CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘THE MIND OF AN ASS AND THE IMPUDENCE OF A DOG’: A SCHOLAR GONE BAD

Cynthia Damon

‘… the intellectual power of great scholars … their moral principles of absolute honesty and unremitting patience in the pursuit of truth’.

Rudolf Pfeiffer, History of Classical Scholarship, vii

1. Introduction

Apion, the scholar of the title, was a first-century CE success story. By birth he was an Egyptian, by training a teacher and scholar of Greek literature. But despite his Egyptian origin he earned the coveted citizenship of Alexandria, and despite his philological profession he led an embassy to Gaius seeking to stir that emperor’s wrath against his adopted city’s Jewish population. Apion also claimed to have conferred with Homer’s shade and to possess the true story about the poet’s much-disputed birthplace, though he never revealed it.

As even this very brief sketch suggests, Apion raised eyebrows in antiquity. He also raised tempers and attracted the attention of the great. His sobriquet cymbalum mundi ‘the world’s gong’, for example, was bestowed upon him by the emperor Tiberius. The present chapter, in the context of a volume on κακία ‘badness’, asks what made Apion so provoking to so many.

After a brief look at Apion’s life (section 2) and reputation (section 3), consideration is given to his philological work, again briefly (section 4). The scant and discordant remains of his five-book account of Egypt require a more thorough discussion (sections 5 and 6). The final section addresses the question of why the ancient reputation of this apparently successful scholar was so multifariously and persistently bad. Rather a different picture emerges here than that offered recently by Kenneth
Jones:¹ ‘a multi-faceted scholar and man who devoted his life to various studies’ with ‘celebrity justly won by his brilliance’.

2. Μόχθος²

The Suda entry on Apion offers a fairly standard—for the Suda—blend of fact, confusion, error, and puzzles. Also omissions. But it is a convenient place to begin (Suda α 3215):

Apion, son of Pleistonices, called ‘Drudge’. An Egyptian (but according to Heliconius, a Cretan). Grammarian, pupil of Apollonius the son of Archibius. Also studied with Euphranor, then an old man (in fact, more than 100 years old). Raised in the household of Didymus the Great. Taught in Rome under Tiberius Caesar and Claudius. Took over from the grammarians Theon. Contemporary of Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Wrote a history organized by nation and some other works.²

‘Απίων, ὁ Πλειστονίκου, ὁ ἐπικληθεὶς Μόχθος. Αἰγύπτιος, κατὰ δὲ Ἑλληνίδα, γραμματικὸς, μαθητής Ἀπολλονίου τοῦ Ἀρχιβίου, ἥρακοι δὲ καὶ Εὐφρανορὸς γηραιός καὶ ὑπὲρ οὗ ἐτης γεγονότος, Διδύμου δὲ τοῦ μεγάλου θερητοῦ. ἔπαιδευσε δὲ ἐπὶ Τιβερίου Καῖσαρος καὶ Κλαύδιου ἐν Ῥώμῃ, ἵνα διάδοχος Θέωνος τοῦ γραμματικοῦ καὶ σύγχρονος Διονυσίου τοῦ Ἀλικαρνασίου. ἔγραψεν ἱστορίαν κατ’ ἔθνος καὶ ἄλλα τινά.

There is confusion even in the innocuous opening of this entry: ὁ Πλειστονίκου, ‘son of Pleistonices’. Πλειστονίκης was an epithet applied to Apion himself, not his father’s name: thus in the elder Pliny, who had seen Apion, and in Gellius.³ Neither author tells us whether Πλειστονίκης is a compound of νίκη ‘victory’ or of νεῖκος ‘strife’, i.e., whether it means ‘supreme champion’ or ‘supremely contentious’; for discussion see section 3.

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¹ Jones 2005, 281 n. 7.
² Except where otherwise noted, translations are my own.
³ Plin. Nat. 37.75 Apion cognominatus Plistonices ‘Apion surnamed Plistonices’; likewise in Book 1 on the external authorities for Book 36: Apione Plistonice ‘from Apion Plistonices’. Gel. 5.14.1 qui ‘Plistonicus’ appellatus est; 7.8.1 qui ‘Pleistonicius appellatus est, both meaning ‘who was called “Plistonices”‘. For the inscription Ἀπίων πλειστονίκης ἤκουσα τρις ‘I, Apion Pleistonicus, heard [sc. the voice] thrice’ on the ‘talking’ Colossus of Memnon see Bernand 1960, 164–165. The report of Sextus Julius Africanus, a third-century chronographer used by Eusebius in the fourth century and George Syncellus in the ninth (see FGrHist 616 T 3), that Apion’s father’s name was Poseidonius is suspect since Africanus has no other independent evidence about Apion.