

To: Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies

**Report on Oxford conference, *Generic Enrichment in Plutarch's Lives***

**Saturday, 28<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

Scholarship has already stressed that generic crossing, generic mixtures, generic self-criticism and appropriateness are central to Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. The aim of the conference was to raise and discuss questions about 'Generic Enrichment' in Plutarch's *Lives*, a concept that was introduced with reference to the poetry of Vergil and Horace by Stephen Harrison in 2007. By generic enrichment in Plutarch's *Lives*, we aimed at exploring the different ways in which the Plutarchan biographical 'genre' develops, expands, and deepens its texture by confronting and interacting with other 'genres'. Such effect of enrichment may include: (a) formal aspects (e.g. language, narrative structure, narrative voice, addressee, rhetorical framework) which may in their turn point to either (b) thematic aspects, or (c) meta-generic signals which concern the literary 'category' to which Plutarch's text might belong. Another question that was addressed in the conference was the way in which generic complexity and interaction in Plutarch's biographies are used as part of Plutarch's characterising and moralising techniques. Attention was mainly paid to the value of generic enrichment for *interpretation*, as echoes of other texts may encourage reflection on certain narrative templates of historical continuities and changes, plot or character or moral import, affording a repertoire of and for characterisation and moral evaluation. Any differences or similarities between the effect of generic enrichment in Plutarch's biographies and in other 'genres' were further discussed in the conference. How are different 'genres' developed and enriched themselves over time? In which ways are they received and within which existing generic expectations? And how does their reception influence and reshape these very generic expectations?

These were a few among many other questions that we raised and examined within our discussion of the limits and possibilities of the effect of generic enrichment in Plutarch's *Lives*. By bringing into the analysis works from different literary traditions, different times, and with different forms we tried to offer a large number of new insights in Plutarch's 'genre' or 'generic repertoire'—to use Alastair Fowler's words—examining in particular how a range of literary and non-literary stimuli add

to, expand, and enrich creatively the texture of Plutarch's biographies, setting an agenda for the 'genre' of ancient biography which is picked up and creatively reshaped by later authors.

The workshop started with an introduction to the literary effect of 'generic enrichment' by Stephen Harrison (University of Oxford). He talked about the concept of 'genre' and 'generic enrichment' as well as 'generic crossing' in Plutarch's work. The first paper by Zoe Stamatopoulou (Pennsylvania State University) dealt with the versatility and multivalence of the Hesiodic intertext within the *Lives*, focusing especially on how the *Works and Days* emerges as an apt intertext for Plutarch's didactic and morally edifying biographical narratives. Larry Kim (University of Heidelberg/Trinity University) examined, next, how early archaic lyric poetry might have influenced Plutarch's writing of biography, concentrating on the *Life of Solon* and the way in which the 'poetic' world of lyric poetry informs the construction and reading of Solon's political and legal activity, character, and wisdom in the *Life*. The *Life of Solon* constituted the main case-study in Alexei Zadoronjyi's (University of Liverpool) paper too, which aimed at taking stock of Plutarch's expectations about philosophy as a set of generic benchmarks of intellectual and literary activity. Plutarch's *Lives* and philosophy, and more precisely Plato, was the topic of the next paper by Timothy Duff (University of Reading), who showed through a close reading of part of the *Life of Alcibiades* how the reader's understanding of the Plutarchan text is changed and enriched by recognition of the original Platonic passages to which the *Life* alludes and their context.

Although trained in Platonic philosophy, Plutarch was thoroughly imbued also with the rhetorical training of his day, as Mike Edwards (University of Roehampton) illustrated through his discussion of possible rhetorical influences on the composition of the *Life of Demosthenes*. The *Life of Demosthenes*, a very theatrical and dramatic *Life* itself, especially at its closing chapters, offered a good transition to the next paper by Judith Mossman (University of Nottingham) on Plutarch's engagement with tragedy, comedy, but also lyric and medicine in *Demetrius* 38. The characterising and moral effects of medical discourse in Plutarch's biography were thoroughly examined afterwards by Maria Vamvouri Ruffy (University of Lausanne). Plutarch's description of landscapes, influenced by several genres (e.g. epic, history), similarly help us to understand and explore character and morality, addressing questions about confusion

and ignorance, misperception and decipherment, as Jason Koenig (University of St Andrews) discussed next. Craig Cooper (University of Lethbridge) shed further light on Plutarch's characterising and moralising techniques in the *Lives* by looking at how generic enrichment works in the case of non-literary sources (such as inscriptions, works of art, or monuments). Lucy Fletcher (University of Reading) focused on sources too, and more specifically on whether and how far distinctions conventionally drawn between 'source' and 'non-source' intertexts, 'historiographical' and 'fictional' narrative types accordingly, are heuristically valuable for elucidating the intertextual dimension of Plutarch's biographical project. Finally, Chris Pelling (University of Oxford) offered some concluding remarks on Plutarch's handling of generic enrichment in the *Lives*.

Due to your generous support, two postgraduate students from Germany and Austria, working on Plutarch and other literary genres, especially tragedy and medical texts, were able to attend the conference. We are all most grateful for your help and support.

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