

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dreams in Plutarch's *Lives* of Alcibiades and Demosthenes

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Abstract

This article argues that the *ante mortem* dreams of Alcibiades and Demosthenes articulate key themes of moral doubt in Plutarch's biography of each man. Alcibiades' dream of being dressed as a courtesan alludes to his uneasy stance between masculine and feminine postures; Demosthenes' dream of himself as a failed tragic actor draws upon his lifelong concern with performance and insincerity. In these two *Lives*, Plutarch deploys the ambiguity and uncertainty of dreams to pose an interpretive problem for the reader which can never fully be resolved, particularly appropriate to these unpredictable and untrustworthy men.

Keywords: dreams; Plutarch; Alcibiades; Demosthenes

*I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with the other sleepers each in turn,
I dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,
And I become the other dreamers.*

Walt Whitman, 'The Sleepers'

I. Introduction

In his *Parallel Lives*, a series of at least 23 pairs of biographies of Greek and Roman statesmen composed around the turn of the second century AD, Plutarch relates approximately 45 dreams in detail.¹ In what follows, I demonstrate how the dreams recounted in the *Lives* of Alcibiades and Demosthenes, two of Plutarch's most complex and morally ambiguous subjects, provide vivid closing summations of the central conflicts in these men's lives. Further, via a highly sophisticated minimalist technique of ellipsis and contraposition, Plutarch uses uncertainties in the dream narrative to create a final, unsolvable moral *aporia* for the reader. The particular qualities of dreams, above all their ambiguity, provide Plutarch with a fitting means of portraying these two enigmatic men.

Dreams in biography constitute a special quandary for the historian, since they are by their very nature personal and unverifiable.² Plutarch's inclusion of dreams in and of itself has aroused suspicion. William Harris, in his book-length survey of ancient dream culture,

¹ Brenk (1975) 337. My own count is slightly higher, as I include dreams that are described in just a few words, provided Plutarch hints at their content.

² For the ontological status of dreams as 'historical' evidence, cf. Hall (2011).

accuses Plutarch of ‘cram[ming] dreams uncritically into his biographies’.³ Frederick Brenk likewise observes that Plutarch has ‘a tendency to take great liberties’ when reporting dreams.⁴ And Christopher Pelling supposes that in many cases it may have been Plutarch himself who composed the dreams that appear in his *Lives*, a practice of ‘creative reconstruction’.⁵ Yet the implied dichotomy between fiction, on the one hand, and history and biography, on the other, may be misleading here. Within the conventions of the form that he has chosen, there is considerable latitude for Plutarch to shape his material.

In what follows, I set aside the idea that Plutarch’s duty was to collect ‘facts’ which should ‘speak for themselves’, and focus instead on how his use of dreams furthers his central interest in revealing character, a line of inquiry that has not been sufficiently explored in prior analyses.⁶ As case studies, I will consider the *Lives* of Alcibiades and Demosthenes. In both, the hero dreams a single, significant dream the night before his death. The narrative is extremely sparing in providing interpretive guidance, and much is left uncertain. Where did the dream originate, from the gods or from within? How does the dreamer respond to his dream? What can this dream reveal to the reader about the character of the man who dreamt it? The dreams in these two *Lives* seem at once divinely inspired, prompted by the dreamer’s state of mind, and also shaped by the author as an integrated part of his narrative.

Plutarch skilfully exploits all of these ambiguities, deploying dreams in service of his larger project to illustrate character through seemingly trivial details and idiosyncrasies.⁷ As he writes in a programmatic passage at the beginning of the *Life of Alexander*:

οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι πάντως ἔνεστι δὴλωσις ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας, ἀλλὰ πρᾶγμα βραχὺ πολλάκις καὶ ῥῆμα καὶ παιδιὰ τις ἔμφρασιν ἤθους ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυριόνεκροι καὶ παρατάξεις αἱ μέγιστα καὶ πολιορκίαι πόλεων, ὥσπερ οὖν οἱ ζῳγράφοι τὰς ὁμοιότητας ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὄψιν εἰδῶν, οἷς ἐμφαίνεται τὸ ἦθος, ἀναλαμβάνουσιν, ἐλάχιστα τῶν λοιπῶν μερῶν φροντίζοντες, οὕτως ἡμῖν δοτέον εἰς τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα μᾶλλον ἐνδύεσθαι καὶ διὰ τούτων εἰδοποιεῖν τὸν ἐκάστου βίον, ἐάσαντας ἐτέροις τὰ μεγέθη καὶ τοὺς ἀγῶνας. (*Vit. Alex.* 1.2–3)

For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, but a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, where character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests.⁸

Dreams, like phrases or jests, illuminate ‘the signs of the soul in men’, a fundamental goal of Plutarch’s work. As I hope to show, the deathbed dreams of Alcibiades and Demosthenes epitomize a central theme of each man’s life as narrated by Plutarch, in a way that is too

³ Harris (2009) 151.

⁴ Brenk (1975) 347.

⁵ Pelling (1997b) 199.

⁶ This approach is anticipated by Fournel (2016), who focuses on the *Lives* of Caesar and Pompey, and Romero-González (2019b), who analyses the dreams of Pausanias, Cinna and Gaius Gracchus. These are all Roman *Lives* for which comparative material from other ancient authors survives; less has been written about the Greek *Lives*.

⁷ For a contextual approach to this passage, cf. Duff (1999) 14–22; on the importance of ‘trivial’ details, cf. Beck (2000).

⁸ I have used the Loeb text and translation of Perrin (1919) throughout, with my own revisions.

neat to be accidental.⁹ In these two Greek *Lives*, Plutarch experiments with dreams as a biographical device to represent in symbolic terms a final, fatal crux within an inconsistent character. His technique as a narrator in these sections is implicit rather than explicit: he tells the dream briefly and simply, without interpretation or explicit moralizing connection to the rest of the *Life*. Rather, he depicts events in a way which leaves the understanding of their moral significance to the reader.

II. Other dreams in Plutarch's Lives

First, a brief survey of the historical evidence. Where did Plutarch get his oneiric material? The ancients were more apt to record their dreams than we are today, and to consider them worthy of comment.¹⁰ Works such as Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica*, an encyclopaedic treatment on the subject of prophecy through dream interpretation, testifies to a lively interest in dreams among men and women of all social classes during the Second Sophistic.¹¹ The dreams of famous statesmen were an even greater source of fascination, and certainly not all dreams in the *Lives* are purely literary motifs. Indeed, Carol King has demonstrated the prevalence of dream divination among military commanders, especially at times of crisis.¹² Dreams could reveal a divine element at work in human affairs and were valued as a means of communication between the gods and the most powerful of men. Alexander's court employed as chief *mantis* Aristander of Telmessos, a famed dream interpreter and author of a treatise on dreams, as well as an official court historian, Callisthenes, who kept an account of all royal dreams deemed to be significant. The presence of a court entourage devoted to dream interpretation and documentation does not prove the 'authenticity' of any given dream but establishes a plausible historical context. Thus, when Plutarch relates that on her wedding night Olympias dreamed that a thunderbolt fell upon her womb (*Vit. Alex.* 2.3), it was very probably reported during or shortly after the time of Alexander that Olympias had dreamed such a dream, which foretells the greatness of the son that her womb will bear. What Olympias dreamed is beyond our ability to discover.¹³ It is always the dream-as-reported that we have to deal with.

Indeed, Alexander may be something of a special case, in that his reign portended a shift in the way dreams were recorded in antiquity. His court paid close attention to dreams and took pains to preserve them for posterity, in part because of their potential as propaganda to legitimize the autocratic rule of Alexander and his successors.¹⁴ Subsequently, since Alexander's achievements were so staggering, he was the subject of many historical accounts; what Plutarch relates can often be compared to the version of events given by, for instance, Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Justin, Arrian, Strabo, Cicero, Pausanias or Josephus, many of whom also drew on Aristander's writings about the dreams of Alexander. This polyphony of sources makes Alexander's dreams an especially rich subject for comparative source criticism.

⁹ Plutarch, like many of his contemporaries, seems to have believed that the dreams that appear to a man before his death have special predictive power (*De defectu oraculum* 40). On dreams at crucial moments, cf. van Lieshout (1980) 195–200 and Romero-González (2019b); on the truthfulness of dreams, cf. Harris (2009) 123–228.

¹⁰ Aristotle in *On Prophecy in Sleep* 1.462b14–15 refers to the 'the fact that all, or at least many, people suppose that dreams have some significance' (τὸ μὲν γὰρ πάντες ἢ πολλοὺς ὑπολαμβάνειν ἔχειν τι σημειώδες τὰ ἐνύπνια).

¹¹ Harris-McCoy (2012); Thonemann (2020).

¹² King (2013). Nearly a third of the dreams in Plutarch's *Lives* are dreamed by military commanders before battle; cf. Brenk (1975) 339 n.6.

¹³ A fact that has not stopped scholars from trying! Hughes (1984) gives a psychological account of Alexander's personality drawing on his dreams.

¹⁴ Romero-González (2019a).

Here I take a deliberately different approach: I focus on dreams appearing in two *Lives* for which modern scholars *cannot* establish a plausible historical context. Plutarch certainly drew on many sources, both extant and lost, in composing his biographies of Alcibiades and Demosthenes.¹⁵ Yet the *ante mortem* dreams that he attributes to these two men are nowhere else attested in the surviving literature. As I noted earlier, some critics suggest that Plutarch may have made these dreams up. However that may be, even if other contemporary accounts once existed, we must recognize that Plutarch never simply follows his sources in any area, but carefully selects and adapts the material at his disposal with an eye to his moral purposes and the structure of his narrative.¹⁶ And, whether or not the dreams in whole or in part are Plutarch's invention, we are entitled to ask what role they play in his pointed biographical narrative.

When the historical sources are unavailable, we have the tools of the literary critic ready to hand. Plutarch therefore assumes his place in the long tradition of Greek writers, from Homer onwards, who make use of dreams to advance plot, show motivation and reveal character.¹⁷ Against this backdrop, Plutarch's technique in reporting dreams in these two Greek *Lives* emerges as distinct, in several ways. Neither of the paired, parallel Roman lives, Coriolanus for Alcibiades, Cicero for Demosthenes, features a dream on the night before the man's death.¹⁸ It may be that there were no specific Roman sources for Plutarch to draw on; or it may be that Alcibiades and Demosthenes, two of Plutarch's most complex and enigmatic protagonists, stood in greater need of oneiric illumination. If we adopt Plutarch's metaphor of the biographer as a portrait painter, dreams, like the expression of the eyes, are a feature particularly revealing of character. In the *Lives* of Alcibiades and Demosthenes, Plutarch uses dreams not primarily to create suspense or irony, as in Homeric epic or Attic tragedy, but to provide a glimpse into the mindset of his protagonist at a critical moment. In so doing, the dream casts light retrospectively on a defining lifelong conflict within the man.

Alcibiades and Demosthenes provide rich material for deathbed dreams that yoke together a central opposition of their lives. Both men fall into the category described by Laurel Fulkerson as 'inconsistent' protagonists, a particularly problematic character type for the moral programme of philosophical instruction in the *Parallel Lives*.¹⁹ Fulkerson suggests that Plutarch prefers consistency to flexibility of behaviour and mindset, and that he is uncomfortable explaining drastic changes or even indecision in his adult subjects. In his *Political Precepts*, Plutarch declares that statesmen should be 'invariable and unchanging' (ἀρεπτον καὶ δυσμετάθετον) before they enter public life, and he places a high value on consistency throughout the essays that make up his *Moralia*.²⁰ His favoured Greek heroes in the *Lives*, Themistocles and Pericles for instance, exhibit unswerving dedication to a single purpose. Alcibiades and Demosthenes, by contrast, display distressing inconcinnity of character. Alcibiades shifts not only his political allegiance, but also his habits and behaviour as he moves from Athens to Sparta to Persia and back again, and throughout his career he vacillates between masculine virtue and a dangerous

¹⁵ For Plutarch's sources, cf. Verdegem (2010) 399–403.

¹⁶ Cf. Pelling (1990) 36, 41–42. As Fournel (2016) 214 writes, 'Even if most of Plutarch's dreams come from his sources, we notice that it is not first for their historical value that he includes them, but because of the references they call to mind, the symbols they contain, their tragic or dramatic potential'.

¹⁷ On dreams in Greek literature, cf. Dodds (1951); Devereux (1976); Kessels (1978); van Lieshout (1980); Walde (2001); Colantone (2012). On dreams in Greek and Roman society, cf. Price (2004); Harris (2009).

¹⁸ Influenced by the eloquent defences of parallelism in the *Lives* by Pelling (1986) and (2002), Tatum (2010) and others, I had hoped to find evidence for parallelism in Plutarch's use of dreams; instead, my research indicates that the most striking dreams in the *Lives* stand alone.

¹⁹ Fulkerson (2012) also discusses inconsistency in the *Lives* of Coriolanus, Themistocles and Cicero.

²⁰ Plut. *Præ. ger. reip.* 799b. On the mutability of character, cf. Gill (1983); Duff (1999) 72–98; Fulkerson (2012); Nikolaidis (2014).

feminine duplicity.²¹ Demosthenes, on the other hand, performs an extreme *volte face* about the desirability of an alliance with Philip after returning from an embassy which helped to bring that alliance about; this reversal is framed in terms of his lifelong ambivalence towards the deceptive practices of a tragic stage actor.

Like the men who dream them, the dreams that conclude these *Lives* are inconsistent, troubling and open to variable interpretations. Alcibiades is changeable as the wind, hard to define, hard to judge, and Plutarch's use of two contradictory dreams and deaths at the end of his *Life* makes it even harder for readers to see the essential man through the multiple selves and apparently multiple lives of this chameleon-like protagonist. Demosthenes, by contrast, has a single, specific weakness: having overcome a stammer through effortful practice, he lacks the confidence to rely upon his own true voice, and instead develops a persona that he sends out in his stead, like an actor. On the last night of his life, his dream of stage fright expresses anxiety not only about death, but about being a bad performer; when he confronts his impending death in his final waking hour, he accuses his nemesis, the actor Archias, of being as unconvincing and false as he arguably fears he has been himself.²² In so doing, he at last takes on the courage proper to a statesman. In both cases, Plutarch's use of a dream in the final chapter of a *Life* reinforces the difficulty of coming to a moral evaluation of the protagonist.

III. Life of Alcibiades

At the beginning of the final chapter of the *Life of Alcibiades*, Plutarch writes that Alcibiades dreamed on the night before his death:

ἔτοχε μὲν ἐν κώμῃ τινὶ τῆς Φρυγίας ὁ Ἀλκιβιάδης τότε διαιτώμενος, ἔχων Τιμάνδραν μεθ' αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐταίραν, ὅψιν δὲ κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνους εἶδε τοιαύτην· ἐδόκει περικεῖσθαι μὲν αὐτὸς τὴν ἐσθῆτα τῆς ἐταίρας, ἐκείνην δὲ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐν ταῖς ἀγκάλαις ἔχουσιν αὐτοῦ κοσμεῖν τὸ πρόσωπον ὡσπερ γυναικὸς ὑπογράφουσιν καὶ ψιμοθιοῦσαν. ἕτεροι δὲ φασιν ἰδεῖν τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀποτέμνοντας αὐτοῦ τοὺς περὶ τὸν Μαγαῖον ἐν τοῖς ὕπνοις καὶ τὸ σῶμα καϊόμενον. ἀλλὰ τὴν μὲν ὅψιν οὐ πολὺ γενέσθαι λέγουσι πρὸ τῆς τελευτῆς. (*Vit. Alc.* 39.2)

At that time Alcibiades was living in a certain village of Phrygia, where he had Timandra the courtesan with him, and in his sleep he had the following vision. He thought he had the courtesan's garments upon him, and that she was holding his head in her arms while she adorned his face like a woman's with paints and pigments. Others say that in his sleep he saw Magaeus' followers cutting off his head and his body burning. All agree in saying that he had the vision not long before his death.

In fact, two different dreams are reported here: one in which Alcibiades is decked out like a woman, and another in which he sees himself decapitated and burned, from the distanced vantage point of a bystander to his own dismemberment. Both dreams contain elements that foreshadow Alcibiades' death, which Plutarch describes immediately afterwards:

οἱ δὲ πεμφθέντες πρὸς αὐτὸν οὐκ ἐτόλμησαν εἰσελθεῖν, ἀλλὰ κύκλω τὴν οἰκίαν περιστάντες ἐνεπίμπρασαν. αἰσθόμενος δ' ὁ Ἀλκιβιάδης τῶν μὲν ἱματίων τὰ πλεῖστα καὶ τῶν στρωμάτων συναγαγὼν ἐπέρριψε τῷ πυρὶ, τῇ δ' ἀριστερᾷ χειρὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ

²¹ Cf. Plut. *Vit. Alc.* 2.1: 'His character, in later life, displayed many inconsistencies and marked changes, as was natural amid his vast undertakings and varied fortunes'. Fulkerson (2012) 68 n.71 comments that the 'lateness' of these changes would make them worrisome for a moralist.

²² On anxiety in ancient dreams, cf. Brenk (1975) 343.

γλαμύδα περιελίξας, τῇ δεξιᾷ σπασάμενος τὸ ἐγγειρίδιον ἐξέπεσεν ἀπαθῆς ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρὸς πρὶν ἢ διαφλέγεσθαι τὰ ἱμάτια, καὶ τοὺς βαρβάρους ὀφθεις διεσκέδασεν. οὐδεις γὰρ ὑπέμεινεν αὐτὸν οὐδ' εἰς χεῖρας συνῆλθεν, ἀλλ' ἀποστάντες ἔβαλλον ἀκοντίους καὶ τοξέμασιν. οὕτω δ' αὐτοῦ πεσόντος καὶ τῶν βαρβάρων ἀπελθόντων, ἡ Τιμάνδρα τὸν νεκρὸν ἀνείλετο, καὶ τοῖς αὐτῆς περιβαλοῦσα καὶ περικαλύψασα χιτωνίσκοις, ἐκ τῶν παρόντων ἐκήδευσεν λαμπρῶς καὶ φιλοτίμως. (*Vit. Alc.* 39.3–4)

The party sent to kill him did not dare to enter his house, but surrounded it and set it on fire. When Alcibiades became aware of this, he gathered together most of the garments and bedding in the house and cast them on the fire. Then, wrapping his cloak about his left arm, and drawing his sword with his right, he dashed out, unscathed by the fire, before the garments burned, and scattered the barbarians, who ran at the mere sight of him. Not a man stood ground against him, or came to close quarters with him, but all held aloof and shot him with javelins and arrows. Thus he fell, and when the barbarians were gone, Timandra took up his dead body, covered and wrapped it in her own garments, and gave it as magnificent and honourable a burial as she could provide.

Specific details connect the two dreams and the subsequent narrative of Alcibiades' death. The first dream anticipates Alcibiades' actions in the fatal struggle by its focus on garments and clothing, while Timandra's application of cosmetics prefigures her preparation of the corpse for death. The second dream predicts the violence and fire that drive Alcibiades from his house. Both dreams, then, are promptly fulfilled by the manner of Alcibiades' death and burial, and therefore prophesy his end.

At first, Plutarch's use of a dream to foretell the imminent death of a powerful man seems straightforward. Yet the account is soon complicated. In the last sentences of the *Life*, Plutarch offers a different and incompatible explanation for Alcibiades' murder:

ἐνιοὶ δὲ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα περὶ τῆς Ἀλκιβιάδου τελευτῆς ὁμολογοῦσι τούτοις, αἰτίαν δὲ φασιν οὐ Φαρνάβαζον οὐδὲ Λύσανδρον οὐδὲ Λακεδαιμονίους παρασχεῖν, αὐτὸν δὲ τὸν Ἀλκιβιάδην γνωρίμων τινῶν διεφθορκότα γόναιον ἔχειν σὺν αὐτῷ, τοὺς δ' ἀδελφοὺς τοῦ γοναίου τὴν ὕβριν οὐ μετρίως φέροντας ἐμπρῆσαι τε τὴν οἰκίαν νόκτωρ, ἐν ᾗ διαιτώμενος ἐτύγχανεν ὁ Ἀλκιβιάδης, καὶ καταβαλεῖν αὐτόν, ὥσπερ εἴρηται, διὰ τοῦ πυρὸς ἐξαλλόμενον. (*Vit. Alc.* 39.5)

But some, while agreeing in all other details of the death of Alcibiades with what I have written, say that it was not Pharnabazus who was the cause of it, nor Lysander, nor the Lacedaemonians, but Alcibiades himself. He had corrupted a girl belonging to a certain well-known family, and had her with him; and it was the brothers of this girl who, taking his wanton insolence much to heart, set fire by night to the house where he was living, and shot him down, as has been described, when he dashed out through the fire.

Here ends the *Life*. These are its final words: the two versions of Alcibiades' dream, followed by the two versions of his death. Plutarch is our only surviving source for the dreams; Xenophon does not mention Alcibiades' death at all, and there are no dreams in the accounts of Diodorus and Cornelius Nepos.²³ Although Plutarch refers to other historians who treated the same material, he may well have composed or at least recast these dreams to suit his needs as an author; and certainly he is responsible for the emphases and ambiguities of the passage. If so, we must ask: to what effect and purpose

²³ Diod. Sic. 14.11; Nep. *Vita Alcibiades* 10.2. Both espouse the first theory of Alcibiades' death, that he was killed in an act of arson. For Plutarch's sources, cf. Verdegem (2010) 387–91.

does Plutarch conclude his narrative this way? Why does he foreground the uncertainties of Alcibiades' dream and of his death?

If we were to consider only the first dream, in which Alcibiades is dressed as a courtesan, then the connection between the dream and the *Life* would be much simpler. The first dream vividly expresses the frustration, helplessness and ignominy of Alcibiades in his final moments. The reversal of sexual roles in the dream links Alcibiades' past and present, portraying his death as of a piece with the way he has lived his life. Alcibiades' vision of himself wearing Timandra's garments and makeup recalls the most explicit moral assessment of his character offered by Plutarch, in the so-called 'chameleon passage'.²⁴ After describing how Alcibiades adopted Spartan *mores* during his sojourn in Sparta, Plutarch writes:

ἦν γάρ, ὡς φασι, μία δεινότης αὐτῆ τῶν πολλῶν ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ μηχανὴ θήρας ἀνθρώπων, συνεξομοιοῦσθαι καὶ συνομοπαθεῖν τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι καὶ ταῖς διαίταις, ὀξυτέρας τρεπομένῳ τροπᾷ τοῦ χαμαιλέοντος. πλὴν ἐκεῖνος μὲν, ὡς λέγεται, πρὸς ἓν ἐξαδυνατεῖ χρῶμα τὸ λευκὸν ἀφομοιοῦν ἑαυτόν. Ἀλκιβιάδῃ δὲ διὰ χρηστῶν ἰόντι καὶ πονηρῶν ὁμοίως οὐδὲν ἦν ἀμίμητον οὐδ' ἀνεπιτήδευτον, ἀλλ' ἐν Σπάρτῃ γυμναστικός, εὐτελής, σκυθρωπός, ἐν Ἰωνίᾳ χλιδανός, ἐπιτερπής, ῥάθυμος, ἐν Θράκῃ μεθυστικός, ἐν Θετταλοῖς ἰπαστικός, Τισαφέρνῃ δὲ τῷ σατράπῃ συνῶν ὑπερέβαλεν ὄγκῳ καὶ πολυτελείᾳ τὴν Περσικὴν μεγαλοπρέπειαν, οὐχ αὐτὸν ἐξιστὰς οὕτω ῥαδίως εἰς ἕτερον ἐξ ἑτέρου τρόπον, οὐδὲ πᾶσαν δεχόμενος τῷ ἦθει μεταβολήν, ἀλλ' ὅτι τῇ φύσει χρώμενος ἔμελλε λυπεῖν τοὺς ἐντυγχάνοντας, εἰς πᾶν αἶε τὸ πρόσφορον ἐκείνοις σχῆμα καὶ πλάσμα κατεδύετο καὶ κατέφευγεν. ἐν γοῦν τῇ Λακεδαιμόνι πρὸς τὰ ἐξῶθεν ἦν εἰπεῖν· “οὐ πᾶσις Ἀχιλλέως, ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνος εἶη ἂν ‘αὐτός’, οἷον Λυκοῦργος ἐπαίδευσεν” τοῖς δ' ἀληθινοῖς ἂν τις ἐπεφώνησεν αὐτοῦ πάθει καὶ πράγμασιν· “ἔστιν ἡ πάλαι γυνή”. (*Vit. Alc.* 23.4–6)

He had, as they say, one power which transcended all others, and proved an implement of his chase for men: that of assimilating and adapting himself to the pursuits and lives of others, thereby assuming more violent changes than the chameleon. That animal, however, as it is said, is utterly unable to assume one colour, namely, white; but Alcibiades could associate with good and bad alike, and found nothing that he could not imitate and practice. In Sparta, he was all for bodily training, simplicity of life and severity of countenance; in Ionia, for luxurious ease and pleasure; in Thrace, for drinking deep; in Thessaly, for riding hard; and when he was thrown with Tissaphernes the satrap, he outdid even Persian magnificence in his pomp and lavishness. It was not that he could so easily pass entirely from one manner of man to another, nor that he actually underwent in every case a change in his real character; but when he saw that his natural manners were likely to be annoying to his associates, he was quick to assume any counterfeit exterior which might in each case be suitable for them. At all events, in Sparta, so far as the outside was concerned, it was possible to say of him, “He is no child of Achilles, but Achilles himself”, such a man as Lycurgus trained; but judging by what he actually felt and did, one might have cried with the poet, ‘She is the same woman still!’

In Plutarch's assessment, a central feature of Alcibiades' character is his talent for assimilating and adapting himself to the people around him. With the simile of the chameleon, Plutarch enters the lively historical and biographical debate about how to regard his subject. Varying opinions were current in Alcibiades' own lifetime, and continued to be debated for a century after his death: was he to blame for Athens' fall, or

²⁴ On the centrality of this passage, cf. Verdegem (2010) 269–78.

was the city to blame for sending him into exile? Passages in Aristophanes, Thucydides, Xenophon and Plato emphasize the unconventional nature of Alcibiades' private life, as well as his overblown personal ambition, which led the Athenians to suspect he wanted to become a tyrant; yet they also recognize his personal excellence and his service to Athens.²⁵ He was a polarizing figure, inspiring passionate love and hatred by turns. The account of Xenophon, writing in the early fourth century, is indicative, representing the Athenian people debating what to make of Alcibiades as he sails back into Athens from exile in 407 BC: 'some say that he is the best of citizens, others that he is responsible for all of the troubles of Athens' (*Hell.* 1.4.13–17). Plutarch echoes this assessment, suggesting that Alcibiades combines a natural potential for virtue (4.1–2, 6.1) with many uncontrolled passions (2.1, 16.9). In accord with the complex tradition about his hero, in this passage Plutarch offers a coherent vision of Alcibiades as a man of contradictions.

Plutarch goes further than his predecessors, however, in underscoring Alcibiades' problematic identity as inclusive of both male and female. As Plutarch writes, Alcibiades was adept at assuming a 'counterfeit exterior' suitable for his surroundings (23.6). Plutarch illustrates this idea, which we might also think of in terms of the costume and mask of an actor, with two quotations from tragedy. The first is an adaptation of a line of iambic trimeter by an unknown poet: 'He is no child of Achilles, but Achilles himself' (*TGF* II.363).²⁶ The second is from Euripides' *Orestes*, said of Helen of Troy: 'She is the same woman still!' (129).²⁷ The first quotation portrays Alcibiades as the most warlike and manly of heroes; the other, as the most duplicitous and faithless of women. The juxtaposition of the two lines, with the second reversing the first, reveals one of the most troubling inconsistencies of Alcibiades' character: beneath his male exterior lurks something feminine. Alcibiades' identity includes altogether different, in fact opposite, potential roles, which can be assumed opportunistically, to suit the circumstances.

Although Alcibiades may be able to play the part of a masculine hero, Plutarch suggests that starting from his childhood, he also exhibits an untrustworthy feminine element.²⁸ As a boy, Alcibiades is accused of biting his opponent in a wrestling match 'just like women do' (*καθάπερ αἱ γυναῖκες*, 2.2). He replies, 'No, but as lions do' (*ἀλλ' ὡς οἱ λέοντες*, 2.2). The incident not only indicates Alcibiades' desire to win at all costs, but also the way in which he challenges the norms of acceptable behaviour. His fighting is underhanded, feminine, possibly erotic, but also ferocious; his unorthodox methods as a wrestler transgress the boundaries between male and female, human and animal. In his adolescence, Alcibiades' effeminacy of dress is connected with other luxurious behaviours inappropriate for an Athenian man:

ἐν δὲ τοιοῦτοις πολιτεύμασι καὶ λόγοις καὶ φρονήματι καὶ δεινότητι πολλὴν αὖ πάλιν τὴν τρυφήν τῆς διαίτης καὶ περὶ πότους καὶ ἔρωτας ὑβρίσματα, καὶ θηλυτικὰ ἐσθῆτων ἀλουργῶν ἐλκομένων δι' ἀγορᾶς, καὶ πολυτέλειαν ὑπερήφανον, ἔκτομάς τε καταστρωμάτων ἐν ταῖς τριήρεσιν, ὅπως μαλακώτερον ἐγκαθεύδοι, κειρίας, ἀλλὰ μὴ σανῖσι, τῶν στρωμάτων ἐπιβαλλομένων, ἀσπίδος τε διαχρύσου ποίησιν οὐδὲν ἐπίσημον τῶν πατρίων ἔχουσιν, ἀλλ' Ἐρωτα κεραυνοφόρον, ἅπερ ὀρῶντες οἱ μὲν

²⁵ For depictions of Alcibiades, cf. Duff (1999) 222–29; Gribble (1999); Shapiro (2009).

²⁶ Duff (1999) 236 n.90 suggests that the line may come from Sophocles' lost plays *Philoctetes at Troy* or *Scythians*. Verdegem (2010) 276–77 speculates that it may refer to Neoptolemus, the son whom Achilles fathered upon Deidameia when, dressed as a woman, he was hiding out at the palace of Lycomedes in order to avoid deployment to the Trojan War.

²⁷ Helen wishes to make an offering of her hair to be placed on the tomb of her dead sister Clytemnestra; her niece Electra, observing that Helen has snipped off only the very tips of her hair, in order not to spoil her beauty, cuttingly remarks that she is the same woman as always.

²⁸ On youth and young manhood in the *Lives*, cf. Soares (2014).

ἔνδοξοι μετὰ τοῦ βδελύττεσθαι καὶ δυσχεραίνειν ἐφοβοῦντο τὴν ὀλιγωρίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ παρανομίαν. (*Vit. Alc.* 16.1–2)

But all this statecraft and eloquence and lofty purpose and cleverness was attended with great luxuriousness of life, with wanton drunkenness and lewdness, with effeminacy in dress—he would trail long purple robes through the marketplace—and with prodigal expenditures. He would have the decks of his triremes cut away so that he might sleep more softly, his bedding being slung on cords rather than spread on the hard planks. He had a golden shield made for himself, bearing no ancestral device, but an Eros armed with a thunderbolt. The reputable men of the city looked on all these things with loathing and indignation, and feared his contemptuous and lawless spirit.

Now let us return to the account of Alcibiades' final night. As I hope to have demonstrated, the imagery of the first dream echoes earlier passages in the *Life* that portray Alcibiades as blurring the line between male and female. Yet the strong effect of the dream section as a whole is to frustrate any hope for narrative closure: there are two dreams, two deaths and no authorial guidance to help us choose between the alternatives. This is in contrast to Plutarch's usual practice when reporting dreams: as Brenk notes, 'Plutarch almost always lets the reader know the immediate significance of a dream, either as a clarification of the future, or as a motivating force in the person's decision-making process'.²⁹ The narrative of Alcibiades' death, however, strikes Brenk as 'rather vague and imprecise'.³⁰ Similarly, Simon Verdegem suggests that the ending of this *Life* creates an unusual strong sense of 'terminal disquiet'.³¹

Plutarch's technique in this section may be even more pointed than Brenk and Verdegem acknowledge. By reporting two dreams, Plutarch first promises to gratify a wish for closure and then immediately blocks its fulfilment. The first dream suggests a tidy moral lesson: Alcibiades' vision of himself as a courtesan satisfies the reader's sense that his downfall should be due to the same meretricious and deceptive behaviour that he has displayed since adolescence, to his shifting and chameleon-like nature. In this reading, Alcibiades dreams that he is dressed as a courtesan because, in a sense, he has prostituted himself all his life, selling his services to Sparta, Persia or whoever bid highest for them. The first dream thus creates a neat narrative twist, suggesting that the protagonist's successes and failures are flip sides of the same coin. Throughout the *Life*, Plutarch has painted Alcibiades as courageous, munificent, witty, brilliant, persuasive, but also as overbold, spendthrift, mercurial, showy, deceptive. Each good quality casts a dark shadow.

But, as stated earlier, Plutarch offers this clear, satisfying conclusion only to whisk it away again. He complicates the first dream by offering a second, different dream and, further, adds an alternative history of Alcibiades' death. Plutarch tells the courtesan dream as though it were generally accepted and admits only afterwards that others held a different view, offering no criteria to distinguish between the various alternatives. And here, abruptly at the hero's death, however uncertain the manner of it, Plutarch cuts off the *Life of Alcibiades*, without authorial summation of the life and its lessons. This omission is worth noting; as the parallel *Life of Coriolanus* makes clear, Plutarch often extends discussion of a man's character and influence for several chapters after he has died.³² In this case, Alcibiades leaves the stage, the curtain falls and silence descends. An irreducible element of doubt is thereby introduced. As possibilities multiply, the reader is confronted with the ultimate unknowability of Alcibiades' final moments.

²⁹ Brenk (1975) 338.

³⁰ Brenk (1975) 339.

³¹ Verdegem (2010) 398.

³² On death and closure, cf. Pelling (1997a); Cooper (2014).

This striking *aporia* is appropriate to what has come before, for scholars have long noted that Alcibiades is exceptional among the subjects of Plutarch's *Lives*. As Tim Duff writes, Alcibiades 'defies classification into the usual categories of virtue and vice, and seems to stand outside, and even to challenge, any moral schema'.³³ Mark Beck concurs, suggesting that 'the unevenness of his nature defies easy interpretation', and that Alcibiades' life 'challenges the biographer with its ambivalence'.³⁴ What I hope to have added is a sense of how the specific positioning and presentation in Plutarch's use of dreams reinforces the sense of Alcibiades' exceptionality, in particular his ungraspable and transgressive epicene identities. The ambiguities and doublings of the dream section, as well as the abrupt ending, render it difficult, even impossible, for the reader to come to a final evaluation of Alcibiades. Dreams, mysterious, inscrutable, contradictory, provide Plutarch in closing with an apt metaphor for his anomalous protagonist.

IV. Life of Demosthenes

Demosthenes too has a dream on the night before his death. Fleeing political reprisals in Athens, the orator claims sanctuary in the temple of Poseidon at Calauria. The 'exile hunter' Archias then arrives and attempts to persuade Demosthenes to leave the temple and surrender himself to Antipater, assuring Demosthenes that he will suffer no harsh treatment. This Archias, Plutarch tells us, had been a tragic actor before he took to exile hunting, and was the teacher of the famous Polus of Aegina. Then, without preamble, Plutarch relates a dream that Demosthenes had the previous night:

ὁ δὲ Δημοσθένης ἐτύγχανεν ὄψιν ἑωρακῶς κατὰ τοὺς ὕπνους ἐκείνης τῆς νυκτὸς ἀλλόκοτον. ἐδόκει γὰρ ἀνταγωνίζεσθαι τῷ Ἀρχίᾳ τραγωδίαν ὑποκρινόμενος, εὐημερῶν δὲ καὶ κατέχων τὸ θέατρον ἐνδεῖα παρασκευῆς καὶ χορηγίας κρατεῖσθαι. (*Vit. Dem.* 29.2)

But it chanced that Demosthenes, in his sleep the night before, had seen a strange vision. He dreamed, namely, that he was acting in a tragedy and contending with Archias for the prize, and that although he acquitted himself well and won the favour of the audience, his lack of stage decorations and costumes cost him the victory.

The dream is dropped into the narrative suddenly, like a cutaway shot in a film. The transition from the previous sentence is signalled only by the adversative particle *δέ*, here translated as 'but'. In the Greek, the connection is less definitive; one sentence simply follows another, with *δέ* marking a change of subject.³⁵ Even the adjective *ἀλλόκοτος*, 'strange', receives no elaboration. The whole dream is related in one simple sentence. We are not told whether Demosthenes speaks the dream aloud, to Archias or to anyone else, although logically he must have. Instead, Plutarch straightway picks up the thread of his original story. With another mild connective, *διό* ('therefore', 'and so'), Plutarch recounts how Demosthenes rejects the offer with a quip that draws on the imagery of his dream:

διὸ τοῦ Ἀρχίου πολλὰ φιλόφρονος διαλεχθέντος ἀναβλέψας πρὸς αὐτόν, ὥσπερ ἐτύγχανε καθήμενος, "ὦ Ἀρχία", εἶπεν, "οὔτε ὑποκρινόμενός με ἐπεισας πώποτε οὔτε νῦν πείσεις ἐπαγγελλόμενος". ἀρξαμένου δ' ἀπειλεῖν τοῦ Ἀρχίου μετ' ὀργῆς, "νῦν", ἔφη, "λέγεις τὰ ἐκ τοῦ Μακεδονικοῦ τρίποδος, ἄρτι δ' ὑπεκρίνου. μικρὸν οὖν ἐπίσχες, ὅπως ἐπιστείλω τι τοῖς οἴκοι". (*Vit. Dem.* 29.3)

³³ Duff (1999) 227.

³⁴ Beck (2000) 27.

³⁵ Cf. Denniston (1996) 162–70. The stronger adversative in prose would be *ἀλλά*.

Therefore, after Archias had said many kindly things to him, Demosthenes, just as he happened to be sitting, looked steadfastly at him and said: 'Archias, you never convinced me with your acting, nor will you now convince me with your promises'. And when Archias began to threaten him angrily, 'Now', he said, 'you utter the language of the Macedonian oracle; but a moment ago you were acting a part. Wait a little, then, so that I may write a message to my family'.

Instead of writing a message to his family, however, Demosthenes ingests poison concealed in a pen. In Plutarch's version, the suicide of Demosthenes represents for the Athenians a courageous last stand against Macedonian rule, and demonstrates conclusively his loyalty to the democratic cause of Athens. After his death, the citizens 'pay him worthy honour' by erecting a statue in bronze, with an inscription on its pedestal commemorating his fortitude (*Vit. Dem.* 30.5).

As with the *ante mortem* dream of Alcibiades, Plutarch as a narrator employs a very light touch throughout this passage. This authorial reticence may explain why the dream has received little attention from scholars working on this *Life*.³⁶ Although in the next chapter Plutarch cites several authorities who differ on the death of Demosthenes, whether he took the fatal poison from a pen, from a cloth or from a hollow bracelet, he does not comment on the source or sources of the dream. Neither does he speculate on the dream's cause. Was it inspired by a god, perhaps Poseidon, in whose sanctuary Demosthenes slept? Or did it arise within Demosthenes, who must have known that his days were numbered? We are not told how Demosthenes interprets the dream, or how we should interpret it in assessing his life. Does his response the next day at the colloquy show him as heroic, witty and one step ahead of Archias? Or is he a career loser, an actor who just can't win? Rather than providing answers, the dream opens up a space for the reader to experience the last moments of Demosthenes' life without ethical guidance from the narrator.

As in the case of Alcibiades, the *ante mortem* dream of Demosthenes brings together several themes that have been central throughout the *Life*: in this case, the relationship between rehearsal, performance and the approval of an audience.³⁷ From the opening chapters of the *Life*, Plutarch emphasizes that Demosthenes' skill as an orator was due not so much to natural genius but rather to study, exercise, practice, preparation and rehearsal. His success as a speaker and statesman represents a lifetime's attempt to prevail over his physical and moral weaknesses. In childhood, Plutarch describes Demosthenes as frail, physically weak, lean and sickly (*Vit. Dem.* 4.3). He suffers from indistinctness and lisping in his speech, which he famously corrects by reciting his speeches through a mouthful of pebbles (11.3–4). When he reaches adulthood, he displays cowardice in forsaking his weapons on the field in his flight from the battle at Chaeroneia (20.2). After entering public life, he proves himself greedy and susceptible to bribery, his support bought by Alexander's treasurer Harpalus with a golden cup (25.4). Despite these limitations, Demosthenes becomes a great orator. In fact, modern scholars have seen him as a model for overcoming a natural disability by discipline and determination.³⁸ The Greeks, however, would have been less sanguine about a weak man's ability to achieve moral excellence.³⁹ The tension between admirable and despicable qualities marks Demosthenes, like Alcibiades, as one of Plutarch's inconsistent protagonists.

³⁶ There is no mention of the dream in the commentary of Lintott (2013). Cooper (2014) 393 notes that acting is an important motif connecting the death to what has come before, but does not analyse the dream in any detail. Mossman (1999) 96–98 is an exception, adeptly explicating the dream as part of Plutarch's concern with rhetoric and its failure in this *Life*.

³⁷ Mossman (1999) anticipates this argument, framing the *Life of Demosthenes* as an exploration of rhetoric gone wrong. Fournel (2016) discusses Pompey's dream in the *Life of Pompey*, which also takes place in a theatre.

³⁸ Rose (2003) 50–65.

³⁹ Cf. Lintott (2013) 12 on hostile ancient interpretations of Demosthenes' career.

Demosthenes' inconsistency is conveyed through recurrent encounters with actors and acting.⁴⁰ Here Plutarch may have been influenced by the speeches of his protagonist; the long-perceived link between acting and oratory, epitomized by the stage career of the *rhetor* Aeschines, was derided by the historical Demosthenes in his speech *On the Crown*.⁴¹ In Plutarch's *Life of Demosthenes*, orators and actors reflect one another like images in a distorted mirror. The orator and the actor share certain similarities: both professions are performative, and orators and actors alike contend for the favour of a fickle audience. The vocabulary of the professions overlaps: *ὑποκρίνομαι* in the middle voice means 'reply, make answer', but also has two specialized meanings in Attic Greek: first, 'deliver a speech, declaim', as an orator does; and second, 'play a part on the stage', as an actor does, with the extended meaning of 'play a part, feign, pretend'.⁴² It is one of the standard words used by Plutarch in the *Life of Demosthenes* for both professional orators and professional actors. So, for instance, Plutarch writes of Archias, 'the story goes that he was once a tragic actor' (λόγος ἔχει τραγωδίας ὑποκρίνεσθαί ποτε, *Vit. Dem.* 28.3); several chapters earlier, he writes of Demosthenes, 'his oratory was astonishingly pleasing to most men' (τοῖς μὲν οὖν πολλοῖς ὑποκρινόμενος ἤρεσκε θαυμαστῶς, *Vit. Alc.* 11.3).

Despite or rather because of their essential similarities, an orator is always at pains to differentiate himself from an actor. Where the orator in democratic Athens ideally deploys the deliberate, persuasive argument essential for membership in civil society, an actor mimics the passions of men, and even women, in extreme circumstances. The orator works freely for the public good; the actor is paid, and enacts the part composed for him by another. As a philosopher in the Platonic tradition, Plutarch would have been aware of the moral discomfort with acting expressed in Plato's works, most notably in the *Ion* and *Republic*, and echoes these sentiments in his *Life*. When Demosthenes appears in a splendid robe with a garland on his head, although his daughter had died only six days before, Aeschines, a former actor, denounces him as unnatural, implying that he is 'faking' his celebration (*Vit. Dem.* 22.2). Plutarch, however, praises his behaviour. Demosthenes supported the public good despite his private grief. In so doing, he preserved his dignity 'far more than actors (τοὺς ὑποκριτάς) do when they take the parts of kings and tyrants; for these, as we see in the theatres, neither weep nor laugh according to their own inclinations, but as the subject of the action demands' (22.4).

In addition to this direct criticism of acting, Plutarch juxtaposes Demosthenes with actors at two crucial moments in his career to show Demosthenes' uneasy relationship with the actor's craft: the second, climactic encounter is that with Archias, quoted earlier. In the first instance, the young Demosthenes studies technique with the tragic actor Satyrus. He seeks out the established actor's counsel, bemoaning his failure as a budding orator:

ὀδυρομένου δὲ τοῦ Δημοσθένους πρὸς αὐτόν ὅτι πάντων φιλοπονώτατος ὢν τῶν λεγόντων καὶ μικροῦ δέων καταναλωκέναι τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἀκμὴν εἰς τοῦτο χάριν οὐκ ἔχει πρὸς τὸν δῆμον, ἀλλὰ κραυπαλῶντες ἄνθρωποι ναῦται καὶ ἀμαθεῖς ἀκούονται καὶ κατέχουσι τὸ βῆμα, παρορᾶται δ' αὐτός, "ἀληθῆ λέγεις, ὦ Δημοσθένης", φάσαι τὸν Σάτυρον, "ἀλλ' ἐγὼ τὸ αἴτιον ἴασομαι ταχέως, ἂν μοι τῶν εὐριπίδου τινὰ ῥήσεων ἢ Σοφοκλέους ἐθελήσης εἰπεῖν ἀπὸ στόματος". εἰπόντος δὲ τοῦ Δημοσθένους μεταλαβόντα τὸν Σάτυρον οὕτω πλάσαι καὶ διεξελεῖν ἐν ἡθείᾳ πρέποντι καὶ διαθέσει τὴν αὐτὴν ῥῆσιν ὥσθ' ὅπως ἑτέραν τῷ Δημοσθένει φανῆναι. πεισθέντα δ' ὅσον ἐκ τῆς ὑποκρίσεως τῷ λόγῳ κόσμου καὶ χάριτος πρόσεστι, μικρὸν ἠγήσασθαι καὶ

⁴⁰ On Plutarch's use of imagery of actors and tragedy in other *Lives*, cf. de Lacy (1952); Mossman (1988).

⁴¹ Hall (1995); Easterling (1999).

⁴² LSJ s.v. *ὑποκρίνομαι*, *ὑπόκρισις*.

τὸ μὴδὲν εἶναι τὴν ἄσκησιν ἀμελοῦντι τῆς προφορᾶς καὶ διαθέσεως τῶν λεγομένων.
(*Vit. Dem.* 7.1–3)

Demosthenes lamented to him [Satyrus] that although he was the most laborious of all the orators and had almost used up the vigour of his body in this calling, he had no favour with the people, but drunkards, sailors and fools were listened to and held the bema, while he himself was ignored. ‘You are right, Demosthenes’, said Satyrus, ‘but I will quickly remedy the cause of all this, if you will consent to recite off-hand for me some narrative speech from Euripides or Sophocles’. Demosthenes did so; then Satyrus, taking up the same speech after him, gave it such a form and recited it with such appropriate sentiment and disposition that it appeared to Demosthenes to be wholly different. Persuaded that much ornament and grace is given to a speech by acting, he considered it of little or no use for a man to practise declaiming if he neglected the delivery and disposition of his words.

The anecdote positions actors alongside ‘drunkards, sailors and fools’ as men who can move the multitude. From Satyrus, Demosthenes learns how to recite with appropriate sentiment and disposition (ἐν ἡθει πρέποντι καὶ διαθέσει), that is, with appropriate theatricality. As Judith Mossman notes, ‘to give prominence to Demosthenes taking lessons from an actor may suggest a disturbing falsity in his work’.⁴³ Demosthenes has learned to deliver semblance in place of substance. Armed with the persuasive weapons of the actor, he may join the ranks of the unsavoury characters who play upon the passions of the audience.

The training successfully improves Demosthenes’ performance, in combination with the young man’s own dedicated rehearsal regimen. After his session with Satyrus, he redoubles his efforts, like a Method actor: he builds a subterranean study for the cultivation of his voice (*Vit. Dem.* 7.3), shaves his head so that shame will keep him from venturing outdoors (7.4), assiduously reviews all personal interactions to see what knowledge he can glean from them (8.1) and studies the speeches delivered by others, even composing his own corrections and emendations to them (8.2). Following the example set by Satyrus, Demosthenes treats public speaking as a rehearsed performance. Plutarch concludes that from these endeavours to be more actor-like, Demosthenes developed a certain reputation: ‘Consequently, it was thought that he was not a man of good natural parts, but that his ability and power were the product of toil’ (8.2).

This contrast between natural ability and toil, and between inspiration and acting, informs the dream that Demosthenes has the night before his death. Throughout his career, according to Plutarch, Demosthenes advances through personal effort rather than inborn genius. He attempts to act as though he is something he is not: a fluid speaker, a Periclean statesman, a courageous warrior on the battlefield. But he is, by nature, a coward. Demosthenes thus fails to live up to the Delphic maxim, ‘Know thyself, which Plutarch pointedly quotes in the prologue to the *Demosthenes–Cicero* pair (3.2).⁴⁴ Demosthenes’ *ante mortem* dream reveals a fundamental insecurity about his performance in the role in which he has cast himself. In the dream, quoted in full at the beginning of this section, Demosthenes sees himself as a tragic protagonist, contending with Archias for the actor’s prize (ἐδόκει γὰρ ἀνταγωνίζεσθαι τῷ Ἀρχία τραγωδίαν ὑποκρινόμενος, *Vit. Dem.* 29.2). Although he acts well and wins over the audience, he loses on account of his ‘lack of stage decorations and costumes’ (ἐνδεία παρασκευῆς καὶ χορηγίας, 29.2).

To frame the dream in the context of his earlier encounter with Satyrus, Demosthenes has learned one great lesson of the craft of acting: to please the audience through his

⁴³ Mossman (1999) 84.

⁴⁴ For the applicability of this maxim to the *Life of Demosthenes*, cf. Beneker (2016).

delivery. Yet he falls short in terms of the props, costumes and opulent spectacle necessary to sway the crowd. Theatre, unlike oratory, is a communal art, and lavish stage props and decorations are beyond the reach of the individual actor. Such visual magnificence would traditionally be supplied by a *chorēgos*, the financial sponsor of a tragic spectacle, a philanthropic, political position in which autocratic rulers like Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great and Antipater all excelled. Archias has the support he needs to win; Demosthenes does not. Demosthenes' dream, then, reflects the fact that he has mastered his craft as a performer, but does not have the powerful backing needed to bolster his efforts. He has extended himself beyond his abilities, and lost.

And yet, Demosthenes triumphs as well. For in the critical moment, neither his resolve nor his props fail him. On the pretext of writing a letter to his family, he takes out a scroll and a pen, which he bites as if in thought; it is through this ruse that he ingests the fatal poison. The references to tragedy in the final chapter of the *Life* convey Demosthenes' new stature as a moral agent, a man growing into his role. As Mossman writes, 'though his words still cloak his actions, now his actions are worthier than his words'.⁴⁵ By taking responsibility for his own final act, Demosthenes demonstrates at last the courage that lifts him from orator to statesman.

V. Conclusion

Over the course of the thousand years that separate Homer from Plutarch, the treatment of dreams in Greek literature changes in at least one specific way. In the first few centuries, dreams convey the will of the gods and the working out of destiny. By the time of the Roman Empire, a dream may also reflect the dreamer's current state of mind: his emotions, memories, wishes and fears.⁴⁶ As we have seen, a particular complexity of motivation characterizes the dreams of Plutarch's inconsistent protagonists Alcibiades and Demosthenes. In these two *Lives*, Plutarch encourages the reader to think of the *ante mortem* dream as originating in one specific, apprehensive, anxious, striving human soul, and as providing a terse final accounting of that soul in its moment of crisis.

Dreams in narrative may trigger in a small space a flash of insight. Like other poetic devices, they can be surreal, vivid, suggestive, outlandish, disturbing. As Brenk has suggested, Plutarch's major contribution was 'the use of the dream in a period of individualism, to lay bare the recesses of the hero's soul when the lack of intimate details in his sources must have been a perplexing frustration'.⁴⁷ Brenk does not discuss the dreams of Alcibiades and Demosthenes in any detail; but it is striking that in these two cases, Plutarch concludes each man's *Life* with a dream that is highly individualized. They do not rely on the stock symbols of literary dreams: lions, eagles, serpents, monstrous births, thunder and lightning. Rather, it is the man himself who puts on stage his cast of private dream symbols, whose play calls for interpretation. That hermeneutic task is only possible for the reader insofar as the imagery of each man's dream is drawn from his *Life*, and has been carefully prepared for by earlier incidents. Alcibiades' two dreams recall his lifelong conflation of masculine and feminine behaviour, while Demosthenes' vision of himself as a losing tragic actor summons up his defining struggle to succeed in a scripted role. Plutarch offers in each instance a dream particular to the dreamer, which could belong to no one else.

⁴⁵ Mossman (1999) 98.

⁴⁶ Cf. Pelling (1997b) 198, of dreams in the Roman historians: 'We are often left uncertain exactly what sort of a dream we are dealing with; and there are also cases where a dream is a bit of both, carrying an irreducible external element *and also* illuminating the pre-existing psychology of the dreamer'.

⁴⁷ Brenk (1975) 348.

At the same time, Plutarch directs attention to the masks that his protagonists wear, pointing out that the role of a great man, of the hero, may in certain cases be just that, a role, a trained voice or a set of costumes and cosmetics put on for show. Yet by their real achievements Alcibiades and Demosthenes were still incontrovertibly great, and their dreams make manifest their own awareness of the price they have paid. In this way the *ante mortem* dream as related by Plutarch takes on the status and import of a recognition scene in tragic drama, an *anagnōrisis*.

Morality is central to Plutarch's *Lives*: in those enigmatic cases where it is most difficult to discern where good and evil lie, how do we judge what is the best course of action? Consistent right action is particularly challenging in times of historical upheaval and sudden, repeated shifts of fortune. Plutarch's inconsistent protagonists live in highly uncertain times. Alcibiades begins his career in the glorious years of Athens' military and cultural ascendancy, and his downfall is both symptom and cause of the city's defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Demosthenes, whose education introduces him to the best of classical thought and behaviour, witnesses the last throes of democracy and the ultimate, humiliating capitulation of Athens before the superior power of Macedon. Elsewhere Plutarch writes openly of his enthusiasm for Athens and Greek achievement.⁴⁸ Perhaps it is partly because he is writing about two Athenians in a turbulent age that Plutarch withholds explicit judgement upon them, and turns to dreams instead.

In these passages, the reader is invited to take on a role of paramount importance. For Plutarch goes beyond simply withholding explicit judgement; he elides from the text the very possibility of drawing a convincing moral lesson. And the dreams, dense with apparent significance but baffling in final import, serve as rhetorical tactics in this strategy of elision. In narrating the dreams of Alcibiades and Demosthenes, Plutarch refrains from commentary on the rightness or wrongness of any conventional interpretation, or on the sense or folly of the decisions taken in the dream's wake. Rather, he leaves the understanding of events and their moral significance to the reader. That significance is brought out partly by the details of the dream themselves, and partly by their relation to other events in the *Life*. Without Plutarch's explicit authorial guidance, the reader has no privileged position, and hardly more insight than the dreamer. In this moment of vulnerability and perplexity Plutarch beckons us to lean in close: the reader of a dream narrative 'sleeps close with the other sleepers', as the epigraph from Walt Whitman suggests, and dreams their dreams alongside them, waking to confusion or illumination.

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⁴⁸ Cf. Podlecki (1988). Plutarch himself lived in Athens for a time, as he mentions in the *Life of Demosthenes* (31.1).

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