication that errors can creep into the god's messages through the human speech of their human vessels.

Plutarch demonstrates the oracle being used successfully when the recipients take the opportunity to consider and reflect, rather than making swift – or rash – decisions, seen most notably in the *Aristides* and the *Nicias*. In the *Aristides* Plutarch shows the god using language that promotes dialogue and discussion among the Greeks. This is also the only *Life* under study in this chapter where Plutarch admits that the meaning of the oracle was truly unclear. Plutarch explains away the ambiguity of the response, however, by demonstrating how the oracle caused confusion not because it was vague, but rather through its specificity, describing the specific set of circumstances that needed to be created in order for victory to occur. Additionally, in the dialogues, the oracle was accused of being used as a political tool, and this was given as an explanation for vagueness. In the Classical Greek *Lives*, the oracle is used as a tool, or is suspected of being used as a tool, but this is not a consequence of the vagueness of the responses. The public debate and deliberation

that the god appeared to support in the *Aristides*, however, could also prove dangerous, for it gave figures such as Themistocles and Demosthenes the opportunity to sway the masses through their rhetorical skills. Themistocles's interpretation of the oracle turned out to be correct and Demosthenes's incorrect, but Plutarch presents both men's approach to the oracle as the opposite of what he describes in the *Aristides*: rather than using the oracle to determine what action would be best to pursue, Themistocles fit the oracle to his preconceived idea of what should be done and Demosthenes rejects the oracle because it contradicted what he wished the Athenians to do. Plutarch through the oracle thus introduces the question of whether positive outcomes justify the methods used to achieve them, and whether negative outcomes can be forgiven if the methods were morally sound. In this way while Plutarch does not emphasize the god's wisdom in these *Lives* in the same way that he does in the Delphic dialogues and the archaic *Lives*, he still through the oracle poses moral questions for the readers about proper action.

Chapter 5

Plots, Looting, and Insults: Negative Interactions with the Delphic Oracle

i. introduction

This chapter will cover *Lives* of figures who in both their interactions with the oracle and in their characters overall served as negative examples for Plutarch: in particular the *Lysander* and *Demetrius*. Through these *Lives* I demonstrate how Plutarch uses oracles not only in *Lives* of largely successful or morally imitable statesmen, but also in the *Lives* of figures whose public careers or private actions rendered them cautionary tales and representatives of inappropriate behavior. As I will show, with these leaders Plutarch reveals particularly problematic aspects of their characters and their approaches to leadership through their interactions with the Delphi oracle, while also defending the sanctity of the oracular sanctuary and rejecting utterly the notion that oracular responses could be bought by corrupt leaders looking to use the oracle for their own personal advantage.

Plutarch's use of negative *exempla* in the *Lives* has only recently become widely accepted among scholars. Previously, it was argued that because the *Lives* were intended to function as mirrors for the reader, they must therefore reflect good rather than bad behavior.[559] Hillard and Titchener argue that Plutarch intended the *Lives* to be *positive* examples for his readers.[560] Nikolaidis acknowledges the existence of negative *exempla*

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[559] On the meaning of mirrors and mirroring in the *Lives*, see the discussion in Chapter 2.

[560] Titchener (1991: 155) claims that "Plutarch is not in the business of presenting negative, but rather positive examples… his reason for writing biographies was to supply his readers with good examples." See also Hillard's (1987: 33) claim that "it must never be forgotten that the *Lives*, with

among the *Lives*, but nevertheless attempts to fit all of the *Lives* into set categories, identifying pairs and individual *Lives* within them as either "positive" or "negative."[561] Against this interpretation, Duff argues that attempts such as these to classify *Lives* as positive or negative both misunderstands Plutarch's purpose and gives an overly simplistic view of Plutarch's moral program in the *Lives*.[562]

Critical to the question of Plutarch's use of negative *exempla* is the prologue to the *Lives of Demetrius and Antony*. Plutarch opens this pair of *Lives* with a warning about its contents, defending his choice to include these figures in the *Parallel Lives:*

> [5] τῶν δὲ κεχρημένων ἀσκεπτότερον αὐτοῖς καὶ γεγονότων ἐν ἐξουσίαις καὶ πράγμασι μεγάλοις ἐπιφανῶν εἰς κακίαν οὐ χεῖρον ἴσως ἐστὶ συζυγίαν μίαν ἢ δύο παρεμβαλεῖν εἰς τὰ παραδείγματα τῶν βίων... [6] οὕτως μοι δοκοῦμεν ἡμεῖς προθυμότεροι τῶν βελτιόνων ἔσεσθαι καὶ θεαταὶ καὶ μιμηταὶ βίων, εἰ μηδὲ τῶν φαύλων καὶ ψεγομένων ἀνιστορήτως ἔχοιμεν. [7] περιέξει δὴ τοῦτο τὸ βιβλίον τὸν Δημητρίου τοῦ Πολιορκητοῦ βίον καὶ τὸν Ἀντωνίου τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος, ἀνδρῶν μάλιστα δὴ τῷ Πλάτωνι μαρτυρησάντων, ὅτι καὶ κακίας μεγάλας ὥσπερ ἀρετὰς αἱ μεγάλαι φύσεις ἐκφέρουσι.[563]
>
> [5] But perhaps it would not be detrimental to add to the examples of lives one or two pairs of those who lived more recklessly and who were in both their positions of power and in their great deeds notorious for vice… [6] thus it seems to me that we will be more eager both to observe and to imitate the better sort of lives if we should not be ignorant of the

notable exceptions, were designed to transport Plutarch (and the reader) away from the base and ignoble."

[561] Nikolaidis (2005). Nikolaidis (2005: 307) also argues that Plutarch intended the *Lives* to be about paragons of virtue and models for imitation, and so places what he considers to be the more negative *Lives* together, towards the end of the series and coming after the what he argues is the first "negative" pair of *Lives*: the *Demetrius-Antony*.

[562] See, for example, Duff (1997) 170, (1999a) 64, and (1999b) 313-327.

[563] *Demosthenes* 1.5-7.

> inferior and blameworthy lives. [7] This book therefore will contain the lives of Demetrius Poliorcetes and of the *imperator* Antony, men who in particular proved true Plato's claim that great natures produce both great vices as well as great virtues.

This statement is one of the few programmatic statements in the *Lives*, and has received considerable attention in scholarship as scholars debate exactly what Plutarch meant by it. Duff argues persuasively that Plutarch's reference to great natures is an allusion to a passage from Plato's *Republic* (491b-492a), discussing how men with great natures have the capacity to bring about great good or great evil.[564] Plutarch takes an unusual step here by identifying Demetrius and Antony as specifically negative *exempla* in advance. But this statement does not mean that before this pair there were no figures in the *Lives* whose mistakes or negative attributes did not outweigh their positive ones. Plutarch's use of the comparative βελτιόνων is key to understanding the meaning of the passage. He is not saying that the *Lives* he wrote before were all of stateman who possessed laudable characters, rather that these other figures were simply *better* than Antony and Demetrius, whose characters were more blameworthy (ψεγομένων) than Plutarch's previous heros. Many of the faults Plutarch finds with Demetrius's and Antony's characters can be found in other subjects of the *Lives*, including those typically viewed as "positive": Theseus engaged in amorous activities the morality of which was highly dubious;[565] Demosthenes was a coward who let others fight battles for him;[566] Alexander at times acted tyrannically

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[564] Duff (1999b) 315-317. Plutarch also discusses the issue of great natures in *De sera numinis* 552b, in association with Alcibiades (on this, see Duff 1999a: 207-208; 1999b: 317-8).

[565] E.g. *Demetrius-Antony* 3.1-4.6, *Theseus* 29-34, *Theseus-Romulus* 6.

[566] E.g. *Demetrius-Antony* 5.5; *Demosthenes* 3.3, 20.2.

and appeared to accept being called divine, even if he did not believe this claim himself.[567] As Plutarch explains clearly in the prologue to *Cimon-Lucullus*, in his view no one is entirely good or wicked:

> οὕτως ἐπεὶ χαλεπόν ἐστι, μᾶλλον δ' ἴσως ἀμήχανον, ἀμεμφῆ καὶ καθαρὸν ἀνδρὸς ἐπιδεῖξαι βίον, ἐν τοῖς καλοῖς ἀναπληρωτέον ὥσπερ ὁμοιότητα τὴν ἀλήθειαν. τὰς δ' ἐκ πάθους τινὸς ἢ πολιτικῆς ἀνάγκης ἐπιτρεχούσας ταῖς πράξεσιν ἁμαρτίας καὶ κῆρας ἐλλείμματα μᾶλλον ἀρετῆς τινος ἢ κακίας πονηρεύματα νομίζοντας οὐ δεῖ πάνυ προθύμως ἐναποσημαίνειν τῇ ἱστορίᾳ καὶ περιττῶς, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ αἰδουμένους ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως, εἰ καλὸν οὐδὲν εἰλικρινὲς οὐδ' ἀναμφισβήτητον εἰς ἀρετὴν ἦθος γεγονὸς ἀποδίδωσιν.[568]
>
> For since it is difficult, or more probably impossible, to represent a life of a man as blameless and pure, in good [deeds] just as in likenesses the truth must be realized. But the failures and faults that pervade the deeds which stem from some passion or from political necessity, we, considering them to be more defects of some virtue instead of reprehensible acts of wickedness, ought not point out in our history too eagerly and excessively, but rather as if we are having pity for the human spirit, since it has produced no character that is purely good or indisputably fixed on virtue.[569]

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[567] E.g. *Demetrius-Antony* 5.3-4.

[568] *Cimon* 2.4-5. On the impersonal language in this section, see Chrysanthou (2018: 36-37), who argues persuasively that this impersonal language, combined with Plutarch's heavy use of first-person plurals in the sections preceding this quotation, helps form a link between Plutarch and his readers since it includes them in the process of narrative composition.

[569] For this sentiment, see also *Agis and Cleomenes* 37.8 (*Cleomenes* 16.8): "but we say these things not intending to blame Aratus, but because we pity the weakness of the human spirit, if even in characters so worthy and remarkable for their virtue it has not been able to produce a virtue that is blameless" (ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν οὐκ Ἀράτου βουλόμενοι κατηγορεῖν γράφομεν… οἰκτίροντες δὲ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως τὴν ἀσθένειαν, εἰ μηδ' ἐν ἤθεσιν οὕτως ἀξιολόγοις καὶ διαφόροις πρὸς ἀρετὴν ἐκφέρειν δύναται τὸ καλὸν ἀνεμέσητον).

In this prologue Plutarch defends his choice of heroes and how he has chosen to portray them. Plutarch begs his readers to forgive him for his decision not to deliver uncritical *encomia*, but rather to present the two statesmen's flaws alongside their virtues. Plutarch makes this purpose clear through the vignette that opens the prologue describing why Lucullus was celebrated in Chaeronea even down to Plutarch's own day. Plutarch ends this vignette with the argument that Lucullus may have done glorious and praiseworthy deeds, "but he himself would not have considered it a fair reward for his truthful testimony to accept a false and fabricated narrative about him."[570] Plutarch thus defends his decision to critique Lucullus in his *Life*, since all men possess some faults and Lucullus himself would not wish his biography to be anything other than truthful. Thus while the *Cimon-Lucullus* prologue does contain a clearly programmatic statement, the claim Plutarch makes in it also serves an important local function within the pair to which it belongs. Similarly in the prologue to the *Alexander-Caesar* Plutarch's oft-repeated claim that he is writing lives (βίοι) rather than histories (ἱστορίαι) serves both to set his narrative apart from the many other accounts of Alexander and Caesar, while also deflecting criticism preemptively from his decision to avoid narrating the many battles and events in which the two men were involved.[571]

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[570] *Cimon* 2.3: ἀληθοῦς δὲ μαρτυρίας οὐδ' ἂν αὐτὸς ἐκεῖνος ἠξίωσε μισθὸν λαβεῖν ψευδῆ καὶ πεπλασμένην ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ διήγησιν.

[571] *Alexander* 1.1-2: "because of the quantity of the deeds to be covered, I will make no other introduction than to beg my readers not to be critical if I should not relate everything, or should not treat thoroughly each thing even of the most famous events, but for the most part am abbreviating events. For I am not writing histories, but lives, and a display of virtue or vice is not always present in the most famous deeds, but often an insignificant deed or some phrase or joke gives an impression of character more than battles where countless die and the greatest battle lines and sieges of cities" (διὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ὑποκειμένων πράξεων οὐδὲν ἄλλο προεροῦμεν ἢ παραιτησόμεθα τοὺς ἀναγινώσκοντας, ἐὰν μὴ πάντα μηδὲ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐξειργασμένως τι τῶν περιβοήτων ἀπαγγέλλωμεν, ἀλλ' ἐπιτέμνοντες τὰ πλεῖστα, μὴ συκοφαντεῖν. οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι πάντως ἔνεστι δήλωσις ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας, ἀλλὰ πρᾶγμα

Returning to the *Demetrius-Antony* prologue, there, just as in the prologues to the *Cimon-Lucullus* and the *Alexander-Caesar*, Plutarch is defending himself in advance from criticisms that might be made against him. In this case, that he is presenting figures whose negative traits so outweighed their positive that they would seem to provide little to no benefit to the reader other than as entertainment.[572] Read as an *apologia* of his decision to include Demetrius and Antony in his series, the prologue shifts from an introduction to a new type of *Lives* to a defense of a pair of statesmen who on the surface may appear simply worse than other men Plutarch has featured. Within the *Demetrius* and the *Antony*, even the titular figures are not wholly bad, but have many positive traits as statesmen. In the same way, figures such as Lysander and Sulla are not wholly good, as both the individual *Lives* and the *synkrisis* make clear. As Duff argues, to insist on a clear dichotomy – positive versus negative examples – is to read the *Lives* as restricted in the scope of their moral instruction and as highly simplistic.[573] Consequently, when talking about negative *Lives* two principles must be taken into account: first, even in the *Demetrius* and *Antony* Plutarch

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βραχὺ πολλάκις καὶ ῥῆμα καὶ παιδιά τις ἔμφασιν ἤθους ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυριόνεκροι καὶ παρατάξεις αἱ μέγισται καὶ πολιορκίαι πόλεων). Note also Plutarch's description of his work as a ἱστορία in *Cimon* 2.5, in contrast to his protestation here about the genre of his biographies. As Duff (1999a: 17-21) argues, while this statement in the *Alexander-Caesar* has been interpreted as evidence for how ancient Greeks conceived of the generic distinctions between history and biography and as a programmatic statement describing Plutarch's approach to the *Lives* as a whole, this is a mistake since Plutarch's words in the prologue to the *Alexander-Caesar* should be interpreted rather as a way for Plutarch to differentiate his work from the myriad other accounts of the careers of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. Against this approach, see, for example, Pelling (1988:10-12) who argues that the prologue to the *Alexander-Caesar* is evidence that Plutarch felt "no need to give a continuous history of events," although he does note that Plutarch does not apply this approach consistently across all of the *Lives*. In contrast to both of these positions, Chrysanthou (2017: 137) argues that this proem applies to the *Alexander* alone, since in that *Life* Plutarch does focus on anecdotes more than battle narratives, while in the *Caesar* large-scale military actions are much more prominent.

[572] For a discussion of Plutarch's navigation of utility versus pleasure in this prologue, see Duff (2004).

[573] Duff (1999b) 313-314.

may include material that causes the reader to look favorably upon his subjects, and second, that other *Lives* may also represent figures who exhibited blameworthy or negative characteristics.

Finally, the figures under discussion in this chapter will not be the first figures under study in this dissertation who acted reprehensibly towards the oracle.[574] It is worthwhile nonetheless to analyze how Plutarch presents figures who treat the Delphic oracle with disrespect, impiety, or even violence, and to assess how such treatment of the oracle fits into Plutarch's overall representation of Delphi and the Delphic oracle in his writings. I will begin the chapter with the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus*, assessing how Plutarch treats a figure – Lysander – who showed a clear and consistent disdain for the gods and the oracles, viewing them as nothing more than tools to be exploited in his quest for power. I will end with the *Demetrius*, in which Plutarch explores a figure who allowed himself to be placed in a position of equality with the divine, receiving honors and making decisions as if he was a god.

ii. *Lysander* and *Agesilaus*

The Delphic oracle appears five times in the *Lysander,* twice in discussions of dedications at the Delphic sanctuary[575] and three times in oracular consultations or oracle stories.[576] The oracle also appears three times in the *Agesilaus*, twice in discussions of the oracular response concerning Agesilaus's kingship and once as the site of Agesilaus's dedication of

[574] E.g. Demosthenes, as discussed in Chapter 4.

[575] *Lysander* 1.1, 18.1-3.

[576] *Lysander* 22.5, 25.2-27.8, 29.7-12.

spoils at the sanctuary.[577] As with the *Nicias* and the *Alcibiades*, the *Lysander* and *Agesilaus* overlap chronologically and with respect to their subjects, allowing for comparison of how Plutarch treats the same events and figures in different *Lives*. There is also considerable overlap with passages from the Delphic dialogues, providing a glimpse into how Plutarch treats the same oracle stories in different *Lives* as well as how these episodes are presented in the biographies versus in the dialogues. Over the course of the *Lysander,* Plutarch traces how Lysander (son of Aristocritus) upended Sparta's long history of maintaining a close and pious relationship with Delphi, using the traditional relationship between Spartan leaders and the oracle to further his personal political ambitions. Lysander's actions foreshadow those of his descendent, Lysander son of Libys,[578] and set in motion the degradation of the Spartan state that Agis IV and Cleomenes III sought to correct. In the process, Plutarch shows that politicians may stoop to employing whatever means necessary, but also thoroughly rejects the notion that the Delphic oracle was susceptible to political manipulation.

a. Delphic dedications

Delphi appears early in the *Lysander* in two discussions of dedications made at Delphi: a stone statue of Lysander and a dedication made by Lysander after his victory at Aegospotami. Plutarch opens the *Life* with a description of a statue at Delphi that Plutarch claims depicted Lysander, though it was popularly believed to be Brasidas.[579] As Stadter

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[577] *Agesilaus* 3.7, 19.4, 30.1. See also *Agesilaus-Pompey* 1.2, 2.2.

[578] For clarity, here and throughout "Lysander" will refer to Lysander son of Aristocritus. Lysander son of Libys will always be identified with the patronymic.

[579] *Lysander* 1.1: "The treasury of the Acanthians in Delphi bears this inscription: "Brasidas and the Acanthians, from the Athenians." As a result, many people consider the stone statue standing

and Duff have demonstrated convincingly, Plutarch uses this episode at the opening of the *Life* to introduce what will be key themes across both the *Lysander* and its Roman pair, the *Sulla*: the ambiguous moral status of both figures, and the difficulties of capturing the entirety of their personalities either in stone or in words.[580] In addition to these broader themes, in his discussion of the statue Plutarch also touches upon two figures that will be critical in the *Lysander*: the legendary hero Lycurgus and the Delphic oracle.[581] Just as Plutarch presents Lycurgus as being connected closely to Delphi, so too was Lysander in his *Life*, although Plutarch takes pains to demonstrate that the attitudes of these two Spartan leaders towards the oracle were fundamentally different.[582]

Plutarch reprises these themes in his subsequent discussion of the spoils Lysander dedicated at Delphi following his victory at Aegospotami in 404. Here, as with the stone statue of Lysander, Plutarch uses Lysander's activities at the sanctuary to highlight some of the contradictions present in the Spartan's character. Plutarch describes in detail the number and types of dedications Lysander made to the Delphic sanctuary:

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in the building next to the doors to be [an image] of Brasidas. But it is an image of Lysander" (ὁ Ἀκανθίων θησαυρὸς ἐν Δελφοῖς ἐπιγραφὴν ἔχει τοιαύτην· "Βρασίδας καὶ Ἀκάνθιοι ἀπ' Ἀθηναίων." διὸ καὶ πολλοὶ τὸν ἐντὸς ἑστῶτα τοῦ οἴκου παρὰ ταῖς θύραις λίθινον ἀνδριάντα Βρασίδου νομίζουσιν εἶναι. Λυσάνδρου δ' ἐστιν εἰκονικός).

[580] Stadter (1992) 41-43, Duff (1997) 170-173. On physiognomy and physical descriptions in general in the *Lives,* see Tatum (1995).

[581] *Lysander* 1.2: "For it is not true that, as some say, with the Argives having shaved [their heads] out of grief after their great defeat, the Spartans contrariwise celebrated their victory by growing out their hair… but this [custom] also is from Lycurgus; and they say that he said that hair makes the beautiful appear even more comely, but the ugly more terrible" (οὐ γάρ, ὡς ἔνιοί φασιν, Ἀργείων μετὰ τὴν μεγάλην ἧτταν ἐπὶ πένθει καρέντων, οἱ Σπαρτιᾶται πρὸς τὸ ἀντίπαλον αὐτοῖς τὰς κόμας ἀγαλλόμενοι τοῖς πεπραγμένοις ἀνῆκαν… ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῦτο Λυκούργειόν ἐστι· καί φασιν αὐτὸν εἰπεῖν ὡς ἡ κόμη τοὺς μὲν καλοὺς εὐπρεπεστέρους ὁρᾶσθαι ποιεῖ, τοὺς δ' αἰσχροὺς φοβερωτέρους). The final statement of this quotation is particularly meaningful within the project of the *Lives*, since it serves as a reminder to the reader of the importance of context: not all moral characteristics or political tactics will appear equally worthy or unworthy in different figures.

[582] Lycurgus is named directly again at *Lysander*17.4, and discussions of his constitution (and Lysander's changes to it) appear in *Lysander* 24 and *Lysander-Sulla* 2.1.

> ὁ δὲ Λύσανδρος ἔστησεν ἀπὸ τῶν λαφύρων ἐν Δελφοῖς αὑτοῦ χαλκῆν εἰκόνα καὶ τῶν ναυάρχων ἑκάστου καὶ χρυσοῦς ἀστέρας τῶν Διοσκούρων, οἳ πρὸ τῶν Λευκτρικῶν ἠφανίσθησαν. ἐν δὲ τῷ Βρασίδου καὶ Ἀκανθίων θησαυρῷ τριήρης ἔκειτο διὰ χρυσοῦ πεποιημένη καὶ ἐλέφαντος δυεῖν πηχῶν, ἣν Κῦρος αὐτῷ νικητήριον ἔπεμψεν.[583]
>
> Lysander set up from the spoils bronze statues of himself and of each of his admirals and golden stars of the Dioscuri, which vanished before the battle of Leuctra.[584] And in the treasury of Brasidas and the Acanthians there was placed a trireme made out of gold and ivory that was two cubits long, which Cyrus sent to him as a victory prize.

Plutarch's combination here of a statue of Lysander together with reference to the treasury of Brasidas and the Acanthians recalls the opening of the *Life* and the stone statue of Lysander described there. As in that passage, here too Plutarch's narrative conveys the complexity of Lysander's character. On the one hand, the Delphic sanctuary was witness to Lysander making an offering to the god from the spoils of his naval victory. But after describing the lavish votive offerings Lysander set up at Delphi, Plutarch states that "Anaxandrides the Delphian records that Lysander also left a deposit there of a talent of silver and fifty-two minas, and eleven staters in addition to these, an account that does not agree with the generally agreed-upon claims of Lysander's poverty."[585] In both the opening and closing chapters of the *Life* as well as in the *synkrisis* Plutarch directly contradicts this claim attributed here to Anaxandrides that Lysander's supposed poverty was just a façade.

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[583] *Lysander* 18.1.

[584] These same stars and their disappearance appear also in a speech of Philinus in *De Pythiae oraculis* 397f on the nature of votive offerings.

[585] *Lysander* 18.3: Ἀναξανδρίδης δ' ὁ Δελφὸς ἱστορεῖ καὶ παρακαταθήκην ἐνταῦθα Λυσάνδρου κεῖσθαι τάλαντον ἀργυρίου καὶ μνᾶς πεντήκοντα δύο καὶ πρὸς τούτοις ἕνδεκα στατῆρας, οὐχ ὁμολογούμενα γράφων τοῖς περὶ τῆς πενίας τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ὁμολογουμένοις.

This discrepancy raises the question of why Plutarch has decided to present here information he appears to disagree with elsewhere in the *Life*.[586] Duff suggests plausibly that the juxtaposition of the statue with the report of Lysander's funds in Delphi reinforces the theme of appearances versus reality that Plutarch established in the opening chapter of the *Life*.[587] Read in this light, the statue of Lysander at Delphi serves both as a starting point for the biography while also providing food for thought for the reader, hinting at a fundamental aspect to Lysander's character that the reader must consider.

Plutarch juxtaposes the dedications Lysander made to the Delphic god with the altars and sacrifices made to Lysander:

> τότε δ' οὖν ὁ Λύσανδρος, ὅσον οὐδεὶς τῶν πρόσθεν Ἑλλήνων δυνηθείς, ἐδόκει φρονήματι καὶ ὄγκῳ μείζονι κεχρῆσθαι τῆς δυνάμεως. πρώτῳ μὲν γάρ, ὡς ἱστορεῖ Δοῦρις, Ἑλλήνων ἐκείνῳ βωμοὺς αἱ πόλεις ἀνέστησαν ὡς θεῷ καὶ θυσίας ἔθυσαν, εἰς πρῶτον δὲ παιᾶνες ᾄσθησαν.[588]
>
> At that time, then, Lysander, who was as powerful as no Greek ever was before him, seemed to have experienced a purpose and pride greater than his power. For to him first of the Greeks, as Duris records, the *poleis* established altars and made sacrifices as to a god, and to him first paians were sung.

Plutarch goes on to quote one such *paian*, as well as to describe how the Samians changed their Hereia (Ἡραῖα) into a Lysandreia (Λυσάνδρεια) and poets competed to sing the

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[586] *Lysander* 2, 30. See also *Lysander-Sulla* 3. Chrysanthou (2018: 106-108) argues that Plutarch carries some of this ambiguity over Lysander's character through to the end of the *Life* to show that under Lysander's guidance the other Spartans became corrupted by greed and a desire for wealth, so his poverty ultimately does not free him from blame.

[587] Duff (1997).

[588] *Lysander* 18.4-5.

Spartan general's praises.[589] In his narrative, Plutarch thus transitions from the dedications given to the Delphic god by Lysander, to the riches he stored for himself at the sanctuary, to, finally, the offerings given to Lysander by others. In this way Lysander's personal wealth buoys Plutarch's claim of Lysander's power and serves as a rhetorical support for the transition between Lysander the human and Lysander the god that Plutarch is marking in his text.[590] Furthermore, these three features – Lysander's dedications at Delphi, questions about his real poverty, and his receiving worship as a god – all highlight key problematic aspects to Lysander's character: he would mask his actions in piety, but, according to Plutarch, this seeming piety was simply that, a mask. Instead of honoring the gods, Lysander sought continually greater powers and greater honors for himself at the expense of the gods.[591] With these passages Plutarch uses Lysander's dealings with the Delphic sanctuary to explore problematic and contradictory aspects of Lysander's character and reputation. Lysander's outward or public actions in dedicating the spoils to the god are balanced by rumors of his private actions that appeared to contradict his narrative about himself and Spartan values that he was espousing. This discrepancy between Lysander's secret actions and plots and his public persona is a theme that Plutarch continues exploring throughout the *Life* and appears also again in his dealings with Delphi later in the *Life*.

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[589] *Lysander* 18.5-10.

[590] The larger context of this passage provides further support for this reading. Immediately prior to the description of the dedications, Plutarch discusses not the battle that produced these spoils (the narration of which finishes in *Lysander* 12), but rather the use and value of money in Sparta, and in particular Sparta's relationship to money and riches (*Lysander* 16-17).

[591] On the cult(s) of Lysander, see Habicht (2017) 1-4, 179.

Plutarch contrasts Lysander's dedication of spoils from his military victory with anecdotes that portray his character in a negative, rather than a positive, light, shadowing the virtue of his actions with suspicion of impropriety. In the *Agesilaus*, however, Plutarch presents Agesilaus's dedications at Delphi in a wholly positive light, describing how after his victory, Agesilaus travelled to Delphi himself, dedicated a tenth of the spoils to the god, and even participated in the Pythian games.[592] As Shipley notes, Agesilaus's journey to Delphi is not included in Xenophon's account, and forms the ending note in what for Plutarch appears as the "moral climax" of Agesilaus's career.[593] Between the two men, Plutarch has chosen to present Agesilaus as having, aside from the lame kingship incident, a rather positive relationship with Delphi, while Plutarch at each point problematizes Lysander's interactions with the oracle.

Lysander's deposition of riches at Delphi – both his own and those given on behalf of the Spartan state – is mirrored in the despoiling of the Delphic sanctuary by Sulla in the Roman *Life* that serves as the pair to the *Lysander*. Plutarch describes in detail how Sulla, in need of money during his campaign against Mithridates in Greece, first turned to the sanctuaries for funds to pay his soldiers and justifies his actions in so doing:

> [5] ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ χρημάτων ἔδει πολλῶν πρὸς τὸν πόλεμον, ἐκίνει τὰ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἄσυλα, τοῦτο μὲν ἐξ Ἐπιδαύρου, τοῦτο δὲ ἐξ Ὀλυμπίας,[594] τὰ κάλλιστα καὶ πολυτελέστατα τῶν ἀναθημάτων μεταπεμπόμενος. [6] ἔγραψε δὲ καὶ τοῖς Ἀμφικτύοσιν εἰς Δελφούς, ὅτι τὰ χρήματα τοῦ θεοῦ βέλτιον

[592] *Agesilaus* 19.4.

[593] Shipley (1997) 240.

[594] The rationale behind Ziegler's (1973) decision to emend ἐξ Ὀλυμπίας to ἐκ ⟨τῆς⟩ Ὀλυμπίας is unclear. Ziegler does not explain why the article should be added before Ὀλυμπίας, but not before Ἐπιδαύρου in the preceeding clause, and neither sanctuary has been mentioned previously in Plutarch's narrative, removing this justification for adding the article to Ὀλυμπίας alone. I have given the manuscript reading here, which does not contain the article.

εἴη κομισθῆναι πρὸς αὐτόν· ἢ γὰρ φυλάξειν ἀσφαλέστερον, ἢ καὶ ἀποχρησάμενος ἀποδώσειν οὐκ ἐλάττω· καὶ τῶν φίλων ἀπέστειλε Κᾶφιν τὸν Φωκέα κελεύσας σταθμῷ παραλαβεῖν ἕκαστον. [7] ὁ δὲ Κᾶφις ἦκε μὲν εἰς Δελφούς, ὤκνει δὲ τῶν ἱερῶν θιγεῖν, καὶ πολλὰ τῶν Ἀμφικτυόνων παρόντων,[595] ἀπεδάκρυσε τὴν ἀνάγκην. ἐνίων δὲ φασκόντων ἀκοῦσαι φθεγγομένης τῆς ἐν τοῖς ἀνακτόροις κιθάρας, εἴτε πιστεύσας εἴτε τὸν Σύλλαν βουλόμενος ἐμβαλεῖν εἰς δεισιδαιμονίαν, ἐπέστειλε πρὸς αὐτόν. [8] ὁ δὲ σκώπτων ἀντέγραψε θαυμάζειν τὸν Κᾶφιν, εἰ μὴ συνίησιν ὅτι χαίροντος, οὐ χαλεπαίνοντος, εἴη τὸ ᾄδειν· ὥστε θαρροῦντα λαμβάνειν ἐκέλευσεν, ὡς ἡδομένου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διδόντος. [9] τὰ μὲν οὖν ἄλλα διέλαθε τούς γε πολλοὺς Ἕλληνας ἐκπεμπόμενα, τὸν δ' ἀργυροῦν πίθον, ὃς ἦν ὑπόλοιπος ἔτι τῶν βασιλικῶν, διὰ βάρος καὶ μέγεθος οὐ δυναμένων ἀναλαβεῖν τῶν ὑποζυγίων, ἀναγκαζόμενοι κατακόπτειν οἱ Ἀμφικτύονες, εἰς μνήμην ἐβάλοντο τοῦτο μὲν Τίτον Φλαμινῖνον καὶ Μάνιον Ἀκύλιον, τοῦτο δὲ Αἰμίλιον Παῦλον, [10] ὧν ὁ μὲν Ἀντίοχον ἐξελάσας τῆς Ἑλλάδος, οἱ δὲ τοὺς Μακεδόνων βασιλεῖς καταπολεμήσαντες, οὐ μόνον ἀπέσχοντο τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν, ἀλλὰ καὶ δῶρα καὶ τιμὴν αὐτοῖς καὶ σεμνότητα πολλὴν προσέθεσαν.[596]

[5] And since Sulla was also in need of a lot of money for the war, he took away the inviolable things of Greece, now from Epidaurus, and now from Olympia, sending for the most beautiful and the most precious of the votive offerings. [6] And he wrote also to the Amphictyons in Delphi, that it would be better if the god's possessions were handed over to him; for he would either guard them more safely, or even if he made use of them, he would not give back less [than he took]; and of his friends he sent Caphis the Phocian, having ordered him to take everything with force. [7] Caphis came to Delphi, but he shrank from touching the sacred objects,

[595] I have given the manuscripts' reading of παρόντων, rather than Reiske's suggested emendation, which is adopted by Ziegler (1973), of ⟨λι⟩παρούντων. Reiske's reading, changing the Amphiktyons from simply being present (παρόντων) and thus witness to Ciphas's actions to actively imploring Ciphas (λιπαρούντων) not to remove the votive offerings, would certainly make the image more vivid, but is hardly demanded by the context.

[596] *Sulla* 12.5-10.

> and in the presence of the Amphictyons, he shed many tears over the necessity. And when some said that they heard a cithara sounding in the temple, either believing them or wanting to fill Sulla with superstition, Caphis wrote to him. [8] But Sulla wrote back joking that he was amazed at Caphis if he did not understand that the singing was rejoicing, not displaying anger; so he ordered him to take with courage, on the grounds that the god was glad and was giving [the objects]. [9] The other objects being sent away, then, escaped the notice of most of the Greeks, but the silver *pithos*, which was remaining still from the royal gifts, when the pack animals were not able to pick it up on account of its weight and size, the Amphictyons, being forced to cut it into pieces, recalled first Titus Flamininus and Manius Acilius, then Aemilius Paulus, [10] of whom one had driven Antiochus out of Greece, and the others had conquered in war the Macedonian kings, not only did they keep their hands off of the holy things of the Greeks, but they also added both gifts and honor and great dignity to them.

Plutarch's scorn for Sulla in this passage is palpable, in particular his disgust at Sulla's glibness while he dared to violate what Plutarch describes as the inviolable (ἄσυλα) objects which belonged to the god (τὰ χρήματα τοῦ θεοῦ).[597] Plutarch leans on the status of Delphi as specifically Greek to give rhetorical power to his claim that other Romans did not rob these distinctly Greek religious institutions, but treated them with respect and added to the gods' wealth even though they were not Roman.[598] Brenk suggests that Plutarch softens the accusation against Sulla here by noting that Sulla's borrowing was only temporary.[599]

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[597] Brenk (1977: 267) argues, rather implausibly, that Plutarch "accepts Sulla's excuse that… the most glorious shrines of Greece – Delphi, Olympia, and Epidauros – had to be sacked because Sulla was in a hurry to prevent the outbreak of revolution at Rome during his absence." Plutarch's tone in this passage suggests rather the opposite conclusion.

[598] *Sulla* 12.5 (τὰ τῆς Ἑλλάδος ἄσυλα), 12.10 (τῶν ἱερῶν τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν).

[599] Brenk (1977) 240.

Plutarch, however, records Sulla mocking the formulaic response of the Delphic oracle,[600] suggesting that he knew better than the gods how to manage the dedications made to them. Furthermore, Sulla claims that the treasures would be safer with him than with the god, when in fact he was the only one who posed a threat to them. Plutarch's readers knew full well that Sulla did not intend to keep these treasures safe, and Sulla's promise that should he use the treasures he would give back things of equal value to what was taken reveals his true intentions. Finally, and perhaps most important, Sulla fails to recognize that the votive offerings (ἀναθημάτων) are sacred (ἱερῶν) and inviolable (ἄσυλα): Plutarch presents Sulla as seeing the god's χρήματα as money that is replaceable, rather than as sacred objects. After Sulla has successfully besieged and sacked Athens as well as Thebes, Plutarch explains that Sulla, "cutting off half of the Thebans' land, set it aside as sacred (καθιέρωσεν) to the Pythian and to the Olympian, ordering that from the revenue the money which he had taken be given back to the gods."[601] Plutarch plays with the multiple meanings of χρήματα between these two passages,[602] showing Sulla taking the χρήματα of the god, which included statues and works of art, and returning it in the form of money (χρήματα) earned from working the land he took from Thebes and gave to Delphi and Olympia. Additionally, by showing Sulla's willingness to seize even what has been designated as sacrosanct (the offerings), Plutarch also devalues Sulla's dedication of the

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[600] As Fontenrose (1978: 37) states, a frequent form of a question put to the oracle is to ask whether it is "λῷον καὶ ἄμεινόν ἐστι" to do something. For examples from Dodona using this formula, see Parke (1967) Appendix I.

[601] See *Sulla* 19.12: τῆς χώρας αὐτῶν ἀποτεμόμενος τὴν ἡμίσειαν τῷ Πυθίῳ καὶ τῷ Ὀλυμπίῳ καθιέρωσεν, ἐκ τῶν προσόδων κελεύσας ἀποδίδοσθαι τὰ χρήματα τοῖς θεοῖς ἅπερ αὐτὸς εἰλήφει.

[602] *Sulla* 12.5-10, 19.12.

Thebans' land to the gods: what good is sacrosanct land, if it can be taken away just as quickly as it was given?

When considering their treatment of the Delphic sanctuary, then, Plutarch shows how Sulla and Lysander took opposing tactics. One added to the god's rich collection of objects as well as to his wealth, while the other stole the objects given to the god and, Plutarch suggests, only returned as much as he took, adding nothing more and certainly not enhancing the honor (τιμήν) or dignity (σεμνότητα) of the god via his sanctuary. Indeed, Plutarch suggests that the god enacted his revenge on Sulla later in his life in the midst of his final struggle with Marius for control of Rome. Witnessing his army dissolving before his eyes, Sulla called on the Pythian god for aid:

> [11] λέγεται δ' ἔχων τι χρυσοῦν Ἀπόλλωνος ἀγαλμάτιον ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀεὶ μὲν αὐτὸ κατὰ τὰς μάχας περιφέρειν ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τότε τοῦτο καταφιλεῖν οὕτω δὴ λέγων· [12] "Ὦ Πύθι' Ἄπολλον, τὸν Εὐτυχῆ Σύλλαν Κορνήλιον ἐν τοσούτοις ἀγῶσιν ἄρας λαμπρὸν καὶ μέγαν, ἐνταῦθα ῥίψεις ἐπὶ θύρας τῆς πατρίδος ἀγαγών, αἴσχιστα τοῖς ἑαυτοῦ συναπολούμενον πολίταις;" [13] τοιαῦτά φασι τὸν Σύλλαν θεοκλυτοῦντα τοὺς μὲν ἀντιβολεῖν, τοῖς δ' ἀπειλεῖν, τῶν δ' ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι· [14] τέλος δὲ τοῦ εὐωνύμου συντριβέντος ἀναμιχθέντα τοῖς φεύγουσιν εἰς τὸ στρατόπεδον καταφυγεῖν, πολλοὺς ἀποβαλόντα τῶν ἑταίρων καὶ γνωρίμων.[603]
>
> [11] And it is said that Sulla had a certain little golden statue of Apollo from Delphi that he would always carry into battle tucked into his bosom, but on that occasion he also kissed it and said the following: [12] "O Pythian Apollo, you raised up the fortunate Cornelius Sulla as magnificent and great in so many contests, now, having led him to the gates of his ancestral home you cast him down, destroying him most shamefully together with his fellow citizens?" [13] They say that Sulla, calling upon the god thus, entreated some [men],

[603] *Sulla* 29.11-14.

> threatened others, and seized still more; [14] but finally when his left wing was shattered, he joined those escaping and fled for refuge into his camp, having lost many of his companions and acquaintances.

Plutarch does not state directly that Delphic Apollo ignored the prayer but, as Brenk notes, Sulla's prayer certainly does not appear to have been answered.[604] Plutarch twice within this short passage connects this statuette with the Delphic oracle, recalling the statue's Delphic origins and having Sulla call on Pythian Apollo specifically. In this way, Plutarch suggests that Sulla's actions at Delphi and his staunch refusal to respect the god or his sanctuary did not go unnoticed by the god. Stadter has argued that Plutarch presents Sulla as a magnified version of Lysander, with the result that "the features which only disturb in the portrait of Lysander horrify in the *Life* of Sulla."[605] This is certainly true when comparing the role and presence of the physical Delphic sanctuary in each *Life*. In both cases, the figures' interactions with Delphi shed light on some of the more problematic or conflicting aspects of their characters. Sulla was, as he reminds the reader himself through his prayer to Apollo, extraordinarily successful as a general, but he acted with little to no respect for the gods, looting freely from their sanctuaries to buy his solders' loyalty and decreasing, rather than enhancing, the honor (τιμή) or dignity (σεμνότης) of the god via his sanctuary.

This theme of the dignity of the oracular sanctuary and the sanctity of its possessions appears also in the *Timoleon*. When it comes to Timoleon himself, Plutarch

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[604] Brenk (1977) 242. Although Sulla's army is ultimately successful, this is not a consequence of Sulla's actions, but rather of the success of Crassus (e.g. *Sulla* 29.9, 30.1-2).

[605] Stadter (1992) 47. For a more positive interpretation of Sulla in his *Life*, see Candau Morón (2000).

has nothing but praises to sing, as does the Delphic oracle. Prior to his departure for Sicily, Plutarch describes how Timoleon paid a visit to the Delphic oracle:

> αὐτὸς δ' ἐκεῖνος εἰς Δελφοὺς πορευθεὶς ἔθυσε τῷ θεῷ, καὶ καταβαίνοντος εἰς τὸ μαντεῖον αὐτοῦ γίνεται σημεῖον. ἐκ γὰρ τῶν κρεμαμένων ἀναθημάτων ταινία τις ἀπορρυεῖσα καὶ φερομένη, στεφάνους ἔχουσα καὶ Νίκας ἐμπεποικιλμένας, περιέπεσε τῇ κεφαλῇ τοῦ Τιμολέοντος, ὡς δοκεῖν αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ στεφανούμενον ἐπὶ τὰς πράξεις προπέμπεσθαι.[606]
>
> But Timoleon himself, having journeyed to Delphi, sacrificed to the god, and while descending into the oracle he received a sign from it. For a certain fillet, having crowns and images of Victory embroidered on it, detached from the suspended votive offerings, and being carried along, fell on the head of Timoleon, so that he seemed to be sent out on his tasks as one crowned by the god.

Plutarch does not describe what question Timoleon put to the oracle, or what answer he received. Instead, Plutarch focuses on the sign (σημεῖον) Timoleon received, presenting this and a subsequent omen as being signs of encouragement from the gods.[607] These positive omens bore out, as Timoleon and his men were in fact successful. But Plutarch describes how some of Timoleon's mercenaries who accompanied him on his expedition had seized Delphi and robbed the sanctuary prior to their employment with Timoleon. Plutarch describes how these men were slaughtered, and then reveals to his readers the truth about the actions and the characters of these now-dead mercenaries:[608]

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[606] *Timoleon* 8.2-4.

[607] *Timoleon* 9.1: "These things, therefore, from the gods thus encouraged the expedition" (τὰ μὲν οὖν παρὰ τῶν θεῶν οὕτω τὸν στόλον ἐθάρρυνε).

[608] For the deaths of the mercenaries, see *Timoleon* 30.6.

[7] ἐξ ὧν καὶ μάλιστα τὴν Τιμολέοντος εὐτυχίαν συνέβη γενέσθαι διώνυμον· ἦσαν μὲν γὰρ οὗτοι τῶν μετὰ Φιλομήλου τοῦ Φωκέως καὶ Ὀνομάρχου Δελφοὺς καταλαβόντων καὶ μετασχόντων ἐκείνοις τῆς ἱεροσυλίας. [8] μισούντων δὲ πάντων αὐτοὺς καὶ φυλαττομένων ἐπαράτους γεγονότας, πλανώμενοι περὶ τὴν Πελοπόννησον ὑπὸ Τιμολέοντος ἐλήφθησαν, ἑτέρων στρατιωτῶν οὐκ εὐποροῦντος. [9] ἀφικόμενοι δ' εἰς Σικελίαν, ὅσας μὲν ἐκείνῳ συνηγωνίσαντο μάχας, πάσας ἐνίκων, τῶν δὲ πλείστων καὶ μεγίστων ἀγώνων τέλος ἐχόντων, ἐκπεμπόμενοι πρὸς ἑτέρας ὑπ' αὐτοῦ βοηθείας ἀπώλοντο καὶ καταναλώθησαν, οὐχ ὁμοῦ πάντες, ἀλλὰ κατὰ μέρος τῆς δίκης αὐτοῖς † ἀπολογουμένης τῇ Τιμολέοντος εὐτυχίᾳ †[609] ἐπιτιθεμένης, ὅπως μηδεμία τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ἀπὸ τῆς τῶν κακῶν κολάσεως βλάβη γένηται. [10] τὴν μὲν οὖν πρὸς Τιμολέοντα τῶν θεῶν εὐμένειαν οὐχ ἧττον ἐν αἷς προσέκρουσε πράξεσιν ἢ περὶ ἃς κατώρθου θαυμάζεσθαι συνέβαινεν.[610]

[7] From these affairs also the good fortune of Timoleon became especially far-famed. For these men were some of those who, with Philomelus of Phocis and Onomarchus, seized Delphi and were partners in their sacrilegious theft. [8] And, since everyone hated them and were on their guard against them as those who were accursed, while wandering through the Peloponnesus they were taken in by Timoleon, because he did not have enough other soldiers. [9] After they arrived in Sicily, they were victorious in every battle they fought alongside Timoleon, but when they reached the end of the most and greatest of the contests, being sent out by him to help others, they were killed and destroyed, not all at once, but one at a time, with justice attacking them † while defending the good fortune of Timoleon †, so that not any harm might come to the good from the punishment of the wicked. [10] Therefore it happened that the gods' goodwill towards Timoleon was not less to be wondered at in affairs in which he was unsuccessful than concerning which things he accomplished successfully.

[609] The text here is corrupt, and each editor has supplied his own interpretations to correct it. For the various readings, see Ziegler (1964) 247-248.

[610] *Timoleon* 30.7-10.

Throughout the *Timoleon*, Plutarch presents the general as having acted in accordance with the gods, and as a leader who was favored by them. Plutarch thus shows how the defeat and destruction of his mercenaries was actually favorable to Timoleon, for the god deliberately delayed his punishment of them to ensure that in harming them Timoleon was not also harmed. Plutarch makes unequivocal, however, that what the mercenaries had done – steal the property of the god from Delphi – was the cause of their downfall.[611]

Plutarch comments directly on the characters of Lysander, Agesilaus, Sulla, and Timoleon as well as his mercenaries through their interactions with the physical sanctuary of Delphi, including the offerings dedicated there. Lysander was eager to use any opportunity given to him to his advantage, including twisting the Spartans' reverence for Delphi against them, but as a general was also responsible for bringing home vast riches from his victories. Sulla was greedy and constantly in need of money, and he did not care where it came from. Nevertheless, as seen in the *Timoleon,* the god was apparently taking note of those who committed violence against his sanctuary, and exacted just punishment for such actions. While Plutarch does not say directly that the god is present in the votive offerings, the dedications are nonetheless described as sacred and the property of the god, and forgetting this does not go unnoticed by the gods. This view is similar to the perspective given by Philinus in *De Pythiae oraculis*, when he declares, "but I would say that of votive offerings (ἀναθημάτων), those dedicated here in particular move together with and help to indicate the foresight (προνοίᾳ) of the god, and no part of these are empty or lacking

[611] Plutarch repeats this conclusion again in *De sera numinis vindicta* 552f. There, Plutarch-as-interlocutor gives the case of Timoleon's mercenaries as an example of the god perhaps delaying punishment until after the men were no longer useful.

perception, but all are filled with a divine spirit (θειότητος)."[612] Philinus does not address what happens to those who steal these votive offerings, but Plutarch's treatment of temple-robbery in the *Sulla* and the *Timoleon* suggests that Philinus's claim in *De Pythiae oraculis* may actually represent or be similar to Plutarch's own views.

b. Sparta's "Lame Kingship"

Following Plutarch's descriptions of Lysander's dedications at Delphi, the oracle next appears in the *Life* in the debate over who should succeed Agis II as one of the two kings of Sparta: Agis's son Leotychides, or Agis's brother Agesilaus. Plutarch discusses this episode, and the oracular response associated with it, in both the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus*. In what follows, I will address first how Plutarch presents this oracle story in the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus* separately, before turning to how he portrays the Delphic oracle in each version of this episode.

In the *Lysander*, Plutarch uses the oracular response concerning the Spartan kingship to present Lysander as a master manipulator who did not care what the gods were trying to tell to the people and was only considering what would benefit him politically. According to Plutarch, Lysander convinced Agesilaus to compete with Leotychides for the kinship on the grounds that Leotychides was not in fact Agis's son, but was rather the son of Alcibiades and thus not one of the Heracleidae.[613] Indeed, Plutarch claims that Agis had also believed this to be true and had actually repudiated Leotychides, although the dying

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[612] *De Pythiae oraculis* 398a: ἐγὼ δὲ φαίην ἂν καὶ τῶν ἀναθημάτων τὰ ἐνταυθοῖ μάλιστα συγκινεῖσθαι καὶ συνεπισημαίνειν τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ προνοίᾳ, καὶ τούτων μέρος μηδὲν εἶναι κενὸν μηδ' ἀναίσθητον, ἀλλὰ πεπλῆσθαι πάντα θειότητος.

[613] *Lysander* 22.6-7. See also *Agesilaus* 3.4, 3.8-9.

king was persuaded to change his mind immediately before his death.[614] Unfortunately for Lysander and Agesilaus, however, a certain Diopeithes circulated an oracular response that appeared to predict ill for Sparta should Agesilaus be chosen as king:

> [10] τὸν δ’ Ἀγησίλαον, λαμπρὸν ὄντα τἆλλα καὶ συναγωνιστῇ τῷ Λυσάνδρῳ χρώμενον, ἔβλαπτε Διοπείθης, ἀνὴρ εὐδόκιμος ἐπὶ χρησμολογίᾳ, τοιόνδε μάντευμα προφέρων εἰς τὴν χωλότητα τοῦ Ἀγησιλάου·
>
> > [11] Φράζεο δή,[615] Σπάρτη, καίπερ μεγάλαυχος ἐοῦσα,
> > μὴ σέθεν ἀρτίποδος βλάστῃ χωλὴ βασιλεία.
> > δηρὸν γὰρ μόχθοι σε κατασχήσουσιν ἄελπτοι
> > φθεισίβροτόν[616] τ’ ἐπὶ κῦμα κυλινδόμενον πολέμοιο.
>
> [12] πολλῶν οὖν ὑποκατακλινομένων πρὸς τὸ λόγιον καὶ τρεπομένων πρὸς τὸν Λεωτυχίδαν, ὁ Λύσανδρος οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἔφη τὸν Διοπείθη τὴν μαντείαν ὑπολαμβάνειν· οὐ γὰρ ἂν προσπταίσας τις ἄρχῃ Λακεδαιμονίων, δυσχεραίνειν τὸν θεόν, ἀλλὰ χωλὴν εἶναι τὴν βασιλείαν, εἰ νόθοι καὶ κακῶς γεγονότες βασιλεύσουσι ⟨καὶ μὴ⟩ Ἡρακλεῖδαι. [13] τοιαῦτα

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[614] *Lysander* 22.8-9. As Trego (2014: 41) notes, this detail about Agis’s deathbed confirmation of Leotychides’s paternity does not appear in Xenophon’s description of Agesilaus’s succession. For an analysis of Plutarch’s source material for the *Agesilaus*, see Hamilton (1991) 4208-4213 and Shipley (1997) 46-55. On Plutarch’s use of Xenophon in particular, see Beck (1999) 181-186.

[615] Fontenrose (1978: 150) identifies these opening words as conventional for responses from oracle-collections.

[616] The manuscripts are inconclusive on the exact form of this compound, and the picture in the *Lysander* is muddied further by other citations of the oracular response by both Plutarch (*Agesilaus* 3.7, *De Pythiae oraculis* 399b-c) and Pausanias (3.8.9). The word is a compound either of φθίω or φθείρω (“to destroy”) and βροτός (“mortal”), and is either genitive to modify πολέμοιο or accusative, modifying κῦμα. There is additional disagreement over whether the text should read κυλινδόμενον or κυλινδομένου. For the different readings of this line, see Ziegler (1973) 120, 196. Ultimately, the debate boils down to whether the final line means:

1. “and toward a rolling wave of mortal-destroying war” (φθεισιβρότου, κυλινδόμενον)
2. “and toward a rolling wave of war, bane of mortals” (φθεισίβροτον, κυλινδόμενον)
3. “and toward a mortal-destroying wave of rolling war” (φθεισίβροτον, κυλινδόμενου)

The confusion in the manuscripts has made impossible the task of determining exactly which formula Plutarch followed in the *Lysander* or which form of the compound adjective he used, let alone whether or not he was consistent across his works when citing this oracle. Here, I have printed Ziegler’s (1973: 120) text for the *Lysander*, though it should be noted that Ziegler prints φθερσίβροτον in *Agesilaus* 3.7.

> λέγων καὶ δυνάμενος πλεῖστον ἔπεισε, καὶ γίνεται βασιλεὺς Ἀγησίλαος.[617]
>
> [10] But Agesilaus, who was distinguished in respect to all other things and was working with Lysander as his accomplice, was harmed by Diopeithes, a man renowned for his work as a *chresmologos*,[618] when he circulated a certain oracular response against the lameness of Agesilaus:
>
> [11] Beware, Sparta, although you are proud,
> Lest from you who are agile a lame kingship should be born
> For unexpected griefs will follow you closely,
> And toward the rolling wave of war, bane of mortals.
>
> [12] Then when many people were submitting to the prophecy and turning to support Leotychides, Lysander said that Diopeithes did not interpret the oracle correctly; for it did not mean that the god would be displeased should someone who was lame rule over the Lacedaemonians, but that the kingship would be lame if bastards and the low-born should rule ⟨instead of⟩ the descendants of Heracles. [13] Lysander, saying such things and through his power persuaded the majority, and Agesilaus became king.

In this episode, Plutarch presents Lysander as a clever politician, seeking to exploit the situation and make it advantageous for himself politically regardless of the consequences for Sparta.[619] Agesilaus was, as Plutarch notes, formerly an *eromenos* of Lysander,[620] and apparently someone whom Lysander believed he could control. As soon as Agesilaus was made king, Plutarch shows Lysander acting quickly to try to make Agesilaus nothing more

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[617] *Lysander* 22.10-13, Parke and Wormell §112, Fontenrose Q163.

[618] On the meaning of χρησμολόγος, and the corresponding word χρησμολογία, see the discussion in Chapter 4.

[619] For this interpretation, see also Trego (2014) 56.

[620] *Lysander* 22.6.

than a puppet, with Lysander wielding the real power behind the throne.[621] Additionally, Plutarch portrays Lysander as a skilled rhetorician, managing to convince people that the oracle's words did not mean what nearly everyone believed they did. Both of these themes – Lysander's relentless pursuit of his own political power and his rhetorical skill – recur throughout the *Life*, and are central to understanding who Lysander was as a leader for Plutarch.[622] Nevertheless, Lysander comes across as a much less conniving and manipulative figure in the *Lysander* than he does in the same episode in the *Agesilaus*, suggesting that Plutarch has presented a more generous image of Lysander in his own *Life*, while treating his actions more harshly in the *Life* of another.

While in the *Lysander* Plutarch does not say what the correct interpretation of the oracle was, simply presenting the contrasting interpretations of Diopeithes and Lysander and noting whose opinion ultimately swayed the people, he is explicit in the *Agesilaus* that Lysander's interpretation was incorrect and Agesilaus's ascension was contrary to the will of the gods. Prior to quoting the oracular response in the *Agesilaus* Plutarch describes Diopeithes as a *chresmologos* who was "well-stocked with ancient oracles and seeming to be remarkably wise concerning the gods."[623] After giving Diopeithes such an introduction, Plutarch then announces that according to Diopeithes the oracle was proof that "it would not be religiously correct (θεμιτόν) for a lame man to become king of the Lacedaemonians."[624] Before the readers even arrive at the oracle and Lysander's interpretation of it, Plutarch has already established for the reader the credibility of both

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[621] *Lysander* 23.6. As Plutarch shows in *Lysander* 23.8-13, Lysander was not entirely successful in neutralizing Agesilaus, who was aware of the older man's scheming.

[622] On Plutarch's characterization of Lysander, see especially Hamilton (1991) 4217-4218.

[623] *Agesilaus* 3.6: μαντειῶν τε παλαιῶν ὑπόπλεως καὶ δοκῶν περὶ τὰ θεῖα σοφὸς εἶναι καὶ περιττός.

[624] *Agesilaus* 3.7: οὗτος οὐκ ἔφη θεμιτὸν εἶναι χωλὸν γενέσθαι τῆς Λακεδαίμονος βασιλέα.

Diopeithes and his interpretation of the oracle in much stronger language than appears in the *Lysander*. Shipley argues that Plutarch has arranged his material in the *Agesilaus* so that the readers can "approach Agesilaos' reign, like the Spartans, without the complication of doubts about the legality of the succession; the reader, again like the Spartans, will be enlightened later."[625] But while it is true that Plutarch certainly reveals the oracle's meaning unambiguously later in the *Agesilaus*, he does not hide the correct interpretation of the oracle from the readers in his account of Agesilaus's succession. Rather, the opposite is true: Plutarch suggests to the reader what the correct interpretation of the oracle was in the opening chapters of the *Agesilaus*, and then goes on to confirm that interpretation at the end of the *Life* as well as in the *synkrisis*.

After Agesilaus's ascension, Plutarch does not mention this oracle again until nearly the end of the *Life*. After the Spartans suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Thebans at Leuctra and were facing the threat of an invasion into Spartan territory itself, Plutarch claims that the Spartans only then recalled the oracle and the god's warning about Agesilaus:

> οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς, ὡς ἀφίσταντο μὲν οἱ σύμμαχοι, προσεδοκᾶτο δὲ νενικηκὼς Ἐπαμεινώνδας καὶ μέγα φρονῶν ἐμβαλεῖν εἰς Πελοπόννησον, ἔννοια τῶν χρησμῶν ἐνέπεσε τότε πρὸς τὴν χωλότητα τοῦ Ἀγησιλάου, καὶ δυσθυμία πολλὴ καὶ πτοία πρὸς τὸ θεῖον, ὡς διὰ τοῦτο πραττούσης κακῶς τῆς πόλεως, ὅτι τὸν ἀρτίποδα τῆς βασιλείας ἐκβαλόντες, εἵλοντο χωλὸν καὶ πεπηρωμένον· ὃ παντὸς μᾶλλον αὐτοὺς ἐδίδασκε φράζεσθαι καὶ φυλάττεσθαι[626] τὸ δαιμόνιον.[627]

[625] Shipley (1997) 92.

[626] Here I have followed Flacelière and Chambry (1973: 132) in printing φυλάττεσθαι, rather than Ziegler's (1973: 232) φυλάσσεσθαι. Ziegler's decision to print the -σσ- form only here in the *Life* is not merited.

[627] *Agesilaus* 30.1

> However, shunned by their allies and expecting Epaminondas, haughty with victory, to invade the Peloponnesus, thought of the oracles occurred then to many [Spartans] concerning the lameness of Agesilaus, and a great sadness and dismay concerning the divine, because the city was faring badly since after expelling the surefooted man from the kingship, they chose the lame and deformed one, which move in particular the divine instructed them to beware of and to be on their guard against.

Plutarch makes it clear here that the Spartans regretted their choice too late: the divine (τὸ δαιμόνιον) had instructed them to avoid a lame kingship, and they ignored this warning. In this passage, Plutarch places the blame on the Spartans for failing to understand the oracle, instead of on Agesilaus or Lysander for promoting a false interpretation. This changes, however, in the *synkrisis*. There, Plutarch blames Agesilaus directly for deliberately and knowingly rejecting the god's advice:

> Ἀγησίλαος δὲ τὴν βασιλείαν ἔδοξε λαβεῖν οὔτε τὰ πρὸς θεοὺς ἀμέμπτος[628] οὔτε τὰ πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, κρίνας νοθείας Λεωτυχίδην, ὃν υἱὸν [αὐτοῦ] ἀπέδειξεν ὁ ἀδελφὸς γνήσιον, τὸν δὲ χρησμὸν κατειρωνευσάμενος τὸν περὶ τῆς χωλότητος.[629]
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> But Agesilaus seemed in taking the kingship to be blameless neither towards the gods nor towards men, because he accused Leotychides of illegitimate birth, a man whom Agesilaus's brother acknowledged as [his own] legitimate son, and because he treated jokingly the oracle about his lameness.

[628] I have preserved the manuscript reading of ἄμεμπτος instead of Ziegler's (1973: 343) adoption of the adverbial ἀμέμπτως. Both readings are ultimately identical in meaning, and as the manuscript reading ἄμεμπτος is grammatically sound and coherent with regard to the context, I see no compelling reason to emend the text.

[629] *Agesilaus-Pompey* 1.2.

Here Plutarch does not hold back, and chastises Agesilaus directly for not taking seriously the words of the oracle promising ill for Sparta. Lysander does not escape blame in the *synkrisis* for his role in the affair either, since Plutarch goes on to repeat his accusation against Agesilaus for not allowing the Spartans to obey the oracle and adds the further claim that, even if the claim against Leotychides were true, the Spartans might have been able to find a different heir to the throne "if Lysander had not obscured the oracle for Agesilaus's sake."[630] Here Plutarch argues that Agesilaus and Lysander knew that what they were doing was wrong and against the wishes of the divine when they lied to the people about both Leotychides and the meaning of the oracle, making the two of them directly responsible for the disaster at Leuctra. As always with *synkriseis*, these direct attacks on Agesilaus and Lysander together only suggest, rather than instructing readers as to how they must interpret the events of the *Lives*. Considering the *Agesilaus* as a whole, in each of these passages in the *Life* Plutarch singles out different people as responsible for the misinterpretation of the oracle: in the opening of the *Life* Plutarch emphasizes Lysander's role as the mastermind behind the interpretation of the oracle. At the end of the *Life* it is the Spartans who are to blame for having believed him. Finally, in the *synkrisis* it is Agesilaus himself who is responsible because he was a willing and active participant in Lysander's deception. In this way, Plutarch uses the oracle to convey a paradoxical aspect of Agesilaus and his kingship. Plutarch praises Agesilaus for his abilities as a leader in one breath,[631] and then in the next, as with Theseus in his *Life*, suggests that he never should have become king and that his life and rule were somehow contrary to the will of the

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[630] *Agesilaus-Pompey* 2.2: εἰ μὴ δι' Ἀγησίλαον ἐπεσκότησε τῷ χρησμῷ Λύσανδρος.

[631] See especially *Agesilaus* 40.3.

divine.[632] As in the *Theseus*, in the *Agesilaus* too Plutarch uses the oracle to explore the complexity of Agesilaus's character and his complicated legacy as a leader.[633]

Considering the portrayal of the oracle in this oracle story, the first question is whether this episode should even be considered a Delphic oracle story. In both the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus* the *chresmologos* Diopeithes is said to have called the Spartans' attention to the oracular response, and neither *Life* mentions Delphi or a consultation of the god associated with this oracular response. Instead, in the *Lysander* Plutarch says that Diopeithes circulated this oracular response (τοιόνδε μάντευμα προφέρων), and the god (ὁ θεός) is named as the one who would be displeased should the Spartans choose a lame king. In the *Agesilaus* Diopeithes is described as someone who had collected many ancient prophecies (μαντειῶν τε παλαιῶν ὑπόπλεως), and again the god is described as being the force behind the oracle. This oracular response also appears in *De Pythiae oraculis*,[634] and while Plutarch is no more specific here than in the *Lives* as to the speaker of the oracle, its inclusion in one of the Delphic dialogues suggests that Plutarch viewed it as Delphic.[635] That this oracle was associated with Delphi in antiquity is clear from Pausanias, who refers to it as "the oracle from Delphi" (τὸ μάντευμα … τὸ ἐκ Δελφῶν)[636] and he goes so far as to chastise the Spartans for failing to ask the Delphic

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[632] Hamilton (1991: 4210-4211) takes this comparison one step further, suggesting that Agesilaus should never have been allowed to live after his physical condition was discovered.

[633] For a discussion of Plutarch's tendency in the *Agesilaus* to alternate between praise and blame of the Spartan king, see Hamilton (1991) 4205-4207.

[634] *De Pythiae oraculis* 399b-c.

[635] For this argument, see Fontenrose (1978: 149), though Fontenrose (1978: 121) elsewhere describes this oracle as "not really a Delphic response."

[636] Pausanias 3.8.9.

oracle for assistance in interpreting the response.[637] It is clear, however, that within the scope of Plutarch's texts at least this oracular response was not produced through consultation of the oracle at the time, but must be presumed to have been received far earlier, and was evidently a part of an oracle collection.[638]

The clarity of the oracle's words stands at the heart of the conflict between Agesilaus and Leotychides. Within the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus* Plutarch acknowledges that the Spartans were deceived about the meaning of the god's words by Agesilaus and Lysander, leading to the elevation of the lame Agesilaus to the kingship. Nevertheless, in the *Lysander*, *Agesilaus*, and *Agesilaus-Pompey* Plutarch emphasizes the clear and literal meaning of this oracular response. It was Lysander who argues – convincingly – that the oracle did not actually mean the words literally. In the *Agesilaus* and the *Agesilaus-Pompey* Plutarch states directly that Lysander's interpretation was faulty and was at least partially responsible for what happened at Leuctra. Thus Plutarch acknowledges that the oracle was misunderstood, while simultaneously indicating to the reader that the oracle was not deliberately ambiguous or even unclear: it was Lysander and Agesilaus who made the oracle unclear. In this they were aided by the oracle being in verse, for Lysander's interpretation of the oracle requires the Spartans to being open to a more poetic or non-literal interpretation of what constituted a "lame kingship" (χωλὴ βασιλεία). Additionally, in *De Pythiae oraculis*, Sarapion uses this response as an example of a clear prediction that proves the prophetic ability of the oracle (in response to Boethus's claim that oracles are

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[637] Pausanias 3.8.10: "but the Spartans, although it was a possibility for them, did not take the question back to Delphi" (Λακεδαιμόνιοι δέ, καίπερ ἐπὶ σφίσιν ὄν, οὐκ ἐπανήγαγον τὸ ἀμφισβήτημα ἐς Δελφούς).

[638] Parke and Wormell (1956.2: 50) argues that this oracle is "probably to be regarded as an oracle already received and preserved in the records of the Pythii."

vague so as to never be wrong). Consequently, while Fontenrose describes this as an ambiguous oracular response (Mode C2), Plutarch does not, in any of the three works. This oracle *was* clear – it was Lysander who tricked the people into believing that the oracle did not actually mean the words that it said.

Lysander's behavior in the two *Lives* shows how the god's words could be easily manipulated and misconstrued when there was a political battle to be won. Even a seemingly clear oracular response could be twisted and used for nefarious purposes. Here, everyone initially understood the oracle, and it was through public debate that Lysander was able to undermine the god's message. That the god was vindicated in the end, however, Plutarch makes particularly clear in the *Agesilaus.* Nevertheless, Lysander's use of the oracle in this oracle story in both the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus* is not that different from that of Themistocles. Both Lysander and Themistocles went against a majority view in an interpretation of an oracle. Unfortunately for Lysander and Agesilaus, where Themistocles's interpretation was correct, theirs was not.

c. bribing the oracle

Lysander's interactions with the Delphic oracle in the *Lysander* take a dramatic turn for the worse as Lysander's formerly amicable relationship with Agesilaus crumbled under the weight of their mutual desire for glory (φιλοτιμία).[639] Plutarch describes how Lysander's ambitions were frustrated by Agesilaus, who was not as cooperative as Lysander had hoped

[639] On the motif of φιλοτιμία in the *Lysander* and the *Agesilaus*, see Shipley (1997) 12-13, 75-77 and Bearzot (2005). On Plutarch's concept of φιλοτιμία more broadly, see Nikolaidis (2012), Schmitz (2012), and Aloumpi (2017).

he would be.[640] When Lysander realized that Agesilaus was actively thwarting him and seeking to reduce his power, he plotted to become king himself. To accomplish this, Plutarch shows Lysander's turn: from manipulating the people with the oracle's words to attempting to manipulate the oracular sanctuaries themselves, Lysander hoped to use the people's piety to deceive them and provide support for his proposed changes to the Spartan constitution that would clear his path to becoming king.[641] In what follows, I examine how Plutarch describes three attempts Lysander made to convince the people through the divine: selective collection and arrangement of oracular responses, bribing the god's attendants at the oracular sanctuaries, and finally a complex plot involving a supposed child of Apollo. Through these interactions with oracles and with the Delphic oracular sanctuary in particular, Plutarch reveals how Lysander used the Spartans' piety and respect for Delphi against them in his bid for greater personal power. In the process, however, Plutarch rejects utterly the notion that the Delphic oracle was susceptible to bribery or to the type of manipulation that Lysander was attempting to employ.

Plutarch describes first how Lysander approached the problem with tactics similar to those he employed to have Agesilaus chosen as king: a combination of rhetoric and selective readings of prophetic statements. After memorizing a speech prepared by Cleon

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[640] *Lysander* 23.1-24.6.

[641] Plutarch is not consistent in his description of exactly how Lysander intended to change the nature of the Spartan kingship either within the *Lysander* or across his works. Davies (2018: 530) describes the problem succinctly: "Plutarch provides us with a clear statement of the Spartiate version of Lysander's planned reform in the *Life of Agesilaus*; a presentation of both possibilities in the *Life of Lysander* which gives significantly more attention to the Heraclid version; ambiguous references later in the *Life of Lysander*; and a discussion in the *Comparison of Lysander and Sulla* which seems to concern itself with the Spartiate version of the reform." On the historicity of Plutarch's tale, see also Powell (2010) 121-129.

of Halicarnassus,[642] Plutarch says that Lysander decided to turn to the divine in an attempt to make the people more amenable to listen to his speech:

> ἔπειτα τὴν ἀτοπίαν καὶ τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ καινοτομουμένου πράγματος ὁρῶν ἰταμωτέρας δεόμενον βοηθείας, ὥσπερ ἐν τραγῳδίᾳ μηχανὴν αἴρων ἐπὶ τοὺς πολίτας, λόγια πυθόχρηστα καὶ χρησμοὺς συνετίθει καὶ κατεσκεύαζεν, ὡς οὐδὲν ὠφελησόμενος ὑπὸ τῆς Κλέωνος δεινότητος, εἰ μὴ φόβῳ θεοῦ τινι καὶ δεισιδαιμονίᾳ προεκπλήξας καὶ χειρωσάμενος ὑπαγάγοι πρὸς τὸν λόγον τοὺς πολίτας.[643]
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> Then, seeing the peculiarity and the magnitude of the deed he was inventing required even more daring assistance, as if raising a *deus ex machina* before the people in a tragedy, he collected and arranged Pythian prophecies and oracular responses, on the grounds that the cleverness of Cleon would not be of use to him unless he should attract the citizens to his position by scaring them beforehand and subduing them with some fear of the god and with superstition.

Once again Plutarch shows Lysander employing methods similar to those of Themistocles when he was trying to convince the Athenians to make their stand against the Persians at Salamis, tying these two episodes together through the use of his *deus ex machina* simile.[644] As with Themistocles, Plutarch is explicit about Lysander's purpose: he was not using the oracular responses to inform his decisions as a leader, but rather to frighten the people, manipulating them through their fear and respect for the gods in order to make them vulnerable to his plots. Through Lysander's plan Plutarch shows the political power wielded by the oracles, as well as how this very power made them subject to abuse by those

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[642] *Lysander* 25.1. In turning to this speech at all, Plutarch shows Lysander acting in a distinctly un-Spartan fashion, behaving in a manner more similar to the Athenians than his fellow countrymen.

[643] *Lysander* 25.1-2.

[644] See *Themistocles* 10.1.

with less than pure motives. Plutarch's description of Lysander's actions as collecting (συνετίθει) and arranging (κατεσκεύαζεν) oracular responses suggests that Lysander at this stage is not soliciting new oracular responses, but rather acting as a *chresmologos* himself, gathering oracles that, with some curating, would give him the appearance of having the divine on his side.

Plutarch does not say when or how Lysander brought these oracular responses before the people, instead moving on directly to Lysander's second, more elaborate, scheme. Plutarch claims that Lysander, acting more brazenly, went – or sent a messenger on his behalf – to the oracular sanctuaries in Delphi, Dodona, and Siwah and attempted to bribe the human agents of the gods:

> Ἔφορος μὲν οὖν φησιν αὐτόν, ὡς τήν τε Πυθίαν ἐπιχειρήσας διαφθεῖραι καὶ τὰς Δωδωνίδας αὖθις ἀναπείθων διὰ Φερεκλέους ἀπέτυχεν, εἰς Ἄμμωνος ἀναβῆναι καὶ διαλέγεσθαι τοῖς προφήταις πολὺ χρυσίον διδόντα, τοὺς δὲ δυσχεραίνοντας εἰς Σπάρτην τινὰς ἀποστεῖλαι τοῦ Λυσάνδρου κατηγορήσοντας.[645]
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> Ephorus says that then Lysander, after he failed in his attempt to corrupt the Pythia and, trying again, failed to bribe the priestesses at Dodona through Pherecles, went to [the oracle] of Ammon and spoke with the prophets, giving them a lot of gold. But the priests, being indignant, dispatched some people to Sparta to bring an accusation against Lysander.

Plutarch names in each case the human servants of Apollo (Πυθίαν), Zeus (Δωδωνίδας), and Ammon (προφήταις) at their respective oracular sanctuaries, saying that it was them that Lysander was trying and failing to corrupt, trying to convince the prophetic

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[645] *Lysander* 25.3.

mouthpieces of the gods to lie on his behalf. As with Demosthenes's accusation that the Pythia had "Philippized" in the *Demosthenes*, here again Plutarch addresses the issue of the corruption of the Delphic priestess and of her oracular responses. But while in the *Demosthenes* Plutarch only shows through the structure of his narrative that the Pythia had not in fact been bribed, here Plutarch is explicit: Lysander's advances were rebuffed at all three sanctuaries. The human servants may in theory be susceptible to manipulation, but Plutarch is emphatic that they did not actually give in to this temptation. The priests of Ammon not only refused Lysander's offer, they were so offended by his brazen attempt that they lodged a complaint against the general in Sparta. Plutarch's message from this episode is clear: neither the Pythia, nor the priestesses of Dodona, nor the priests at the sanctuary of Ammon were actually susceptible to bribery. Powerful leaders such as Lysander may have tried to bend the oracle to his will, but they did so unsuccessfully.

The final example of Lysander attempting to manipulate the oracle is complex, and more than slightly confused. Parke and Wormell argued that this final story may have actually been an alternative version of Lysander's bribing of the Delphic oracle recorded in the preceding passage.[646] As I will demonstrate, while the stratagem Plutarch describes is a part of Lysander's larger project of using the divine, and the Delphic oracle in particular, to secure the Spartan kingship for himself, in Plutarch's text it represents an altogether separate plot from the ones that precede it in the narrative, and as the third and most elaborate of the plots listed serves as a dramatic capstone to Lysander's divine machinations. Because interpretation of the text is debated, I quote it in its entirety below.

[646] Parke and Wormell (1956.1) 204.

After explaining how Lysander got off the hook for his attempted bribery of the priests of Ammon, Plutarch narrates the following story: [647]

> [1] ἦν γύναιον ἐν Πόντῳ κύειν ἐξ Ἀπόλλωνος φάμενον, ᾧ πολλοὶ μέν, ὡς εἰκὸς ἦν ἠπίστουν, πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ προσεῖχον, ὥστε καὶ τεκούσης παιδάριον ἄρρεν, ὑπὸ πολλῶν καὶ γνωρίμων σπουδάζεσθαι τὴν ἐκτροφὴν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν. ὄνομα δὲ τῷ παιδὶ Σειληνὸς ἐκ δή τινος αἰτίας ἐτέθη. [2] ταύτην λαβὼν ὁ Λύσανδρος ἀρχήν, τὰ λοιπὰ παρ' ἑαυτοῦ προσετεκταίνετο καὶ συνύφαινεν, οὐκ ὀλίγοις χρώμενος οὐδὲ φαύλοις τοῦ μύθου συναγωνισταῖς, οἳ τήν τε φήμην τῆς γενέσεως τοῦ παιδὸς εἰς πίστιν ἀνυπόπτως προῆγον, ἄλλον τε λόγον ἐκ Δελφῶν ἀντικομίσαντες εἰς τὴν Σπάρτην κατέβαλον καὶ διέσπειραν, [3] ὡς ἐν γράμμασιν ἀπορρήτοις ὑπὸ τῶν ἱερέων φυλάττοιντο παμπάλαιοι δή τινες χρησμοί, καὶ λαβεῖν οὐκ ἔξεστι τούτους οὐδ' ἐντυχεῖν θεμιτόν, εἰ μή τις ἄρα γεγονὼς ἐξ Ἀπόλλωνος ἀφίκοιτο τῷ πολλῷ χρόνῳ καὶ σύνθημα τοῖς φυλάττουσι τῆς γενέσεως γνώριμον παρασχών, κομίσαιτο τὰς δέλτους ἐν αἷς ἦσαν οἱ χρησμοί. [4] τούτων δὲ προκατεσκευασμένων ἔδει τὸν Σειληνὸν ἐλθόντα τοὺς χρησμοὺς ἀπαιτεῖν ὡς Ἀπόλλωνος παῖδα, τοὺς δὲ συμπράττοντας τῶν ἱερέων ἐξακριβοῦν ἕκαστα καὶ διαπυνθάνεσθαι περὶ τῆς γενέσεως, τέλος δὲ πεπεισμένους δῆθεν ὡς Ἀπόλλωνος υἱῷ δεῖξαι τὰ γράμματα, [5] τὸν δὲ ἀναγνῶναι πολλῶν παρόντων ἄλλας τε μαντείας καὶ ἧς ἕνεκα ⟨πάντα⟩ πέπλασται,[648] τὴν περὶ τῆς βασιλείας, ὡς ἄμεινον εἴη καὶ λώϊον Σπαρτιάταις ἐκ τῶν ἀρίστων πολιτῶν αἱρουμένοις τοὺς βασιλέας. [6] ἤδη δὲ τοῦ Σειληνοῦ μειρακίου γεγονότος καὶ πρὸς τὴν πρᾶξιν ἥκοντος,

[647] Plutarch gives a lengthy introduction to this story: "But the entire plot and intrigue of the invention, which was not without care nor begun by chance, but having taken in many and great beginnings, proceeding just as in a mathematical diagram through difficult and hard-to-come-by premises to its conclusion, we will narrate, following the argument of a man who was a historian and a philosopher" (*Lysander* 25.5: τὴν δὲ ὅλην ἐπιβουλὴν καὶ σκευωρίαν τοῦ πλάσματος οὐ φαύλην οὖσαν οὐδὲ ἀφ' ὧν ἔτυχεν ἀρξαμένην, ἀλλὰ πολλὰς καὶ μεγάλας ὑποθέσεις, ὥσπερ ἐν διαγράμματι μαθηματικῷ, προσλαβοῦσαν καὶ διὰ λημμάτων χαλεπῶν καὶ δυσπορίστων ἐπὶ τὸ συμπέρασμα προϊοῦσαν, ἡμεῖς ἀναγράψομεν ἀνδρὸς ἱστορικοῦ καὶ φιλοσόφου λόγῳ κατακολουθήσαντες). This introduction, and in particular the emphasis on the trustworthiness of Plutarch's (unnamed) source, serves as a defense of what is an admittedly rather far-fetched tale.

[648] I follow Flacelière and Chambry (1971: 207) in adopting Reiske's emendation of the manuscripts' πλάσαι to ⟨πάντα⟩ πέπλασται.

ἐξέπεσε τοῦ δράματος ὁ Λύσανδρος ἀτολμίᾳ τῶν ὑποκριτῶν καὶ συνεργῶν ἑνός, ὡς ἐπ᾽ αὐτὸ τὸ ἔργον ἦλθεν, ἀποδειλιάσαντος καὶ ἀναδύντος. οὐ μὴν ἐφωράθη γε τοῦ Λυσάνδρου ζῶντος οὐθέν, ἀλλὰ μετὰ τὴν τελευτήν.[649]

[1] There was a woman in Pontus who said that she was pregnant by Apollo, which many people did not believe, as is reasonable; but many also heeded her, so that also when she gave birth to a male child, his nurture and care was taken seriously by many important people. For some reason, the name given to the child was Silenus. [2] Lysander, taking this as a beginning, supplied and wove together the rest on his own, using not few nor lowly accomplices for the story, who advanced without suspicion the report of the child's birth; and carrying back another tale[650] from Delphi to Sparta they added and spread it about [3] that certain very old oracular responses were being guarded by the priests in secret records, and it was not possible to take these nor was it religiously correct to read them, unless someone born from Apollo should arrive after a long time and, providing a recognized symbol of his descent to those guarding [them] should recover the tablets bearing the oracular responses. [4] With these preparations made, it was necessary for Silenus, having arrived, to demand the oracular responses as a child of Apollo, and for the priests aiding in the plot to examine in detail and inquire into the child's birth, and finally, persuaded then that he was a child of Apollo, to show him the records. [5] Then, with everyone present, Silenus was to read aloud the other prophecies and the one on account of which it had all been invented, the one concerning the kingship, that it would be better and more advantageous for the Spartans to choose their kings from the best citizens. [6]

[649] *Lysander* 26.1-6.

[650] I disagree with Perrin's (1916: 307) interpretation of λόγον as an oracular response. Plutarch does not call oracular responses from Delphi λόγοι, referring to a response instead typically as a χρησμός, μαντεῖον, μάντευμα, μαντεία, or λόγιον (accompanied by the adjective πυθόχηρστον in *Lysander* 25.2 and *Theseus* 26.5). Plutarch's use of χρησμός later in the same passage to refer clearly to words supposedly said by the Pythia suggests that he wished to make clear that what Lysander's accomplices (συναγωνισταῖς) brought from Delphi to Sparta was not an oracular response, but rather a story just like the tale (μύθου) of the child that they were also spreading around at Lysander's behest.

> But when Silenus became a youth and was ready for the deed, Lysander was deprived of his drama by the cowardice of one of the actors and colleagues, who shrank from the deed when it came time for it and was unable to do it. This, however, was not discovered while Lysander was alive, but only after his death.

This is the longest and most intricate of the plots Plutarch presents Lysander as having designed to use the divine to convince the people. As noted previously, there are enough inconsistencies and fundamental differences between this tale and the episode that preceded it in Plutarch's narrative to establish these as two separate attempts by Lysander to use the divine to bring about the changes he wanted in Sparta.[651] Unlike in the earlier scenario, here it would appear that some of the priests, at least, either were actually corrupted by Lysander, or were to be corrupted had the plan not been abandoned. Having failed to convince the Pythia to speak the words he wanted, Lysander is forced to come up with this admittedly convoluted and drawn-out plan to bring about the same result. By showing Lysander driven to this length and still failing, Plutarch rejects the notion that the words of the Delphic oracle could be somehow suspect. Additionally, through this story Plutarch shows Lysander's complete lack of care for anything other than himself and his personal goals. Unlike Lycurgus, Lysander did not even bother to ask the Delphic oracle if his plan would be beneficial for Sparta, but instead appears to have composed on his own a fake oracular response, putting words into the god's mouth. When the Pythia refused to read it, he created this plot to pass it off as a Delphic oracular response even without the

[651] Parke and Wormell (1956.1: 205-207) argue that this plot, if it is indeed true, actually was started before the death of Agis II and was abandoned when Lysander succeeded in placing Agesilaus on the throne. This is entirely inconsistent with how Plutarch presents it, however, for within the *Lysander* it appears as Lysander's final attempt to take power from Agesilaus, not Agis.

Pythia. From the very beginning Plutarch shows Lysander seeking to force the answer he wanted and showing more of a concern for himself and his ambitions than for Sparta or the divine.

As a final note, it is clear from this entire series of attempts to manipulate the people through the oracular sanctuaries that Plutarch's Lysander clearly believed that the Pythia had control over the words she was speaking, since otherwise his attempts to bribe her would have been for nothing. This does not answer the question about what control Plutarch believed the Pythia had over the oracular responses under normal circumstances. It does, however, demonstrate the political pressure the interlocutors of the dialogues described as brought against the oracle's human guides, both the Pythia and the priests – only in the end, it was not the Pythia who was corrupted, but the priests who were in on the plot involving Selinus; and yet the plot ultimately failed and Lysander's royal ambitions died with him.

d. Lysander' death

Plutarch's final association of Lysander with Delphi occurs after the general's death, when Plutarch reveals that Lysander had received previously a verse oracle foretelling his own downfall. After detailing events leading up to the armed conflict between Thebes and Sparta, Plutarch describes the disaster that befell the Spartans at Haliartus, when, caught by surprise by the Thebans and their allies, Lysander was killed suddenly and his men turned tail and fled, being cut down as they went.[652] Plutarch then notes that when the Spartan king Pausanias arrived, he negotiated a truce with the Thebans to recover

[652] *Lysander* 27.1-28.12.

Lysander's body,[653] which they carried to Boeotia and buried in a place "next to the road going from Delphi to Chaeroneia" (παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν εἰς Χαιρώνειαν ἐκ Δελφῶν πορευομένοις).[654] It is at this point in the narrative that Plutarch explains how two Phocian soldiers were discussing the events that had ensued, including how Lysander had been killed just after he crossed the Hoplites river. Plutarch describes how a Spartan who happened to overhear the conversation between the two Phocians revealed that Lysander's place of death fulfilled a prophecy the general had received sometime previously:

> ἀκούσαντα δὲ τὸν Σπαρτιάτην ἐκδακρῦσαι καὶ εἰπεῖν ὡς ἄφευκτόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώπῳ τὸ πεπρωμένον. ἦν γάρ ὡς ἔοικε τῷ Λυσάνδρῳ δεδομένος χρησμὸς οὕτως ἔχων·
>
> Ὁπλίτην κελάδοντα φυλάξασθαί σε κελεύω
> γῆς τε δράκονθ' υἱὸν δόλιον κατόπισθεν ἰόντα.[655]
>
> Hearing this, the Spartan burst into tears and said that destiny is not escapable for humans. For, as it seems, an oracle had been given to Lysander as follows:
>
> Against a sounding *Hoplites* I order you to be on your guard
> And a dragon, crafty child of earth, approaching from behind.

The first line of the verse oracular response the unnamed Spartan has already explained: Lysander died shortly after crossing a river called Hoplites, thus proving the oracle's words of caution to have been warranted. Plutarch explains the second line after he quotes the oracular response, stating that "the Haliartian man who killed Lysander, named Neochorus, had a dragon as his shield's emblem; and this is what the oracular response is understood

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[653] *Lysander* 29.1-3.

[654] *Lysander* 29.4.

[655] *Lysander* 29.7, Parke and Wormell §175, Fontenrose Q199. As with the lame kingship oracle, Plutarch does not explicitly identify this response as Delphic, though the nature of its inclusion in *De Pythiae oraculis* (see below) suggest that it should be seen as such.

to indicate."[656] Within the *Lysander* Plutarch does not discuss Lysander's interpretation of this response. The unnamed Spartan's conclusion that the oracle story proves that you cannot escape your fate suggests that it is possible Lysander may have attempted to do so, but Plutarch gives no indication of what these attempts may have entailed.

Plutarch reveals more information about this oracle story in *De Pythiae oraculis*. Theon, arguing that in the past oracles were given in verse because it made them easier to remember,[657] acknowledges that this did not always work since mortals could still forget or misunderstand, as in the case of Lysander.[658] Theon claims that "Lysander, not recognizing the hill Orchalides, also called Alopecus, and the river Hoplites, 'and a dragon, crafty child of earth, approaching from behind,' fell in those very places defeated by a Haliartian man named Neochoros who was carrying a shield bearing an emblem of a snake."[659] The reference to Orchalides likely refers to an oracular response Plutarch says in the *Lysander* that the Thebans received from the sanctuary of Ismenus, which he claims also referred to the battle of Haliartus, although he does not indicate a connection to Lysander there.[660] Theon thus presents Lysander as either having forgotten this oracle or

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[656] *Lysander* 29.9: ὁ δὲ ἀποκτείνας τὸν Λύσανδρον Ἁλιάρτιος ἀνὴρ ὄνομα Νεόχωρος ἐπίσημον εἶχε τῆς ἀσπίδος δράκοντα· καὶ τοῦτο σημαίνειν ὁ χρησμὸς εἰκάζετο.

[657] *De Pythiae oraculis* 407f.

[658] *De Pythiae orauclis* 408a-b.

[659] *De Pythiae oraculis* 408a-b: Λύσανδρος δὲ καὶ παντάπασιν ἀγνοήσας τὸν Ὀρχαλίδην λόφον καὶ Ἀλώπεκον προσαγορευόμενον καὶ τὸν Ὁπλίτην ποταμόν 'γῆς τε δράκονθ' υἱὸν δόλιον κατόπισθεν ἰόντα' μάχῃ κρατηθεὶς ἔπεσεν ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις ὑπὸ Νεοχώρου Ἁλιαρτίου ἀνδρὸς ἀσπίδα φοροῦντος ἐπίσημον ὄφιν ἔχουσαν.

[660] *Lysander* 29.11-12: "'Keep watch over the border while lying in wait for wolves with spears / And the hill Orchalides, which a fox never abandons.' The place around Delium signifies the border, where Boeotia neighbors Attica, and the hill Orchalides, which now they call Alopecus, lies in the parts of Haliartus which face Mt. Helicon" ('ἐσχατιὰν πεφύλαξο λύκους καμάκεσσι δοκεύων / καὶ λόφον Ὀρχαλίδην, ὃν ἀλώπηξ οὔποτε λείπει.' τὸν μὲν οὖν περὶ Δήλιον τόπον ἐσχατιὰν προσεῖπε, καθ' ὃν ἡ Βοιωτία τῇ Ἀττικῇ σύνορός ἐστιν, Ὀρχαλίδην δὲ λόφον, ὃν νῦν Ἀλώπεκον καλοῦσιν, ἐν τοῖς πρὸς τὸν Ἑλικῶνα μέρεσι τοῦ Ἁλιάρτου κείμενον).

as having failed to recognize the place, not having misinterpreted it because it was confusing. Fontenrose describes this oracle story as having elements of legends or folktales,[661] by which he means that "the terms used or the asserted condition of fulfillment mislead the receiver, falsely reassuring or discouraging him, because they are obscure or because words are not employed in their original meanings." In this case, Fontenrose argues that the recipient (Lysander) understood the words to be warning him against one type of creature or person, but actually a different type was meant, and confusion resulted because the god used a word in an obscure way: the god was not warning Lysander to be on his guard against a hoplite, but when he was near the river Hoplites; and it was not a dragon who would approach from behind, but a man with a snake on his shield.[662] Similarly, Parke and Wormell claim that Plutarch's "interpretation is evidently rather forced and… it appears as if strong efforts were made to connect the oracle with the circumstances of Lysander's death, though its ambiguities were not particularly susceptive of such interpretation."[663] This is altogether different from how Plutarch presents the oracular response in either the *Lysander* or has Theon explain it in *De Pythiae oraculis*. In the dialogue, Theon presents it as a forgotten response, not misunderstood. In the *Lysander* Plutarch is more vague, but certainly does not suggest the confusion Fontenrose identifies. It is true that both this and the Ismenian oracular response involve some aspect of wordplay in the interpretation: the child of earth was a man named "new land" (Neochorus), and the hill that foxes never abandoned was called "foxy" (Alopecus). Plutarch does not dwell on

[661] Fontenrose (1978) 58.

[662] Fontenrose (1978) 61.

[663] Parke and Wormell (1956.1) 208.

the difficulty of interpretation, however, presenting these instead simply as oracles foretelling the battle of Haliartus which came true.

Plutarch addresses Lysander's death again in the *synkrisis,* where he chides Lysander for having thrown his life away ingloriously,[664] although he does say that perhaps it was the consequence of evil fortune (δυστυχία... ἴσως ἐπράχθη τινί).[665] The difference between these two interpretations – it was fated versus he could have acted differently – reveals this incident as an episode to which Plutarch in particular intended his readers to apply their own judgement. Looking back to the earlier oracle stories throughout the *Life,* Plutarch shows repeatedly that Lysander did not think that there would be consequences to misinterpreting or ignoring oracles: his own death shows that this assumption is not true.

e. *Agis*

Before turning to the final *Life* under consideration, it is worth considering briefly the *Agis* in light of the *Lysander*, since in the *Agis and Cleomenes* Plutarch explores the life of another Spartan king who, like Lysander, attempted to change the Spartan constitution and, again as with Lysander, also failed to follow Lycurgus's model. After describing at length how Agis IV and Leonidas II were at odds with each other, and how Agis's proposed *rhetra* aiming to return Sparta to the way it was under Lycurgus, failed by only a single vote,[666] Plutarch claims that Lysander son of Libys (a descendant of the Lysander of the *Lysander*) brought an indictment against Leonidas based on a law that forbade a descendant of Heracles to have children with a foreign woman and also stripped Leonidas of his power

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[664] *Lysander-Sulla* 4.3-5.

[665] *Lysander-Sulla* 4.3.

[666] *Agis* 11.1.

through a law meant to ensure that Sparta's kings maintained good relations with the gods.[667] Plutarch provides his readers with a description of how this latter law was intended to be used:

> ταῦτα κατὰ τοῦ Λεωνίδα λέγειν ἑτέρους διδάξας, αὐτὸς παρεφύλαττε μετὰ τῶν συναρχόντων τὸ σημεῖον. ἔστι δὲ τοιόνδε· δι' ἐτῶν ἐννέα λαβόντες οἱ ἔφοροι νύκτα καθαρὰν καὶ ἀσέληνον σιωπῇ καθέζονται πρὸς οὐρανὸν ἀποβλέποντες. ἐὰν οὖν ἐκ μέρους τινὸς εἰς ἕτερον μέρος ἀστὴρ διάξῃ, κρίνουσι τοὺς βασιλεῖς ὡς περὶ τὸ θεῖον ἐξαμαρτάνοντας καὶ καταπαύουσι τῆς ἀρχῆς, μέχρι ἂν ἐκ Δελφῶν ἢ Ὀλυμπίας χρησμὸς ἔλθῃ τοῖς ἡλωκόσι τῶν βασιλέων βοηθῶν.[668]
>
> After Lysander instructed others to speak against Leonidas, he himself kept watch for the sign with his fellow ephors. This worked as follows: every nine years the ephors, choosing a clear and moonless night, sit in silence looking towards the sky. Then if a star should dart across from one part (of the sky) to another, the ephors condemn the kings for committing errors concerning the divine and they put an end to their rule until an oracular response from Delphi or Olympia should come and assist the kings who were condemned.

According to Plutarch, Lysander son of Libys declared that he had received this sign,[669] which he offered as proof that Leonidas had angered the gods by breaking Spartan law and fathering children with an Asian, rather than Spartan, woman. But Plutarch, by sandwiching this ritual between his descriptions of the actions taken by Lysander son of Libys to undermine and destroy the reputation of Leonidas, suggests that Lysander's

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[667] *Agis* 11.2.

[668] *Agis* 11.3-5.

[669] *Agis* 11.6: "Lysander, then, saying that he had received this sign brought a charge against Leonidas" (τοῦτο δὴ τὸ σημεῖον αὐτῷ γεγονέναι λέγων ὁ Λύσανδρος κρίσιν τῷ Λεωνίδᾳ προὔθηκε).

motivations here are not protecting Sparta's relationship with the gods, but rather furthering his own political interest. The reference to the oracular sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia contrasts Pythian Apollo and Olympian Zeus with Lysander son of Libys: instead of relying on the gods, Lysander son of Libys used the Spartan constitution to strip a rightful king from his office and install Cleombrotus, who, he hoped, would be more sympathetic to Agis's cause. With this episode, Plutarch shows Lysander son of Libys's willingness to use and abuse everything he could to carry out his political goals. In this case, that included the Lycurgan constitution and a ritual designed to ensure that the Spartans maintained their positive relationship with the gods. Lysander son of Libys had no concern for the ritual or its purpose – it was a tool for him to use to achieve his goal. Plutarch shows both Lysanders – Lysander son of Aristocritus and Lysander son of Libys – attempting to change or influence the kingship in Sparta, both using approaches that were fundamentally different from those of Lycurgus. Where Lycurgus sought and received the god's assistance and support, both of the Lysanders and the kings they supported – Agis IV and Agesilaus II respectively – tried to use the gods, and Delphi in particular, as tools to achieve their ends, as rubberstamps to grant a veneer of validity to their actions, rather than as a source of guidance and indicating proper and profitable action. This is not to say that Agis's goal of bringing the Spartans back under the laws of Lycurgus was not worthy. What is at fault here is not the goal, but the method used. Where Lycurgus relied on the gods for his success, Agis IV and Lysander son of Libys tried to use the gods instead. Agis IV, as with his Roman counterpart Tiberius Gracchus, had a lofty goal, but failed to achieve it because the methods he employed were faulty.[670] Plutarch shows through their respective use of the

[670] Plutarch's focus on Lysander son of Libys in this passage perhaps serves to shift some of the blame from Agis and on to his supporters. As Roskam (2005: 228) argues, Plutarch presents Agis

gods that Lysander (son of Aristocritus) and Agesilaus II on the one hand, and Lysander son of Libys and Agis IV on the other, all attempted in various ways to change Sparta's constitution, but all also failed to follow Lycurgus's model in doing so. Instead of seeking the god's help through the oracle, they sought to force their will upon the people and use the divine for show and as a tool with which to achieve their goals. As a result, all of them ultimately failed.

f. conclusion

Delphi is a recurring motif in the *Lysander*, and one that structures the *Life* as a whole. The *Life* begins and ends with the Delphic oracle, and Plutarch uses the oracle to tease out some of the more problematic aspects of Lysander's character as a leader. He was successful militarily and outwardly behaved as a leader ought, but was in truth acting not for the good of his state, but for his own personal achievement and glory and was willing to trample everyone and everything that got in his way. He, together with his descendant Lysander son of Libys, desired to change the laws in Sparta, but failed utterly in following the example set by Lycurgus. Lysander also demonstrates the danger to polities posed by the oracle's political clout when manipulated by leaders who placed personal gain over fear of the gods. Plutarch acknowledges that leaders in the past had succumbed to the temptation of attempting to buy favorable words from the god's human servants. As long as the oracle's words held power and influence, the oracle was vulnerable to figures such as Lysander trying to abuse it: the human servants of the gods were seen by others as weak

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as having "surpassed in natural goodness (εὐφυΐᾳ) almost all the kings who ruled after the great Agesilaus." Nevertheless, as Monaco (2013: 132-104) demonstrates, Agis's supporters – including both Lysander son of Libys and Agis's uncle Agesilaus – were not as morally pure, contributing to the ultimate failure of Agis's reforms.

links and thus vulnerable to manipulation. But while Plutarch shows leaders wishing to manipulate the words of the god or influence the god's servants, in each instance he claims that the supposed corruption did not actually happen, placing the entirety of blame in each incident on the leader(s) in question, rather than on the Pythian priestess. The political power of the oracle also created the temptation for leaders like Lysander and Agesilaus to twist the meaning of the oracle's words so the oracle would support their political agenda. Nevertheless, throughout the *Lysander* Plutarch emphasized the actual clarity of the responses, even in cases such as the oracle predicting Lysander's death at Haliartus. Finally, Plutarch describes the dedications to the god as sacred objects and demonstrates divine displeasure when these offerings are removed, stolen, or destroyed. These offerings can, as with the statue of Lysander that opens the *Life*, help the reader begin a process of philosophical thought and contemplation, as Plutarch shows such objects doing in the Delphic dialogues as well.

iii. *Demetrius*

Plutarch refers to Delphi three times in the *Demetrius*, although never as a part of oracular consultations or Delphic oracle stories.[671] Instead, the oracle appears through references to either the divine honors bestowed on Demetrius by the Athenians or through Demetrius's reduction of honors and powers traditionally associated with the oracle. As the *Life* progresses, Plutarch describes how Demetrius received increasingly more extreme divine honors, which resulted in him and his father being treated more like the god in Delphi than like human rulers. Plutarch's disdain for this comes through clearly in the *Life*, and, as I

[671] *Demetrius* 11.1, 13.1, 40.7-8.

will argue, Plutarch's selective use of references to Delphi structure his discussion of the divine honors granted to Demetrius and serve to demonstrate the degree of Demetrius's arrogance in accepting honors meant for the highest gods.

It comes as a surprise to the reader to find, after reading Plutarch's prologue emphasizing Demetrius's destructive nature, a description of Demetrius's early life that is unquestionably positive towards and praising of the young man. Plutarch notes Demetrius's genuine affection for to his parents,[672] describes him as benevolent (φιλάνθρωπος) and devoted to his companions (φιλέταιρος), [673] and claims that he was particularly concerned with both kindness (ἐπιείκεια) and justice (δικαιοσύνη).[674] Plutarch backs up each of these descriptions with vignettes proving to readers that Demetrius did truly embody these characteristics at that time.[675] Plutarch indeed contrasts the young Demetrius with his fellow generals and statesmen, including even his father Antigonus Monophthalmus, since Demetrius refused to compromise his integrity to achieve political gain. For example, when Demetrius, defeated soundly in battle by the far more experienced Ptolemy, was treated with kindness and generosity by the victor, he was eager to be able to return the favor.[676] Sure enough, when the situation was reversed and it was Demetrius

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[672] *Demetrius* 3.1: "he was also especially fond of his father, and in his care for his mother it was evident that he honored his father also because of genuine affection rather than from paying court to his power" (ἦν μὲν οὖν καὶ φιλοπάτωρ διαφερόντως· τῇ δὲ περὶ τὴν μητέρα σπουδῇ καὶ τὸν πατέρα τιμῶν ἐφαίνετο δι' εὔνοιαν ἀληθινὴν μᾶλλον ἢ θεραπείαν τῆς δυνάμεως).

[673] *Demetrius* 4.1: "Indeed it is possible to give the following example of Demetrius being in the beginning both benevolent and devoted to his companions" (τοῦ μέντοι καὶ φιλάνθρωπον φύσει καὶ φιλέταιρον γεγονέναι τὸν Δημήτριον ἐν ἀρχῇ παράδειγμα τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν εἰπεῖν).

[674] *Demetrius* 4.5: "These things, therefore, are proof of Demetrius's naturally favorable disposition towards kindness and justice" (ταῦτα μὲν οὖν εὐφυΐας δείγματα τοῦ Δημητρίου πρὸς ἐπιείκειαν καὶ δικαιοσύνην).

[675] *Demetrius* 3.2-5, 4.1-5.

[676] *Demetrius* 5.1-6.

who achieved victory over Ptolemy in battle, Demetrius leapt at the opportunity to restore to Ptolemy prisoners taken, and even sent them back laden with gifts.[677] Through episodes such as these Plutarch characterizes Demetrius as keen to win glory through noble deeds.[678] It is this aspect of Demetrius's character that Plutarch credits as being behind Demetrius's and Antigonus's decision to liberate Greece, which war Plutarch describes in encomiastic language:

> ἐνδόξου δὲ τῆς φιλοτιμίας ταύτης γενομένης, ὁρμὴ παρέστη θαυμάσιος αὐτοῖς ἐλευθεροῦν τὴν Ἑλλάδα, πᾶσαν ὑπὸ Κασσάνδρου καὶ Πτολεμαίου καταδεδουλωμένην. τούτου πόλεμον οὐδεὶς ἐπολέμησε τῶν βασιλέων καλλίω καὶ δικαιότερον· ἃς γὰρ ἅμα τοὺς βαρβάρους ταπεινοῦντες εὐπορίας συνήγαγον, εἰς τοὺς Ἕλληνας ὑπὲρ εὐδοξίας καὶ τιμῆς ἀνήλισκον.[679]
>
> Since they received glory from this honorable action,[680] it produced an admirable desire in them to free Greece, which was enslaved entirely by Cassander and Ptolemy. No one of the kings fought a more noble or just war than this, for the wealth which they acquired together by subduing the barbarians they spent upon the Greeks in pursuit of fame and honor.

Up until this point in the narrative, Plutarch has worked to emphasize positive aspects of Demetrius's character. By repeating at multiple points in his narrative the lofty idealism that Demetrius exhibited at the start of the expedition to Athens,[681] Plutarch makes

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[677] *Demetrius* 6.2-5.

[678] See especially *Demetrius* 6.4.

[679] *Demetrius* 7.1-2.

[680] That is, Demetrius's successful rescue of Halicarnassus from Ptolemy's attack (*Demetrius* 7.5).

[681] See also *Demetrius* 8.7: "[Demetrius] announced through a herald standing at his side that his father had sent him with good fortune to free ⟨the⟩ Athenians and to expel the garrison and to restore their laws and ancestral constitution" (κήρυκα παραστησάμενος ἀνεῖπεν, ὅτι πέμψειεν αὐτὸν ὁ

Demetrius's fall that much harder, demonstrating painstakingly how Athens was hardly free after Demetrius's "liberation." Additionally, crafting this image of Demetrius as just, compassionate, and magnanimous in his youth allows Plutarch to pinpoint for his readers exactly when – and why – Demetrius's moral compass strayed from the mark.

Shortly after Demetrius arrives in Athens, Plutarch starts to introduce slowly his character flaws, connecting them closely to Demetrius's growing power and the sycophancy of the Athenians. Plutarch hints at Demetrius's later debauchery through an anecdote about a certain famed beauty named Cratesipolis. The news that a beautiful woman wanted to meet him was all the prodding Demetrius needed to abandon his post and seek her out, nearly getting himself captured in the process.[682] Demetrius's lust for women is a defining aspect to his character in the *Life*, and its appearance as a source of danger and irresponsibility for Demetrius at this early stage in the *Life* foreshadows Demetrius's problems to come.

πατὴρ ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ, ⟨τοὺς⟩ Ἀθηναίους ἐλευθερώσοντα καὶ τὴν φρουρὰν ἐκβαλοῦντα καὶ τοὺς νόμους αὐτοῖς καὶ τὴν πάτριον ἀποδώσοντα πολιτείαν).

[682] *Demetrius* 9.5-7. Plutarch is our only source for this incident, and, as Wheatley (2004: 1) notes, the timing of this incident makes it "an extremely unlikely point for a general to abscond on a dangerous and frivolous adventure." Wheatley suggests two separate explanations for this episode: either the place of the rendezvous was not Patrae (roughly 150 kilometers from Megara) but the much closer Pagae (about 15 kilometers from Megara), or this meeting with Cratesipolis did not happen during the siege of Megara, but later in Demetrius's life. Regarding the first explanation, while Demetrius travelling to Pagae may have been perhaps more believable than to Patrae, his decision to go at all, his lack of a proper guard, and the narrowness with which he escapes all still make Demetrius's actions here extremely reckless. If Plutarch has transposed this incident earlier in Demetrius's life, this would be even further proof that Plutarch is connecting the decline in Demetrius's morality with the earliest moments of his campaign in Greece (for this suggestion, see Rose 2015: 159-160). For Plutarch's tendency to emphasize early on character traits that will come to define his heroes later in their lives, see Frank (2017: 217-218). In either case and regardless of the historicity of any aspect of this episode, Plutarch's decision to include it here is incredibly damning for Demetrius, for he allowed his lust to overpower his reason and abandoned his responsibilities as a leader.

Next, although Demetrius's purpose is purportedly the liberation of Greece, it does not take long for him to turn from this lofty goal and to start treating Greece as conquered territory to be plundered. Plutarch describes how after Megara was captured, the only reason the city was not plundered was that the Athenians interceded on behalf of the Megarians.[683] Nevertheless, even though Plutarch says that Demetrius freed the city from its garrison and implies that the city was not plundered, Plutarch tells his readers that nearly all of the Megarians' slaves (τῶν δὲ θεραπόντων σχεδὸν ἁπάντων) were stolen. That Demetrius was responsible for, if nothing else, not stopping this robbery, is implied in the anecdote Plutarch relates to close this episode about an exchange between Demetrius and the philosopher Stilpo:

> τῶν δὲ θεραπόντων σχεδὸν ἁπάντων διακλαπέντων, ἐπεὶ πάλιν αὐτὸν ὁ Δημήτριος ἐφιλοφρονεῖτο καὶ τέλος ἀπαλλαττόμενος εἶπεν· "ἐλευθέραν ὑμῶν ᾧ Στίλπων ἀπολείπω τὴν πόλιν," "ὀρθῶς" ἔφη "λέγεις· οὐδένα γὰρ ἁμῶν δοῦλον ἀπολέλοιπας."[684]
>
> But after nearly all of the slaves were stolen away, since Demetrius was again acting kindly towards Stilpo and finally upon his departure said, "Stilpo, I leave behind your city as free," Stilpo replied "that's correct, for you have left behind not even one of our slaves."

As with Lysander, with Demetrius too Plutarch hints at a discrepancy between Demetirus's words and his actions: he claimed to be a liberator, but in reality was merely a conqueror. In Plutarch's text the siege of Megara thus serves as a transitional episode between

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[683] *Demetrius* 9.8: τῶν δὲ Μεγάρων ἁλόντων καὶ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐφ' ἁρπαγὴν τραπομένων, Ἀθηναῖοι παρῃτήσαντο τοὺς Μεγαρεῖς πολλῇ δεήσει, καὶ τὴν φρουρὰν ὁ Δημήτριος ἐκβαλὼν ἠλευθέρωσε τὴν πόλιν.

[684] *Demetrius* 9.10.

Demetrius's actions that were worthy of praise, seen in the opening chapters, and his actions that Plutarch condemns unequivocally in the chapters that follow.

From here, Plutarch's narrative returns to Athens and he describes how the "liberated" Athenians sped along the process of Demetrius's decline as they competed with each other to propose increasingly more absurd honors for Demetrius and his father. Plutarch claims that the Athenians "made Demetrius hateful and unbearable through the excesses of the honors that they voted him."[685] These honors included calling Demetrius and Antigonus kings, declaring them to be savior gods (σωτῆρας ... θεούς), and establishing a yearly priesthood to care for their cult.[686] Plutarch reinforces the excessive nature of these honors in both cases, stressing that the Athenians were the *first* (πρῶτοι) to call Demetrius and Antigonus kings, and the *only* (μόνοι) to call them savior gods.[687] Next, Plutarch says that the Athenians also voted to have Demetrius and Antigonus woven into the *peplos* of

[685] *Demetrius* 10.2: τὸν Δημήτριον ἐπαχθῆ καὶ βαρὺν ἐποίησαν τῶν τιμῶν ταῖς ἀμετρίαις ἃς ἐψηφίσαντο.

[686] *Demtrius* 10.3-4. Mikalson (1998: 80) points out that the inscriptional record proves false Plutarch's accompanying claim that the priest of the Savior-gods replaced the eponymous archon in giving his name to the year. By including this claim in the *Demetrius* Plutarch gives his readers additional proof of the hubris of both Demetrius and the Athenians. Additionally, while it is indisputable, as Mikalson (1998: 80) argues, that the Antigonids were viewed as gods (θεοί) as part of the Savior-gods cult, the inscriptions of the time do not refer to them as θεοί. By using this term, however, Plutarch calls attention to exactly how inappropriate these actions were, making explicit something that the Athenians themselves may have left implicit. Furthermore, as Graf (2016) demonstrates, while the title of θεοί σωτῆρες appears frequently in the epigraphic record during this period, θεοί is typically included only when the name of the god(s) is absent. Plutarch's inclusion of θεοί, while it may be a "literary embellishment" as Erskine (2014: 588) describes it, makes perfect sense in the context of the *Demetrius,* since it makes explicitly clear to the readers that the Athenians were not merely giving the Antigonids an epithet, but were establishing a new cult to them.

[687] The irony is not lost on Plutarch that the first action he records the Athenians taking in their liberated state is to name Demetrius and his father their kings, immediately undermining their status as free while also casting doubt on just how "free" the freedom Demetrius was offering was.

Athena alongside the images of the gods[688] and erected an aptly named altar of Demetrius Kataibates (βωμὸν... Δημητρίου Καταιβάτου) on the spot where Demetrius first stepped down from his chariot.[689] Last, they created two new tribes named after the two men: Demetrias and Antigonis.[690] With this list, Plutarch demonstrates succinctly how thoroughly the Athenians integrated Demetrius and Antigonus into the civic and religious life of the city and in the process granted them status equal to the gods.[691] Plutarch does not say that Demetrius rejected any of these honors, or offered any words of protest.

Plutarch documents through the use of increasingly more dramatic superlatives the inappropriate nature of the honors and title bestowed upon Demetrius by the Athenians at

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[688] On this addition to the *peplos,* see Buraselis (2008). Buraselis's (2008: 216) argument that "the insertion of Antigonos' and Demetrios' figures into this holy of holies [i.e. the peplos] of democratic Athens was perhaps the figural culmination of their cultic honours by the Athenians" may have been true for the Athenians, but it was not for Plutarch. As I will demonstrate below, he has structured his narrative so that with each new charge he implies Demetrius was being granted greater and more outlandish claims to divinity.

[689] *Demetrius* 10.5-6. As Habicht (2017: 34-36) argues, the founding of this cult likely occurred in 304, several years after Demetrius's arrival in Athens and the foundation of the cult of the savior-gods. On this epithet, which was traditionally reserved for Zeus, see Mikalson (1998) 86, Habicht (2017) 36, and Macedo (2017) 22-24. This epiclesis is particularly fitting for Demetrius, since ground struck by lightning would be consecrated to Zeus Kataibates. By treating the place where Demetrius touched the ground as worthy of similar honors, the Athenians were comparing Demetrius directly to Zeus.

[690] *Demetrius* 10.6. As Mikalson (1998: 81) notes, these new tribes would have resulted in Demetrius and Antigonus receiving annual cult worship as the eponyms of tribes.

[691] A similar – though not identical – list of honors is recorded by Diodorus (20.46.1-4), who gives the added details that the Greeks erected gold statues of Demetrius and Antigonus next to those of the tyrant-slayers and awarded lavishly expensive crowns to both men. Plutarch's focus in this passage is on how the Athenians were subjugating themselves again, just to new rulers, so perhaps Plutarch's failure to mention these statues is intentional, since it would call attention to the Antigonids' status as liberators of Athens. Habicht (2017: 33) claims that "it was not… empty flattery, when the Athenians at the time hailed the kings as "liberators," but rather a reflection of the political situation." While this may have been true historically speaking, Plutarch is keen to display the opposite, emphasizing throughout his narrative that the honors bestowed on Demetrius and his father were nothing other than empty and inappropriate gestures by the Athenians.

the direction of sycophants and flatterers.[692] Immediately following the list above, Plutarch declares that these honors paled in comparison to what came next:

> τὸ δ' ὑπερφυέστατον ἐνθύμημα τοῦ Στρατοκλέους (οὗτος γὰρ ἦν ὁ τῶν σοφῶν τούτων καὶ περιττῶν καινουργὸς ἀρεσκευμάτων)[693] ἔγραψεν ὅπως οἱ πεμπόμενοι κατὰ ψήφισμα δημοσίᾳ πρὸς Ἀντίγονον ἢ Δημήτριον ἀντὶ πρεσβευτῶν θεωροὶ λέγοιντο, καθάπερ οἱ Πυθοῖ καὶ Ὀλυμπίαζε τὰς πατρίους θυσίας ὑπὲρ τῶν πόλεων ἀνάγοντες ἐν ταῖς Ἑλληνικαῖς ἑορταῖς.[694]
>
> But the most extreme contrivance of Stratocles (for it was he who was the inventor of these clever and extraordinary acts of flattery) prescribed that those the people sent by public decree to Antigonus and Demetrius would be called *theoroi* instead of ambassadors, as if they were those who during the Hellenic festivals bring the ancestral sacrifices to Delphi and Olympia on behalf of the cities.

Plutarch's use of the superlative ὑπερφυέστατον marks this honor out from the beginning as inherently negative and also on a different level from the ones that came previously.[695]

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[692] Plutarch clearly disapproved strongly of the Athenians' sycophancy and excessive flattery of Demetrius and Antigonus. Erksine (2014: 581) acknowledges that Plutarch's *Demetrius* is a good starting point for anyone wanting to argue that ruler cults were purely or primarily political and that the people did not actually view the rulers as gods. This is persuasive, because in Plutarch's view, these men were decidedly not gods, and only had these titles bestowed on them out of insincere flattery. This is not to say that Plutarch's view was widespread or reflects in any way historical reality, but rather reflects Plutarch's personal attitudes towards the divine and the relative natures of gods and men.

[693] I have followed Manfredini's (Amantini, Carena, and Manfredini 1995: 30) punctuation of this passage over that of Ziegler (1971), who places a raised dot immediately following the end of the parenthesis. Punctuating the sentence as Ziegler does would leave the first half of the sentence (τὸ δ' ὑπερφυέστατον … καινουργὸς ἀρεσκευμάτων) without a main verb outside of the parenthesis, while omitting the raised dot does not cause any grammatical difficulties.

[694] *Demetrius* 11.1.

[695] Generally speaking, ὑπερφυής can have either a positive or negative connotation, both of which occur in Plutarchan texts. Plutarch uses ὑπερφυής in three main ways in his extant works outside the *Demetrius*:

1. to denote physical characteristics as extremely large, strong, or loud (*Theseus* 6.4; *Romulus* 3.5, 28.5; *Timoleon* 27.9; *Marcellus* 8.1, 29.9; *Crassus* 19.4; *Phocion* 10.1; *Artaxerxes* 4.5)

The reference to Delphi and Olympia in particular suggests why: this episode elevates Demetrius and his father to the level of Delphic Apollo or Olympian Zeus. Plutarch's description of this decree as an ἐνθύμημα ("contrivance") and an ἀρέσκευμα ("act of flattery") suggests that Plutarch does not view this honor – or want his readers to view it – as a genuine act of piety or gratitude from the Athenians, but instead as an improper proposal pushed through by a flatterer.[696] Nevertheless, I disagree with Erskine's claim that "the object of Plutarch's criticism is not… the granting of divine honours to men *per se*, but the excessive flattery involved in this particular case."[697] The proposal that Demetrius and Antigonus should be treated as if they themselves are gods of major Panhellenic cults

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2. to mark something (e.g. power, achievements, beauty) as extraordinary in some way with a positive or neutral valence (*Marcellus* 23.11, 17.8; *Cato Maior* 22.3; *Pompey* 8.6; *Alexander* 22.1; *Dion-Brutus* 4.3)
3. to describe something as excessive with a negative valence (*Pompey* 48.3; *Caesar* 60.4; *De audiendis poetis* 12b)

Looking more closely at the passages I have placed in this third category, I find that there are two main similarities between the *Pompey* and *Caesar* passages and *Demetrius* 11.1. In *Caesar* 60.4 Plutarch describes the honors (τιμαί) voted to Caesar by the senate as ὑπερφυεῖς. Plutarch does not say exactly what these honors were, but implies that they were grandiose and inappropriate. In *Pompey* 48.3 Plutarch describes Gabinius as being the most over-the-top (ὑπερφυέστατον) of his flatterers (κολάκων). Here it is clear that with this adjective, and in particular with the use of the superlative, Plutarch is marking Gabinius as an excessive or extreme flatterer, a characterization that is always inherently negative for Plutarch. These two *comparanda* in particular suggest that in *Demetrius* 11.1 ὑπερφυέστατον should be understood as a negative characterization of Stratocles's contrivance (ἐνθύμημα). Plutarch's repetition of ὑπερφυής in *Demetrius* 13.1 to describe a final honor (τιμή) bestowed upon Demetrius secures this reading, since there Plutarch combines ὑπερφυής with ἀλλόκοτος to produce a characterization that is unambiguously negative. Finally, in the passage at hand Plutarch glosses ὑπερφυέστατον ἐνθύμημα by calling this as well as the other proposals of Stratocles "clever and extraordinary acts of flattery" (σοφῶν... καὶ περιττῶν... ἀρεσκευμάτων), making it explicitly clear that ὑπερφυέστατον ἐνθύμημα should be read as a negative rather than positive description.

[696] Erskine (2014: 581-582) argues, probably correctly, that ruler cults such as those of Demetrius were likely genuine attempts by the Greeks and Romans to comprehend and respond to the extraordinary power of the new rulers, rather than the result of insincere flatterers. Plutarch, however, does not represent the average Greek or Roman, and in the *Demetrius* in particular it is quite clear that Plutarch rejects soundly any suggestion that humans may be or become gods.

[697] Erskine (2014) 591-592.

is what Plutarch describes as the ὑπερφυέστατον ἐνθύμημα. Thus Plutarch is condemning both the proposal *and* the flatterers responsible for them.[698]

Plutarch also addresses this same honor in *De fortuna aut virtute Alexandri*, where it appears couched in slightly different language:

> Δημήτριος δέ, ᾧ τῆς Ἀλεξάνδρου δυνάμεως ἡ Τύχη σμικρὸν ἀποσπάσασα προσέθηκε, Καταιβάτης καλούμενος ἐπήκουε, καὶ πρέσβεις πρὸς αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔπεμπον ἀλλὰ θεωροὺς αἱ πόλεις, καὶ τὰς ἀποκρίσεις χρησμοὺς προσηγόρευον.[699]
>
> But Demetrius, on whom Fortune bestowed a smidgen of the power she stole away from Alexander, heard himself being called Katabates, and the cities did not send ambassadors to him but *theoroi*, and they referred to the responses as oracles.

This passage comes in the second oration, in which Plutarch argues that it was Alexander's virtue, not his fortune, that led him to greatness. Here Plutarch is using Demetrius as an example of someone who – unlike Alexander – became so drunk on power that he assumed himself to be a god, or at least close to the divine.[700] This detail that the responses brought back from Demetrius were to be referred to as *chresmoi* ("oracular responses") does not occur elsewhere either in Plutarch or in any other extant source. The relative chronology of *De fortuna aut virtute Alexandri* compared to the *Demetrius* is impossible to determine

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[698] Plutarch's criticism of both Demetrius and the Athenians is clear when Demetrius's actions are compared to those of Dion. In the *Dion*, Plutarch claims that the people of Syracuse addressed Dion as a god (*Dion* 29.2: ὥσπερ θεόν) and lauded him as both savior and god (*Dion* 46.1: σωτῆρα καὶ θεόν). Unlike Demetrius, Dion chides the people, instructing them "to hold on to their freedom" (*Dion* 29.3: ἀντέχεσθαι τῆς ἐλευθερίας) and does not appear to act on the people's declarations of his divinity. Instead, Plutarch shows him offering prayers to the gods (*Dion* 46.1). In the *Dion* it thus does not appear to reflect poorly on Dion's character that the people heralded him as a god, for unlike Demetrius, Dion did not take these declarations as license to commit acts of impiety against the gods.

[699] *De fortuna aut virtute Alexandri* 338a.

[700] Each of Plutarch's examples involves a ruler claiming either that he is a god, that he should be called by a god's name, or that he has some close relationship with the gods.

with any certainty, so it is not possible to say whether Plutarch had access to more or different information when composing either work. If we compare the focus of each passage, however, different themes emerge. In the *Demetrius* passage Plutarch uses this episode as an intermediate step between the new and local honors the Athenians were showering on Demetrius and the subsequent honors traditionally reserved for major deities that were bestowed on Demetrius, stripping these deities of these honors in the process. In the essay, by contrast, Plutarch combines what he presents as two separate incidents in the *Demetrius*: the declaration that ambassadors to Demetrius and Antigonus be called *theoroi* and that which announced Demetrius to be an oracle, which I will discuss below.

In spite of the superlative used to describe this last honor, Plutarch claims a different (unnamed) flatterer, "surpassing Stratocles in servility," proposed that Demetrius receive honors traditionally paid to Demeter and Dionysus,[701] a move that paralleled the decision to change the Dionysia to the Demetria. Through all of this, Plutarch emphasizes at each point the absurdity of the proposals being made to aggrandize Demetrius's status even further.[702] Plutarch claims that he was not alone in viewing these actions with scorn, for he states that this position was shared by the god. As evidence, Plutarch provides a long list of omens involving the *peplos*, altars of the Savior-gods, the Dionysia festival, and the

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[701] *Demetrius* 12.1: "For someone else, surpassing Stratocles in servility, proposed that Demetrius receive, each time he arrives, the same welcome shown to Demeter and Dionysus, and that the person whose hospitality was the most magnificent and extravagant be given silver for a votive offering at public expense" (γράφει γάρ τις ἄλλος ὑπερβαλλόμενος ἀνελευθερίᾳ τὸν Στρατοκλέα, δέχεσθαι Δημήτριον ὁσάκις ἂν ἀφίκηται τοῖς Δήμητρος καὶ Διονύσου ξενισμοῖς, τῷ δ' ὑπερβαλλομένῳ λαμπρότητι καὶ πολυτελείᾳ τὴν ὑποδοχὴν ἀργύριον εἰς ἀνάθημα δημοσίᾳ δίδοσθαι).

[702] I agree with Erskine (2014: 593-595) that Plutarch does not say directly that all of these proposals *passed*, only that they were proposed. The context, however, suggests that the reader should assume that they did (on this, see especially 12.2), and because Plutarch in *De fortuna aut virtute Alexandri* 338a implies that the proposal of Stratocles, at least, was passed, it is reasonable to assume that within the *Demetrius* this should be understood to be the case there as well.

crops,[703] all of which prove, he argues, that "the divine disapproved of most of these actions."[704] In case this was not clear enough, Plutarch announces his disapproval further by ending his catalogue of omens with a passage from the comic poet Philippides, in which Philippides claimed that Stratocles's actions in "making man's the honors of the gods" was bringing about the destruction of the Athenian people.[705]

The final honor given to Demetrius listed by Plutarch is marked as the most extreme and preposterous of them all, encapsulating Plutarch's disdain for these honors and the effect they had on Demetrius's character. This incident marks the heights of Demetrius's insolence and the sycophancy of the Athenians, and finished the job of corrupting Demetrius:

> ὃ δὲ μάλιστα τῶν τιμῶν ὑπερφυὲς ἦν καὶ ἀλλόκοτον, ἔγραψε Δρομοκλείδης ὁ Σφήττιος[706] ὑπὲρ τῆς τῶν ἀσπίδων ἀναθέσεως εἰς Δελφοὺς παρὰ Δημητρίου λαβεῖν χρησμόν. αὐτὴν δὲ παραγράψω τὴν λέξιν ἐκ τοῦ ψηφίσματος οὕτως ἔχουσαν· "ἀγαθῇ τύχῃ·[707] δεδόχθαι τῷ δήμῳ, χειροτονῆσαι τὸν δῆμον ἕνα ἄνδρα ἐξ Ἀθηναίων, ὅστις ἀφικόμενος πρὸς τὸν Σωτῆρα καὶ καλλιερησάμενος ἐπερωτήσει [Δημήτριον] τὸν Σωτῆρα, πῶς ⟨ἂν⟩ εὐσεβέστατα καὶ κάλλιστα καὶ τὴν ταχίστην ὁ δῆμος τὴν ἀποκατάστασιν ποιήσαιτο τῶν ἀναθημάτων. ὅ τι δ' ἂν χρήσῃ, ταῦτα πράττειν τὸν δῆμον."

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[703] *Demetrius* 12.3-5.

[704] *Demetrius* 12.3: ἐπεσήμηνε δὲ τοῖς πλείστοις τὸ θεῖον. On this use of ἐπισημαίνω see Rose (2015) 172.

[705] *Demetrius* 12.7: τὰς τῶν θεῶν τιμὰς ποιοῦντ' ἀνθρωπίνας. Ziegler's emendation of the line to ποιοῦντα τιμὰς τὰς [τῶν] θεῶν ἀνθρωπίνας is not convincing, as the article is justified here and both the line as found in the manuscripts and Ziegler's proposal are metrically and grammatically sound.

[706] I have followed the punctuation of Flacelière and Chambry (1977: 33) rather than that of Ziegler (1971) who places a comma following Σφήττιος, following German punctuation.

[707] For examples of this formula in questions put to the gods, see Parke (1967) Appendix I.

> οὕτω καταμωκώμενοι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, προσδιέφθειραν αὐτόν, οὐδ' ἄλλως ὑγιαίνοντα τὴν διάνοιαν.[708]
>
> But the one of the honors that was especially extreme and unusual, Dromocleides of Sphettos proposed that they should solicit an oracular response from Demetrius concerning the dedication of the shields at Delphi. I will transcribe the law itself from the decree, which ran as follows: "May it be with good fortune; Decreed by the people, that the people elect one man from the Athenians, who going to the Savior and after a sacrifice is made with good omens he will ask the Savior how the people might make a very pious, honorable, and swift restoration of the votive offerings. And what oracular response he shall give, these things the people will do." Mocking the man in this way they brought about his ruin, he who was not sane to begin with.

For Plutarch, the ultimate insult to the gods was paid by the Athenians in proposing – and Demetrius in accepting – these honors, naming Demetrius a better source of divine guidance than Delphi concerning a question about Delphic dedications. Indeed, Parke and Wormell describe this decree as "a blasphemous parody of the proper formula for consulting the Delphic oracle on a matter of ritual … made all the more insulting because the question at issue concerned Delphi."[709] As Mikalson argues, however, the Athenians were likely not *able* to consult the oracle since it was controlled by the Aetolians at the time.[710] By 290, if not sooner, the Aetolians had possession of Delphi and, as hinted at in

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[708] *Demetrius* 13.1-3. On this *psephisma*, see Habicht (1979) 34-44.

[709] Parke and Wormell (1956.1) 245. See also Mikalson (1998: 97): "The language of the decree suits only the consultation of a deity, and Demetrios here … was given, and no doubt took on, the oracular role of Apollo Pythios."

[710] Mikalson (1998) 97. Additionally, as Rose (2015: 176) argues, the language of the decree suggests not gross flattery, but may have expressed genuine religious sentiment shared by many of the Athenians, though clearly not by Plutarch.

the *Demetrius*, were looking to remove (or had already removed) the shields the Athenians had dedicated after the conclusion of the Persian War.[711] Plutarch mentions this difficulty of access to Delphi close to the end of *Life*,[712] but there is no suggestion in this passage or its surrounding context of such problems. By delaying this information, Plutarch eliminates any excuse that could have been afforded to the Athenians for failing to consult Delphi on this matter, making their decision to turn to Demetrius for divine guidance even more unfathomable. Additionally, interlocutors in both *De E apud Delphos* and *De Pythiae oraculis* suggest that Delphic dedications are not only the god's property, but also reflect in some way the god himself. As objects displayed publicly at his sanctuary, they represent therefore his prophetic power, and have the potential to inspire humans to critical reflection.[713] The attention given to Delphic dedications in the dialogues suggests that for Plutarch, part of what made this decree so extreme (ὑπερφυὲς) and strange (ἀλλόκοτον) was that the Atheians were not only giving a human the role of a god, but that with this move the Athenians were also insulting the Delphic god by asking a human what should be done with the god's offerings.

The historicity of this entire series of honors as Plutarch has presented it is highly dubious. First, the chronology of events is utterly confused. Plutarch presents the honors in *Demetrius* 10 as a set, and the flow of the narrative suggests that those documented in *Demetrius* 11, 12, and 13 came in quick succession. Instead, in reality these honors spanned

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[711] As Rose (2015) 175-177 argues, it is likely, though not entirely certain, that the shields referred to here were those created by the Athenians from Persian spoils after their victory at Plataea in 479.

[712] *Demetrius* 40.7-8.

[713] See, for example, *De E apud Delphos* 384e-f; *De Pythiae oraculis* 395b-396c, 398a-b, 408f-409a.

a period of close to twenty years (from 307/6 to around 292/1).[714] Additionally, Plutarch presents the Athenians as competing with each other to propose increasingly more grandiose honors, passing over entirely the historical circumstances that lay behind these actions. The most notable example of this is Plutarch's omission of the fact that, after the Antigonids were defeated at Ipsus in 301, Demetrius had to fight to recapture Athens which had in the meantime been ruled by the tyrant Lachares. It was only after Demetrius overthrew Lachares and restored democratic rule in Athens that he was awarded the honors described in *Demetrius* 12, which are presented in the narrative before the honors described in *Demetrius* 13, which had actually occurred several years previously. Additionally, Plutarch includes aspects of nearly all of these episodes that are not found, or are indeed contradicted directly, in other extant sources for the period. As Diefenbach notes, "Plutarch's description, according to which the Athenians' religious communication with Demetrius led to the progressively greater servility of the polis does not slavishly follow the diachronic historical course of events."[715] Plutarch has modified the chronology to present an image of increasingly inappropriate honors being bestowed upon Demetrius and his father and connects this progression directly to the deterioration in the character of Demetrius.[716]

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[714] On the chronology of these honors, see Habicht (2017: 31-39), Mikalson (1998) 75-104, Paschadis (2013), and Diefenbach (2015) 118-123.

[715] Diefenbach (2015) 129. Diefenbach argues convincingly against the view of Paschadis (2013) 126 that within these chapters "Plutarch merely juxtaposes a series of honours for Demetrius with no chronological order… misinterpreting a number of them and clearly focusing on honours which could be – and were – considered *risqué* from a religious or moral point of view." Instead, Diefenbach argues that Plutarch has not only juxtaposed honors, but knit them carefully into a narrative that follows Demetrius's transformation from human ruler to divine king. See also Rose (2015: 164), who characterizes the honors as "partially anachronistic… possibly inaccurate… and certainly incomplete."

[716] This interpretation is strengthened further by Plutarch's implication in *Demetrius* 23.4 that the Athenians' decision to allow Demetrius to live in the Parthenon came after the honors recorded in

In this way, the decree recorded in *Demetrius* 13 serves as the capstone to what was a lengthy lead-up and process of transformation for Plutarch. This incident marks the heights of Demetrius's insolence and the sycophancy of the Athenians, and finished the job of corrupting Demetrius. In this way Plutarch describes how, in a (seemingly) very short period of time, Demetrius and his father start being treated as gods, were given honors on par with those given to Demeter and Dionysus and the same respect shown to Delphic Apollo and Olympian Zeus, and how Demetrius himself became a source for divine knowledge who could be consulted on issues in place of Delphic Apollo. Not only is the proposal described as giving Demetrius oracular powers, but he is being consulted on a matter pertaining to Delphi itself, serving as a clear reminder to Plutarch's readers of who the proper recipient of this consultation should be. Although Plutarch places the blame on the Athenians for offering such inappropriate honors, this does not absolve Demetrius from all culpability in the affair. After all, Demetrius does not protest or reject these honors. Indeed, as the *Life* progresses Demetrius shifts from being the recipient of divine honors and titles to claiming such prerogatives for himself.

The change that exaggerated titles can bring about in mortal souls is a recurring theme throughout the *Life*. The anecdote about the oracle decree is thus not merely an anecdote, but rather represents the pinnacle of a pattern that will dominate the biography. Within Plutarch's narrative, Demetrius is depicted consistently as pushing an image of

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Demetrius 10-13: "but they, although they already poured out upon him [Demetrius] and used up every honor, discovered how then also they could appear new and novel in their flatteries" (οἱ δὲ καίπερ ἐκκεχυμένοι πρότερον εἰς αὐτὸν καὶ κατακεχρημένοι πᾶσαν φιλοτιμίαν, ἐξεῦρον ὅμως καὶ τότε πρόσφατοι καὶ καινοὶ ταῖς κολακείαις φανῆναι). Demetrius's residency in the Parthenon began in 304 (Rose 2015: 216), long before the honors recorded in *Demetrius* 12, and yet Plutarch suggests that the events described in *Demetrius* 23 took place after those he had described in the preceding chapters.

himself as on par with the gods and able to make decisions regarding their cults without proper consultation of the gods.[717] For example, later in the *Life*, Plutarch describes how Demetrius decided to celebrate the Pythian games in Athens because the Aetolians controlled access to Delphi:

> Τῶν δὲ Πυθίων καθηκόντων, πρᾶγμα καινότατον ἐπέτρεψεν αὐτῷ ποιεῖν ὁ Δημήτριος. ἐπεὶ γὰρ Αἰτωλοὶ τὰ περὶ Δελφοὺς στενὰ κατεῖχον, ἐν Ἀθήναις αὐτὸς ἦγε τὸν ἀγῶνα καὶ τὴν πανήγυριν, ὡς δὴ προσῆκον αὐτόθι μάλιστα τιμᾶσθαι τὸν θεόν, οἷς καὶ πατρῷός ἐστι καὶ λέγεται τοῦ γένους ἀρχηγός.[718]
>
> When it came time for the Pythian games, Demetrius left it to himself to do an entirely new deed. For because the Aetolians held the passes around Delphi, Demetrius himself was holding the games and the festival, on the grounds that it was fitting especially that the god be honored there [that is, in Athens], for Apollo is also their [i.e. the Athenians'] paternal god and is said to be the founder of their race.

Demetrius's decision to host the Pythian games in Athens instead of Delphi was, in Mikalson's words, "tantamount to stealing an old and prestigious festival from a god's own people."[719] Although Plutarch does acknowledge that Demetrius's action was in response to the Athenians' inability to access Delphi, his emphasis that this was "an entirely new deed" (πρᾶγμα καινότατον) is suggestive here of the negative tone of the passage.[720]

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[717] See also *Demetrius* 23.4-24.1, where Demetrius refers to Athena as his older sister (πρεσβυτέραν ἀδελφήν) and sets up residence in the Parthenon, polluting the sacred space by using it to consort with all manner of women and men, citizens and non-citizens alike.

[718] *Demetrius* 40.7-8.

[719] Mikalson (1998) 97. See also Weir (2004: 46), who, noting the political aspects to and opportunities afforded by the Panhellenic games, describes Demetrius as using the Aetolian control of Delphi as an excuse to "hijack" the games and bring them to Athens.

[720] Rose (2015: 294) argues that Plutarch's tone in this passage is ambiguous, or at least ambivalent, arguing that for Plutarch the superlative καινότατον can be either positive or negative. This,

Throughout the *Life* Plutarch makes a point of emphasizing Demetrius's unorthodox nature: he was always in pursuit of new achievements, and his flatterers were equally keen to find new honors to bestow upon him.[721] While newness does not on its own have to have a negative connotation, in the case of Demetrius, these new honors represent in each case some transgression of what was normal or appropriate, at least as far as Plutarch was concerned. The same appears true in this passage. Previously, Demetrius took on new titles and became the honoree at new festivals. Here, Plutarch shows him taking away honors from Delphi, giving himself the authority to determine how the god's rituals are to be observed and in the process transforming a Panhellenic celebration into a local Athenian festival. Furthermore, this is the only point in the *Life* where Plutarch addresses physical access to the oracular sanctuary, even though this issue lay behind the matter with the shield dedications that were at the heart of the decree quoted in *Demetrius* 13. By citing the problems of access presented by the Aetolians Plutarch does shift some of the blame for this action from Demetrius, but the question whether "new" deeds are necessarily beneficial ones remains for his readers to ponder.

Finally, Plutarch emphasizes that while Demetrius tried to act like a god, he was not one. Even if Demetrius wielded god-like power over the Athenians, at the end of the day, he lacked the wisdom necessary to be a good leader. Plutarch takes the rare move of voicing a direct criticism of his subject in the *Life,* by arguing that through Demetrius's actions "wickedness, having arrived at the place of the good through a power that lacked

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however, ignores both the context of this passage, and how καινός has been used in the *Life* up until this point.

[721] *Demetrius* 35.6 and 23.4, respectively. See also *Antony* 29.1, where Cleopatra seduces and corrupts Antony by constantly providing him with new pleasures.

wisdom, associated injustice with glory."[722] Throughout the Delphic dialogues the interlocutors emphasize the wisdom of the Delphic god, wisdom that is a fundamental aspect of the power of the divine. With this statement Plutarch undercuts all of Demetrius's attempts to claim godly power or status for himself. He could claim the powers of Delphic Apollo, and even dictate where his festivals were to be celebrated, but ultimately he did not possess the god's wisdom, which resulted in the loss of his power as well.

In the *Demetrius* Plutarch's references to the sanctuary do not provide information on how Plutarch viewed Delphi as much as they inform how the reader should view Demetrius. Nevertheless, several conclusions can be reached. First, Plutarch uses historical context selectively to present Demetrius as he wishes in each episode of the *Life*: he initially avoids discussing the physical seizure or control of access to the Delphic sanctuary, which could have explained why the Athenians consulted Demetrius as an oracle instead of consulting Delphi, but mentions this same lack of access later, to explain why Demetrius held the Pythian games at Athens. Additionally, Plutarch uses references to Delphi to draw an increasingly stark contrast between Demetrius and Delphic Apollo. Demetrius could adopt the role of the oracular god, but, as Plutarch emphasizes, in so doing he was only dressing as a god, and soon enough "having taken a mortal form in exchange for that of a god" (μορφὴν ἀμείψας ἐκ θεοῦ βροτησίαν) Demetrius was brought back to his human status once more.[723] Through the increasingly superlative honors and Demetrius's reactions to them, Plutarch shows how Demetrius started to believe the claims made about him and

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[722] *Demetrius* 42.11: οὕτως ἐπὶ τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χώραν τὸ αἰσχρὸν ὑπὸ δυνάμεως ἀμαθοῦς ἐπελθὸν συνῳκείωσε τῇ δόξῃ τὴν ἀδικίαν.

[723] *Demetrius* 45.5. Here Plutarch is using a (slightly modified) quote from Euripides *Bacchae* (4) to mock the fallen Demetrius. While in the *Bacchae* the god took on the appearance of a mortal, here Demetrius has been stripped of his appearances of divinity and revealed to be human.

his status. Nevertheless, as Plutarch takes pains to demonstrate as the *Life* draws to a close, at the end of the day, he was still a man, not a god. After Demetrius fell ingloriously from power, Plutarch describes how the Athenians quickly began to take back the excessive privileges they had obsequiouslybestowed upon Demetrius. While Demetrius *acted* like a god, he was not: the honors bestowed on him by sycophants could be taken away just as quickly and easily as they had first been bestowed. As a true symbol of the divine, Delphi thus serves to highlight Demetrius's tragic downfall.

iv. conclusion

In these *Lives* of men whose actions ran afoul of the Delphic oracle, Plutarch uses the oracle to bring out particularly problematic aspects of their characters and their approaches to leadership. Lysander may have appeared as a pious and upright Spartan, but looks can be deceiving, and Lysander's efforts to undercut the god and his use of oracles for his own political gain paint a picture of a Spartan far from the Lycurgan model. Agesilaus may have been Sparta's last great king, but his rule brought a catastrophic end to Spartan power, and Plutarch suggests that his kingship was contrary to the will of the god. Demetrius embarked on his campaign to liberate Greece with noble intentions, but these quickly became compromised and Plutarch uses the oracle to show the stages of Demetrius's moral decline and increasing hubris. Indeed, with the *Demetrius* and the *Lysander* Plutarch explores what happens when men's *philotimia* leads them to consider themselves equal to the gods. Where in the *Alexander* Plutarch was careful to apologize for the king and pushed the narrative that Alexander only pretended to believe in the story of his divine birth as a tool

to control the weak, he makes no such claims in the *Lysander* or the *Demetrius*.[724] Both men, in Plutarch's accounts, had little to no respect for the gods, and in each case their relationships with Delphi stand as evidence for how far they fell.

In his portrayal of the Delphic oracle within these *Lives* Plutarch demonstrates repeatedly the dangers that political power can pose to the oracular sanctuary, while simultaneously denying that the oracle's messages were ever compromised. Leaders such as Lysander, seeking the power granted by the oracle's approval, might try to bribe or otherwise coerce the god's human servants to deliver false oracles, but Plutarch never actually shows this happening. Instead, in each case he claims the opposite: the Pythian priestess rebuffed Lysander's attempts. In the *Demetrius* Plutarch shows how the oracle's power could also be threatened, as when the Athenians and Demetrius together actively bestowed upon both Demetrius and Athens powers given only to the god and associated only with the oracle, first by consulting Demetrius himself as an oracular god on Delphic matters and then by moving the Pythian games to Athens, effectively relocating part of the cult of Delphic Apollo. The oracle's political power also made it vulnerable to the manipulation of its words, as seen especially in the "lame kingship" oracle in the *Agesilaus* and *Lysander*. While within each version of the story Plutarch presents the verse oracle as having a clear meaning – do not allow the physically lame Agesilaus to become king – Lysander manipulated the people into believing that this response did not in fact mean what it said, but needed to be interpreted allegorically rather than literally. Similarly, in the oracle foretelling Lysander's death Plutarch does not dwell on any ambiguity or lack of

[724] E.g. Demetrius's claim that Athena was his sister, compared to Alexander's protestations that he was Philip's son.

clarity, suggesting instead in both the *Lysander* and *De Pythiae oraculis* that the response contained a clear message of warning for Lysander, but that he simply failed to remember or avoid the fate it foretold.

Finally, Plutarch uses dedications at Delphi to provide food for thought in these *Lives*, though not in the same way as he used them in the Delphic dialogues. For example, the statue of Lysander at Delphi represents the ambiguous nature of his character that Plutarch explores throughout the *Life*. How each figure treats the dedications also is revelatory of their characters. Sulla views the objects merely as a source of cash, which Plutarch indicates triggered the god's disapproval. Similarly with Timoleon's mercenaries: robbing the objects at the sanctuary will result in punishment by the gods. There was considerable political as well as military pressure put on the oracle. Lysander saw Delphi as a way to shore up his claims, Demetrius faced a military blockade of Delphi, and Timoleon's men and Sulla robbed the sanctuary. The oracle was not separate from its surroundings, but was affected by the political situation of the Greek states surrounding it. Thus, the political role of the oracle did not always result in universally positive outcomes for the oracular sanctuary. Political power could always be usurped or taken away by humans, as seen with Demetrius, or used and abused for personal gain, as seen with Lysander.

Conclusion

Reading Delphi in Plutarch

i. introduction

The Delphic oracle is a recurring motif throughout Plutarch's writings. For Plutarch, the oracle is a point of connection to the god, and as such can reveal truths about the natures both of the divine and of humans. As I have shown, the oracle is intrinsically connected to Plutarch's philosophical program and he uses Delphi as a springboard for investigation of philosophical and theological questions in the Delphic dialogues, and as a medium to indicate proper and improper actions on the part of leaders in the *Parallel Lives*. For Plutarch, the practice of philosophy was intimately connected with and indeed inseparable from the political arena: the ideal philosopher was an individual who was an active and engaged member of his community, one who employed his philosophical ideals in his everyday life.[725] As I argue in Chapter 2, in the *Parallel Lives* Plutarch uses Greek and Roman history as a model to assess the human condition, exploring what constitutes success and failure, what brings happiness and sorrow, and why. Plutarch's *Lives* are at

[725] Plutarch both calls politicians to engage with philosophy and philosophers to engage in politics. See, for example, *Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum* (776c-779c), *Ad principem ineruditum* (780c-f) *An seni respublica gerenda sit* (783b-797f), *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* (1033a-1034c), and *Adversus Colotem* (1126b-1127e). As Trapp (2004: 193) argues, "the life-pattern Plutarch identifies for the *politikos*… [is presented] as the *only* credible choice for the thinking, responsible individual who is in a position realistically to make it; and it is the only creditable choice because the life and values of the *politikos*, as Plutarch wants them to be, are identical to those of the *philosophos*." On this issue, see also Duff (1999a) 52-71, Roskam (2002), van Raalte (2005), van Hoof (2010) 19-40 and 66-80, and Boulet (2014). Dillon (2002) demonstrates persuasively that Plutarch was not alone in demanding such a prominent social role for philosophy and philosophers.

their core intimately connected to his philosophical agenda, as he uses historical *exempla* to prompt his readers to act as philosophers, exploring questions of virtue and vice.

Through this dissertation I have shown that, contrary to previous scholarly views, Plutarch's understanding of the Delphic oracle and oracular divination cannot be assessed only through the Delphic dialogues without reference to the *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch has woven his philosophical views of the oracle into the *Lives*, often in a way that has an impact on his presentation of historical events. Indeed, Plutarch retrojects his understanding of the oracle, in particular with regard to its purpose, language, and use, into the archaic, classical, and Hellenistic worlds. Plutarch uses his subjects' interactions with the oracle to convey messages about who they were as statesmen, and positive as well as negative aspects to their characters. In the process, Plutarch urges his readers to consider whether the methods employed by the statesmen were both justified and efficacious, and if not, why.

In the dialogues Plutarch shows his readers how to go about asking and answering philosophical questions, presenting them not with definitive answers, but with possible solutions together with the tools needed to judge the merits of different proposals. Similarly, with the *Lives* Plutarch presents sets of information in the form of the individual *Lives* within each pair, and possible interpretations of this information, given in the *synkriseis*. In the *Lives* just as in the dialogues, however, Plutarch does not present his subjects or their proposals to the reader without bias; he has shaped his presentation of the men and their careers to fit his larger goals within the project of the *Parallel Lives*, and is not above tendentious or misleading presentations of people and events to fulfill his philosophical goal. Plutarch's heavy editorial hand in shaping the information he presents in the biographies is especially clear in his treatment of the Delphic oracle. In what follows,

I will lay out first how Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle to shape and structure his narratives as well as to comment on the characters of his subjects and interlocutors across the texts under study in this dissertation. Following this, I will address Plutarch's portrayal of the Delphic oracle in the dialogues as well as in the *Lives* with regard to the purpose of the oracle, the identity of oracle-seekers and the nature of their queries, the existence of and purpose behind ambiguous oracular responses, and the connection between the god and the Pythia including the source of the prophetic words. Finally, I will conclude by situating Plutarch and his presentation of Delphi within his broader historical context.

ii. the literary role of the oracle

Plutarch uses the Delphic oracle, including its oracular responses as well as visits to and dedications made at the sanctuary, to prompt his readers to consider the issues lying at the heart of the dialogues and the *Lives* respectively: the nature of the divine and its interactions with humans on the one hand, and questions of proper and improper action on the part of leaders on the other.

In each of the dialogues, the interlocutors use the oracle as a proxy for discussing broader philosophical and theological questions. In *De E apud Delphos* the inscribed E on the temple of Apollo spurs a discussion of the natures of Delphic Apollo, of the cosmos, and of the supreme and eternal god at the heart of Being. Plutarch uses the oracular responses delivered by the Pythia in *De Pythiae oraculis* to explore different aspects of the god's relationship with humans. The purported disappearance of oracular sanctuaries launches a discussion in *De defectu oraculorum* about the nature of gods and *daimones*,

the source of the oracles' prophetic power, and the relationship between humans and the divine world.

The analysis of traditions and rituals associated with the oracle, as well as the figure of the Pythia and the nature of her responses serve as gateways to ontological reflection in the dialogues. The interlocutors of *De Pythiae oraculis* probe the form of the Pythia's responses – whether they were delivered in verse or in prose – because a change in how she delivers the god's prophecies could indicate a change in the god's purpose in delivering oracles or a change in human nature. In *De defectu oraculorum*, the sacrifices and other rituals surrounding oracular consultation become evidence for the power behind the oracle's prophetic ability. The votive offerings left at the Delphic sanctuary as well as the inscriptions carved onto his temple are used to assess the god's true nature in *De E apud Delphos*. Plutarch thus uses the Delphic oracle to explore philosophical issues in the dialogues, shaping and guiding the conversations among the interlocutors while also modelling for his readers how they too can use the oracle to facilitate their own exercises in philosophical contemplation.

Within the *Lives*, Plutarch uses his subjects' interactions with the Delphic oracle to illustrate to his readers their natures both as leaders and as individuals. The oracle's responses demonstrate for the reader Phocion's unswerving commitment to follow his own counsel and his refusal to bow to the whims and shifting loyalties of the crowd. Conversely, Lysander's desire to use the Delphic oracle for his own personal benefit reveals a fundamental flaw in his character as a leader: his actions were designed to benefit himself first, with little regard for the good of Sparta or the Spartan people. Plutarch also reveals troubling aspects to both Pericles and Alexander through the oracle. Pericles's problematic

obsession with opposing the Spartans is put on display in Plutarch's description of how Pericles handed Delphi back to the Phocians during the Second Sacred War, and the oracle stories concerning Alexander's supposed divine birth challenge the readers to consider for themselves whether Alexander was truly the son of Ammon, and whether Alexander believed himself to be the child of a god.

Plutarch also employs oracle stories at pivotal moments in Greek history, using the oracle to pose moral questions for readers about proper action. Through Nicias's interactions with Delphi, Plutarch asks his readers whether Nicias was truly responsible for the disaster that befell the Athenians in Sicily since the god was against the war from the beginning, and to what degree Alcibiades was culpable for steering the crowd away from what the gods clearly advised. Demosthenes's actions were justified in so far as he was fiercely defending Greek freedom, but his claim that the words said by the Pythia came not from the god but from Philip led directly to the devastating Greek defeat at Chaeronea, calling into question the morality as well as the efficacy of his actions. In the *Agesilaus* Plutarch asks his readers to assess who bears more responsibility for the misinterpretation of the oracular response warning against a lame kingship: Lysander who pulled off the trick, Agesilaus who allowed it to happen, or the Spartan people who fell for the deception. In each case, Plutarch uses Delphic oracle stories to present his readers with questions about just action and moral responsibility.

Additionally, Plutarch suggests that the leaders' success and failure respectively were connected to the god's approval or disapproval of the leaders' actions and how closely the leaders followed the god's advice. Plutarch indicates the god's approval of both Timoleon and his campaign in Sicily through the sign Timoleon received while consulting

the oracle and through the god's delayed punishment of Timoleon's mercenaries, waiting until Timoleon no longer needed them to take revenge for their sacrilegious despoliation of the Delphic sanctuary. Solon's refusal to heed the oracle bidding him to take power and Agis IV's failure to consult Delphi at all led to the collapse of both men's reforms, Solon's soon after they were implemented, and Agis's before they could even be completed. Aristides models the opposite behavior: he together with the allied Greek forces successfully defeated the Persians at Plataea because they made sure that they met each of the criteria given by the god to ensure Greek victory.

Throughout it all, the oracle stands as the primary intermediary between humans and the gods, advising leaders and states alike on how to act so as to ensure the greatest benefit to themselves and their states. In this way, Plutarch uses the oracle to indicate to his readers proper action and to assist them in the process of critical reflection that lies at the heart of Plutarch's purpose in the *Lives*.

The Delphic oracle also appears as a structuring device throughout Plutarch's narratives. In *De Pythiae oraculis* and *De defectu oraculorum* this takes the form of *periegesis* through the Delphic sanctuary, with the physical monuments and the votive offerings guiding the flow of the conversations, while in *De E apud Delphos* the physical oracular sanctuary serves as the starting point for each of the theories put forward by the various interlocutors. In the *Lives*, Plutarch uses oracle stories for a similar effect. Plutarch bookends his *Lives of Theseus and Romulus* with the Delphic oracle, for the biographical book opens and closes with the oracle received by Aegeus, and within the *Theseus* Plutarch uses the hero's interactions with the Delphic god to trace his rise and fall: while he is seeking and following the oracle's advice, he is met with success, and when he ceases to

model his rule on the god's advice, he fails. Similarly, in the *Demetrius* the oracle reveals Demetrius's process of corruption as he accepted increasingly more grandiose divine honors from the Athenians. The oracle also acts as a framing device for key episodes within *Lives*, as seen in Plutarch's treatment of the battle of Plataea in the *Aristides*, and the development and implementation of the new Spartan constitution in the *Lycurgus*. Finally, Plutarch uses the oracle to foreshadow in particular what would turn out to be disastrous decisions or events and to communicate divine approval or disapproval of the actions and decisions made by leaders, as seen in Plutarch's narratives about both the Sicilian expedition in the *Nicias* and the battle of Chaeronea in the *Demosthenes*. Plutarch's strategic use of the Delphic sanctuary and Delphic oracle stories reveals both their utility to him as literary motifs and structuring devices, as well as the centrality of the oracle to his agenda in both the dialogues and the *Lives*: the Delphic oracle is a key tool for Plutarch to reveal truths to his readers and guide them to philosophy.

The physical landscape of Delphi also holds a special place throughout these texts. Plutarch uses the sanctuary in the dialogues to stimulate conversation as well as to comment on the solutions proposed by the interlocutors. For example, in *De Pythiae oraculis* the volume of dedications spanning the centuries stands as evidence against the claim that the oracle was not truly prophetic, while in *De E apud Delphos* Plutarch uses the dedications to model how to undertake philosophical exploration. Within Plutarch's texts the Delphic sanctuary serves as an extension of the god himself, and, like the oracular responses, is a way for the god to communicate with humans. Plutarch demonstrates this aspect to Delphi throughout all three Delphic dialogues, where dedications at the sanctuary can aid humans in understanding the nature of the god, as well as in the *Lives*, where

dedications made to the god reveal truths about Plutarch's subjects. The statue of Lysander at the opening of his *Life* reveals the complexity of Lysander as a figure and displays to the reader the key themes and problematic aspects of the Spartan leader that Plutarch explores in the *Life*. Similarly, Sulla's treatment of the sanctuary stands as crucial evidence of a major flaw in his character: his disrespect for the gods and willingness to use whatever tactics necessary to achieve success. By presenting the Delphic landscape as an extension of the god, Plutarch promotes the value of Delphi both in the past as well as in his own day, showing his readers how the oracular sanctuary is still connected to the god, and should continue to be respected and honored.

Delphi is a particularly poignant literary landscape for Plutarch. Through the sanctuary Plutarch poses questions as well as answers, using the sacred landscape together with the oracle's words to guide his readers through philosophy. In both the *Lives* and the dialogues, Plutarch begins with specifics – the bronzes at Delphi, or the actions of one leader – and uses these details as a basis and a starting point for investigating much larger phenomena. Within the *Lives*, Plutarch uses the oracle to comment on specific leaders and actions: Solon's constitutional reforms, Sulla's actions in Greece, or Phocion's character, for example. The reader is then encouraged and indeed expected to extrapolate from these *exempla* and consider more broadly questions such as the nature of leadership, issues of morality and justice, and what makes an ideal *politeia*. For Plutarch, a true philosopher is one who is intimately engaged with his community, and is actively practicing and advocating for the philosophical principles in which he believes. Plutarch thus uses the Delphic oracle in the *Lives* to help provide clarity for his readers on issues which lay at the heart of his philosophical agenda across his writings. In the dialogues too, Plutarch often

begins from minute details – like the E on the temple of Apollo, the form of the oracular responses, or specifics of Delphic rituals – and uses them as a way to talk about the nature of the divine, the god's relationship with humans, and indeed the very nature of the world itself. The oracle thus stands as a teacher and a guide within both the *Lives* and the dialogues, instructing and assisting Plutarch's characters through their interactions with the oracle as well as Plutarch's readers through his literary use of the oracle within these texts.

iii. the portrayal of the oracle

a. the purpose of the oracle

Plutarch consistently portrays the oracle as a manifestation of the god's philosophical nature, with its primary purpose or reason for existing being to educate and advise humans about proper and just action. In the archaic and Classical *Lives* the oracle serves as the primary intermediary between rulers and the divine, advising leaders in how best to govern their *poleis*. Additionally, Plutarch takes care to show how leaders who took the time to consider and reflect on the meaning of the god's messages were more successful in their endeavors than those who made swift or rash decisions. The initial, hasty interpretation of the oracular response received before the battle of Plataea could have easily resulted in a devastating loss for the Greeks. It was only careful consideration and group deliberation over the oracle's words that revealed the god's true meaning.

This image of the oracle in the *Lives* as promoting discussion and dialogue among states and leaders parallels the image of the oracle from *De E apud Delphos* as promoting reflection among states and individuals. The focus of the *Lives* on prominent and powerful

leaders results in a rather skewed picture of how the oracle was used in the past: the biographies do not tell the stories of ordinary people, so we should not expect to find record of their oracular consultations in the *Lives*. Nevertheless, the image that emerges from the biographies does appear to confirm the conclusions in the Delphic dialogues of Plutarch-as-narrator, Theon, and Didymus, among other interlocutors, that in the past the oracle was used primarily for consultations on matters of states, creating a contrast between the past and Plutarch's own day in which consultations concerned small or personal matters. Despite this change, however, Plutarch still presents the oracle in such a way that reveals the underlying purpose of the oracle as fundamentally unchanged within the *Lives* and between the *Lives* and the dialogues: from the archaic past to the second century CE the god used the oracle to promote critical thinking and dialogue among humans, assisting humans in exploring philosophical questions through the oracular responses and through the oracular sanctuary, including its rituals, traditions, and physical landscape.

b. oracle-seekers and queries

In the Delphic dialogues the interlocutors note a shift in the type of questions people put to the oracle as well as the type of consultants who come to the sanctuary, although the temporal distinction is never more clear than a simple "now" versus "the past": in the past, the oracle answered important questions posed by important people on issues such as war and peace or justice and the law; now the oracle answers mundane questions by normal people about the weather, crops, or marriage. The most specific temporal marker given is by Theon in *De Pythiae oraculis*, with the Roman conquest of Greece or at least the

development of the *principate* and Roman imperial rule being understood to mark the boundary.

Within the *Lives*, Plutarch marks clearly when this shift occurred and when leaders ceased consulting the oracle on matters of state: the birth of the Hellenistic age. In the archaic *Lives* the oracle is a prominent political actor, serving as an advisor of leaders and a guarantor of constitutions. This is still largely true in the Classical *Lives*, when the oracle plays a key role in major political events. Plutarch does show, however, that by this period the oracle had already slowly begun to be viewed more as a political tool than a political partner or advisor, as seen in the actions of Lysander in particular as well as of Pericles and Themistocles. These figures understood that claiming Delphic support carried political clout, and in his *Lives* of these three leaders Plutarch makes it clear that they were not deferring to the oracle's words, but using the oracle to manipulate the Spartans and Athenians respectively. With the rise of the Hellenistic kingdoms the oracle largely disappears from Plutarch's *Lives*, and where the oracle does appear, its diminished status is palpable: the Athenians turned to Demetrius instead of Delphi, and Agis IV did not consult the oracle even as he sought to change the constitution the Spartans received from Delphic Apollo. Plutarch thus shows a transition, from when the oracle was the only source of guidance for rulers, to a time when humans considered themselves equal to the divine and not in need of the oracle's assistance to govern their states.

This situation is similar to that described by Theon in *De Pythiae oraculis*, but with some important differences. In the dialogue, Theon credits the current state of peace throughout Greece for the mundane nature of the questions put to the oracle in his day, implying that Greece's incorporation into the Roman empire and the *pax Romana* are

directly responsible for the shift in the type of oracle-seekers and their queries. Within the *Lives*, Plutarch appears to give an earlier date for this change, and presents not the current peace instituted by Rome as the culprit, but rather the advent of divine leaders and the decrease in respect shown to the divine and the god's oracle as the true causes behind Delphi's descent into political obscurity. Plutarch's disapproval of this turn of events is palpable in the *Lives*, where he gives a far harsher judgement on this issue than the rosy praises of Rome that Theon espouses in *De Pythiae oraculis*. In particular, Plutarch shows how in the distant past even the leaders who themselves received cultic veneration, such as Theseus and Lycurgus, paid close attention to Delphi and the advice the god gave through the oracle; it is only more recent leaders claiming divine natures who failed to do so. Furthermore, Theseus and Lycurgus achieved their heroic and even divine status through Delphi, while the latter figures including Lysander and Demetrius, had their divinity bestowed on them by humans.

Plutarch in his overall presentation of Greek history from the archaic age to the imperial Roman world reveals how the oracle was used differently in different eras, while simultaneously demonstrating how these uses – aside from the abuse of the oracle – were all different manifestations of the god's purpose behind the creation of the Delphic oracle. When leaders ceased to rely on the oracle for guidance, the oracle instead became, as the interlocutors in the Delphic dialogues demonstrate, a source of guidance for individuals. Plutarch thus continues what he claims to be the god's purpose for the oracle with both the Delphic dialogues and the *Lives* by using the oracle in his writings to help instruct individuals and guide them along a path to greater philosophical understanding.

c. ambiguous oracles

Within the Delphic dialogues ambiguous oracular responses appear as a problem that Plutarch is unsure how to solve. Each dialogue presents a different explanation for both the source of ambiguity in some responses, as well as why the ambiguity may be present. In *De E apud Delphos* and *De defectu oraculorum* ambiguous responses are the product of the god, though the interlocutors in the two dialogues give different explanations for why the ambiguity is present. Whereas in *De E apud Delphos* Theon argues that such responses exist in order to prompt humans to use logical reasoning, in *De defectu oraculorum* Lamprias shows the god using an ambiguous oracular response to deny an oracle-seeker the knowledge he sought as well as to rebuke the seeker for asking an impious question in the first place. In contrast, Theon and Boethus in *De Pythiae oraculis* suggest that the ambiguity is created by the Pythia, rather than the god. Theon argues that because the words of the oracular responses are the Pythia's, not the god's, any vagueness must be ascribed to her. Theon is not clear, however, on why exactly the Pythia would choose to employ this ambiguity, suggesting as a possible explanation that the Pythia used ambiguity to avoid retaliation from the powerful for delivering unfavorable responses. Boethus offers a far less charitable explanation, claiming that the Pythia used ambiguity to avoid being proven wrong. Within the dialogues, then, Plutarch neither gives a straight answer to the problem of ambiguous oracular responses, nor is he consistent with how he approaches this issue.

The picture in the *Lives* is clearer. While Plutarch acknowledges that there were ambiguous responses in the Delphic dialogues, he makes no such concession in the *Lives*. Even when faced with famously confusing responses such as those given to Aegeus, to the Athenians about the wooden wall, or to Lysander about his death, Plutarch makes every

effort to present the responses as clear and unambiguous: it was not the fault of the god that humans failed to understand right away. The closest Plutarch comes to acknowledging the existence of ambiguous oracular responses in the *Lives* is the concession that some responses could be cryptic, such as the response given to Aristides before the battle of Plataea, but he implies that this was certainly not done in a deliberate *attempt* to deceive. Rather, it was, as Theon argues in *De E apud Delphos*, a sign of the god's desire to assist humans, for such responses were designed to induce leaders to become more enlightened. Plutarch's consistent efforts in the *Lives* to present oracular responses as clear and not deceptive or misleading thus provides some perspective on the different explanations given in the Delphic dialogues. Plutarch challenges the Delphic oracle's reputation for ambiguity with two arguments: first, that the responses were not truly ambiguous, and second, that those consulting the oracle should always consider carefully the god's words before acting.

d. the god and the Pythia

The Pythia is largely invisible throughout the Delphic dialogues as well as the *Lives*, with the crucial exception of *De Pythiae oraculis* and the lives of *Alexander*, *Demosthenes*, and *Lysander*. In these texts, Plutarch explores how people interacted with the god's human priestess. In *De Pythiae oraculis* Theon argues that the Pythia's human soul influences the oracular responses, and that responsibility for the exact phrasing of the oracular responses lies not with the god, but with the Pythia, who may choose to employ whatever language she wishes, so long as she does not conceal the god's truth. In the *Alexander* Plutarch shows how the Pythia could be overwhelmed physically by an oracle-seeker, while in the *Demosthenes* and *Lysander* Plutarch reveals that others thought the Pythia was susceptible

to corruption either through threat of physical force or through bribery. Across the *Lives*, however, these attempts are never successful: Lysander fails to corrupt the Pythia, Plutarch makes it clear that Demosthenes's accusations that the Pythia had "Philippized" were merely slander, and in the *Alexander* the Pythia does not actually give a formal oracular response from the tripod on an inauspicious day, no matter how Alexander interprets her actions. These episodes from the *Lives* are all in accordance with Lamprias's argument in *De defectu oraculorum* that the Pythia cannot be coerced, since such an attempt will not result in a prophecy, and may indeed cause harm to come to the Pythia.

The theme of human fallibility appears again in the *Lives* with the *theoroi* sent to the oracle of Ammon in the *Nicias*, the priest of Ammon in the *Alexander*, and the Delphic priests in the *Lysander*: in these episodes, humans either changed, misinterpreted, misspoke, or invented the words of the god, resulting in a garbled or fictitious message. Plutarch, therefore, is clearly aware of the Pythia's inherently weak position as a human servant of the god and as one who is subject to human temptations and threats. Nevertheless, Plutarch consistently denies that the Pythia's weakness has ever truly compromised the oracular responses emanating from the Delphic oracle. Instead, throughout most of the oracle stories in the *Lives* and in *De E apud Delphos* as well as elsewhere in *De defectu oraculorum* Plutarch in each case names the god as the source of the oracular responses, with no or minimal reference to the Pythian priestess who vocalized these words. Outside of *De Pythiae oraculis*, Plutarch is simply not interested in acknowledging or exploring the possibility that the oracle's words are anything other than the undiluted and unaltered words of the god.

iv. conclusion

I have shown how Plutarch takes what he himself identifies as a specifically and uniquely Greek religious institution and adapts it to the conditions and the realities of life under Rome. In many ways, throughout his writings Plutarch gives an *apologia* for Delphi, defending the oracular sanctuary from past accusations and fighting for its visibility and relevance in the Roman world. By Plutarch's day, the prophetic power of oracles had become increasingly challenged, and the Delphic oracle had long since lost the political clout Plutarch shows it wielding in the Greek past. Throughout this dissertation I have shown how Plutarch crafts a new identity for Delphi in a way that increased its relevance under Roman rule. Plutarch presents the oracle's purpose as being a source of wisdom and guidance for humans. Whereas in the past the god fulfilled this purpose by guiding states and leaders through the oracle, Plutarch argues that the god still uses the oracle to promote philosophical reasoning in his own day, portraying Delphi as a center for serious theological and philosophical thought, where prominent Greeks and Romans could come together and grow in wisdom through the aid of the god.

Plutarch is a relatively early voice in what would become a cacophony of discussions about oracular divination between the first and fourth centuries CE. This era oversaw a shift in oracular practice and in the status of various oracular sanctuaries: the shrinking power of Greek *poleis* resulted in oracular sanctuaries losing much of their former political clout as mediators between varying city-states, and formerly prominent sanctuaries fell into disrepair and disuse, while new oracles emerged and thrived. Delphi in particular suffered from a decrease in use, while other oracular sanctuaries, particularly

those in Asia Minor, flourished.[726] Additionally, as philosophers increasingly turned to discussions of divination and theology in their writings, some of the oracles, and Didyma and Claros in particular, appeared to take on more philosophical aspects, actively taking part in the debates of the day by delivering oracular responses on theological questions regarding the nature of the gods and their relationship to humans.[727] Through both the Delphic dialogues and the *Lives* Plutarch shows that the god's engagement in these topics is not new: the god has always used the Delphic oracle to answer these types of questions for those with curious minds and the intelligence to pick up on the meanings and implications of the god's messages.

Many of the criticisms of the oracle that Plutarch addresses in both the *Moralia* and the *Lives* – for example, that the Delphic oracle was deliberately ambiguous in order to avoid being wrong – appear in later works by authors such as Oenomaus of Gadara, Lucian, and Porphyry. In addition to Plutarch's Delphic dialogues, discussions of the veracity of the Delphic oracle, the god's purpose in creating the oracle, and the manner in which the god delivers mantic responses appear in the writings of Dio Chrysostom, Aelius Aristides, Lucian, Maximus of Tyre, and Porphyry.[728] Delphi is a literary motif and a poignant setting in Plutarch's *Lives*, but also in Philostratus's biography of Apollonius of Tyana, the travelogue of Pausanias, and Heliodorus's romance novel.[729] Plutarch's defense and often

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[726] On the state of oracular sanctuaries in this period, see, for example, Parke (1985) 69-111, Levin (1989), Bendlin (2011) 211-226, Heineman (2018) 25-30. For interactions between the Roman emperors and the Delphic sanctuary, see Weir (2004) 140-175.

[727] E.g. Lane Fox (1986) 168-215; Busine (2005) 154-224, *et passim*; Busine 2013; Addey (2016) 1-6, *et. passim*. On the oracles of Didyma and Claros, see Parke (1985), Busine (2005).

[728] E.g. Dio Chrysostom: *Discourses* 10, 13, 32. Aelius Aristides: 23.43, 46; 28.9, 14-15, 48, 81; 37.22, 25; 45.7; 50.75. Lucian: *Zeus Rants*; *Zeus Catechized*; *Dialogues of the Gods* 16; *Dialogues of the Dead* 10, 12. Maximus of Tyre: *Orations* 5, 8, 11, 29, 41. Porphyry: *Philosophy from Oracles.*

[729] Philostratus *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 6.11, 7.14. Heliodorus *Aethiopica* 2.26-3.6.

aspirational image of what the oracle was, or what it could be, are a part of this larger conversation about Delphi and Delphic divination. In response to criticism and neglect, Plutarch attempts to correct the record on Delphi, consistently explaining away oracular responses that could be, or traditionally were, interpreted as vague or ambiguous, synchronizing the past with the present, and presenting the Delphic oracle as a mechanism through which the god instructs and guides humans. In this way, Plutarch explains, the god and the god's mission have not changed: human society and the political climate have changed, but the god has not. The Delphic oracle always existed as a way for the god to pursue his philosophical agenda on earth.

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