Tychè et Pronoia

La marche du monde selon Plutarque

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The Interplay of Textual References in Plutarch’s Life of Phocion

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Abstract
The pair of Phocion and Cato the Younger contains a kind of anticipated synkrisis. This anticipation has implications for the author’s narrative strategy. Plutarch seems to prefer Phocion, if one might judge from the way he highlights the text with clues that organize the interpretation of the macrotext. This is to be seen in the way he cites models or plays with the same hypotexts differently in the cases of Phocion and Cato, both of them close to Socrates’ model. It has already been said that the ostentatiousness of the Socratic model in the reading of Phaedo by Cato permits the reader to glimpse a misunderstood appropriation of it. In Phocion’s Life, on the other hand, the reader must look for the hypotext and its paradigmatic dimension – either Herodotus (Solon before Croesus’ treasure/Phocion before Alexander’s treasures) or Plato (Ap., Phd., Cri.) – in Phocion’s placid and soft attitude in his last moments, where some coincidences of episodes before his death and that of Socrates are to be seen, or in Phocion’s behaviour throughout his life. He kept his constantia of character, even under hard circumstances, when Tyche was adverse to him and caused him to be misunderstood by the people or led to death by the manipulation of demagogues.

Phocion is one of the great examples of longevity and constantia of character and behaviour that has lasted from Ancient times to the present. He lived during the turmoil of the 4th century b.C., in an Athens that was defeated and politically weakened and whose identity was badly shaken by a long civil war and by the impending loss of its freedom to the kings of Macedonia, then builders of a new empire.

Although Phocion’s political and private conduct was beyond reproach and in the interests of Athens, which both feared and respected him, he was condemned to death by ingestion of hemlock, in 318 b.C. This very same city, or rather, a crowd, manipulated by the representatives of the Macedonian kings, condemned him to death at the age of eighty-four, in an act that could not be further from the genuine democracy of the 5th century. A short time after, his death produced uncomfortable feelings of guilt and weighed heavily on the conscience of the city.

Unlike many of the heroes in Plutarch’s biographies, Phocion does not represent the soul and the fate of the political community of the time, through synecdoche. On the contrary, he experiences the problems of his time and fights against them as much as he can by intervening and setting trends of collective behaviour regarding political ethics. His effort is consistent and energetic, but in vain, because he is surrounded by traitors, of which he is well aware.

Phocion’s attitudes contrast greatly with the typical behaviour of the members of Athenian society at that time: he follows Socrates’ model of conduct and his life is inspired by a kind of practical philosophy. Therefore, Plutarch chooses another admirer of Socrates, an even greater enthusiast of Stoicism, in Rome, to pair with him: Cato the Younger, from Utica. Although the link