

Moral Truth through Moral Fiction: Plutarch's Life of Antony

This paper examines the compositional method employed by Plutarch in the Life of Antony. I argue that Plutarch utilized the fictional method to delineate an image of Antony that better fits the moralistic purpose of his biographical project. Plutarch's biographies are highly ethical as he presents the life of a historical figure as an exemplar created to foster a process of self-examination aimed at contributing to the moral edification of the reader (Pelling 1979, 1980, 1988b, Duff 1999, Pelling 2002). While it has been recognized that in delineating Antony's character Plutarch departs from the historical record (Pelling 1979, 1988b), it has been less emphasized that these departures result in the composition of a biography that is ultimately more fictional than historical. This paper stresses the fictitious component of Plutarch's Life of Antony in order (1) to complement standard studies on Plutarch's compositional methods (Pelling 1988a, 2002) and (2) to contend that the reason for employing a fictional method rather than a historical one is because the former relies on probability which is better suited for ethical or moral inquiry and reaches plausible conclusions rather than historical truths (Eden 36). Probability, which is the basis of the fictional method developed by Aristotle in his Poetics (1451b5-1451b30), also provides Plutarch with a set of plausible explanations for the causality of Antony's actions, and accounts better for his character. This type of biography provided Plutarch with a means to reach moral truths through moral fictions.

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