“NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET”? PLUTARCH AND PHILOSTRATUS’ LIFE OF APOLLONIUS: SOME THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

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Introduction: on the Commensurability of Plutarch and Philostratus

The very undertaking of a comparative reading of Plutarch and Philostratus’ Life of Apollonius seems to be almost an act of hybris. To be sure, the history of the scholarship on both œuvres shows some resemblance; scholars have focussed, for example, on the question of ‘sources and historical reliability’, and have established the position of Plutarch in the philosophical and biographical tradition on the one hand, and of Philostratus in the movement of the Second Sophistic on the other. But they have never ventured to register in a systematic way the particular topics common to both authors—this will, of course, also have to do with the bulk and variety of the œuvres involved. But neither have they, on a more general level, reflected on any of the possible analogies qua goals, strategies and techniques of both authors. It seems as if the very idea of any commensurability of Plutarch and Philostratus as authors is so fantastic, that it could only be conceived by a daring γόης.

The undertaking is nevertheless a most appealing, if not irresistible challenge. For it should be gratifying to “liberate these Greeks” from their relative isolation, and to bridge the Hellespont between the Chaeronean and the Cappadocian who were contemporaries under the same Roman emperors, between one who is commonly labelled “a philosopher” and one who was actually a sophist, and between authors who both wrote biographies. Yet, in order to avoid a flatly tragic outcome of the whole enterprise, it seems indeed advisable to limit it here to no more than a scouting of the field. I shall first try to gather factual evidence that links Plutarch to Apollonius, and Philostratus to Plutarch. Next, I shall examine the prooemium of the Life of Apollonius and illustrate how its technique and some of its themes are relevant to the formal prooemia

1 But see the suggestions of Jones 1971:36–38.
of Plutarch’s Lives. Finally, I shall attempt to make a rough σύγκρισις of the Life of Apollonius and a Plutarchean ‘Pythagorean Life’.

Making contact: Plutarch, Apollonius, and Philostratus

Plutarch and Apollonius

Let us, then, first make a survey of the historical, chronological, topographical and thematic space shared by Apollonius and Plutarch (ca. 45–125). At first sight the portents are not very good.

Who was the “historical” Apollonius? I quote Jones:

(…) an itinerant Pythagorean philosopher, travelling mainly in the Eastern part of the Roman empire. He was a religious and moral preacher, with a predilection for staying in temples and issuing advice to the personnel; an adviser of cities, who received honorific testimonials from several of them; a teacher with numerous pupils; and a spiritual counselor to at least a few highly placed Romans. These Romans perhaps included the emperors Vespasian and Titus, though Philostratus may have invented the story of Apollonius’ prosecution by Domitian (Jones 2005:11–12).

In Plutarch’s works that came down to us, there is no single mention of this Apollonius of Tyana, who was his contemporary for at least 50 years. This observation, if brought into a discussion about the historical Apollonius, triggers questions that reveal some striking parallels between the two men and make Plutarch’s silence paradoxical, if not somewhat alarming.

Since Plutarch never mentions Apollonius, is it to be assumed that he never met him, or even that he was unaware of his existence? Plutarch was sympathetic to Pythagoreanism to the point that he wrote essays inveighing against the eating of meat; he visited Rome, Italy, Alexandria and Asia Minor, where he probably lectured; he was an expert in religious and ethical questions; he was a priest of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and a counsellor of the priestess Clea; he held office in his

2 One should keep in mind that almost half of Plutarch’s works is lost. Arguing on the basis of the surviving corpus Plutarchean thus inevitably comes down to an argumentum e silentio. Still, the surviving corpus is large and varied enough to allow for plausible inferences.


4 On the possibility that Plutarch lectured in Smyrna, see Jones 1971:14–15.