On the Problematic Classification of Some Rhetorical Elements in Plutarch

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0. That the fable is a difficult genre to define is clear in the very instability and ambivalence of the terminology used to designate it.* The name with which it has passed into posterity is not even from the original Greek: αἰνος is its archaic and poetic name, which also meant “proverb” and “riddle”; subsequently, λόγος “story” in general (often adjectivized Αἰσώρτειος) and μῦθος “fictitious story”, preferentially (and thus also “myth”), as well as ἄποδειγμα were its usual designations.1 It can, indeed, become confused with all these literary forms of similar popular tradition and like structure, and also be confused with others,2 of which we should highlight the ἄποδειγμα, in rhetorical terms known as χρεία,3 if we wish to complete the list of compositional elements which, together with the many literary quotations, confer on Plutarch’s scriptory technique its perhaps most characteristic note.4

However, the fact that the ancient collections of fables (Anonymous, Babrius, Phaedrus…) already included, together with the animal fables and others, some of these related forms, does not, in my opinion, authorize what has been done by some modern editors in the genre, who, like Perry5, add other similar ones taking them from authors such as Plutarch. This attitude has, in turn, dire consequences for a sensible judgement of the fable in the Chaeronean, taking into account that a bibliographic instrument as essential as the Helmbold-O’Neil repertory of Plutarch’s quotations (s.v. Aesop, Fabulae), for the fable is based precisely on Perry’s catalogue. Apart from the existence, from very early on, of collections of proverbs and of χρείαι as well as of fables,

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1 Cf. Van Dijk; Adrados 1979, 18 et sq.; Josifovic, col. 15 et sq.
2 Cf. Adrados, ibid., 52 et sq., 204 et sq.
3 Cf. Trouillet; Kindstrand; Hock & O’Neil, 49.
4 Cf. Gallo 9; Meriani.
5 Perry thus goes far beyond the limits of his own definition of the fable (p. IX). The same practice is adopted in the diverse translations of Aesop’s Fables, which take Perry’s collection as a basis.
and of the important presence in our author of all of these, the ancient progymnasmatic theory, whose influence in Plutarch has recently become a true object of study, made quite clear not only the points of affinity, but also the differences between these literary forms, at the same time as their rhetorical potential: four of them, the fable, the story, the *chreia* and the maxim, one after the other, became the first four *progymnasmata* of the series of fourteen that made up the educational cycle, and formed a particularly apt block for the deliberative type of rhetoric, the model of elaboration and the argumentative *topoi* being, nevertheless, practically the same in the theoretical development of the four exercises (cf. Kennedy and Reche Martínez). Thus, it is our intention to clarify, using Helmbold-O’Neal’s list of quotations from fables by Plutarch, taken from Perry’s edition, those manifestations of rhetorical-literary forms close to the fable which are not fables in the strict sense, nor even in the ancient sense, which is less restrictive than the modern concept of fable.

1. One of these elements is, we have said, the proverb, so that quite often the moral (*epimythion* or *promythion*) of a fable is directly constituted by a maxim or a maxim-like phrase, and a usual practice of the *fabula* exercise consisted of proposing a moral to the students for them to compose a fable to suit it, or else proposing that they compose one or more possible morals for a particular fable.

Thus, it may occur that the meaning of a proverb is explained by a fable that accompanies it, as in *Conius. praec.* 2 (139D), where the proverb ‘Ο ἥλιος τῶν βορέαν ἐνίκησε “The sun vanquishes (gnomic aorist) Boreas” has juxtaposed to it, in summarised form, the content of fable 73 Chambry (46 P.), which serves to illustrate it, to wit, essentially: a man who was threatened with having his clothes torn off by the strong wind fastened them more strongly, whereas, when the heat of the sun ensued, he himself took them off because he was hot. In Plutarch this is applied to a woman, who resists if the man takes away luxury from her by force, but renounces it if he persuades her by reasoning.

Or, unlike this case, in which there is no way of being sure which of the two, the proverb or the fable, came first, it may be that a proverb, or in this

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6 Demetrius of Phalerum, supposedly the first collectionist of Aesop’s fables, is also attributed with a collection of proverbs. Collections of *chreiai* for school teaching are supposed to have existed at least since the Hellenistic age. On the presence of one and the other in Plutarch, cf. Fernández Delgado 1991; Durán; Bellu 2005 b, 55 et sqs.

7 Besides the already traditional and abundant studies on the *syncrisis*, cf. among others Ramón Palerm; Beck 2000; 2003; Fernández Delgado 2000; 2005; 2005 b.; Pordomingo; Bellu 2005; 2005 b; Miguélez; Vicente Sánchez.

8 Cf. Adrados 1979, 32 et sq.

9 Cf. Theo, 74–75 Sp. The ancient writers of treatises came to consider the fable as an expanded proverb, cf. Josifovic, col. 35.
case rather a proverbial expression, both because of its form and because it is thus expressly said, has arisen from a fable. This is what happens with the proverbial expression ὃνος ἵππων μιμούμενος "An ass that imitates a horse", which figures in Macarius’s collection of proverbs (VI 32) accompanied by the specification (proverbium) natum ex fabula. The fable from which it is said to have arisen is, without doubt, 128 Ch. (315 a P.), which is echoed, with variations, by Plutarch in Sept. sap. conv., 4 (150A) (as well as Babrius 62). This is the story of a mule (not an ass) that boasted of being the daughter of a horse until, after having started to run, had to remember that she was also the daughter of an ass.

That the creation of a fable to explain a proverb is something usual is also testified to, in this same work by Plutarch, Sept. sap. conv., 21 (164B), by Pittacus’s answer to Chersias when he asked the Sages for the meaning of their maxims Nothing in excess, Know thyself and Committing oneself brings misfortune. “And what need do you have”, said Pittacus, “for us to explain these phrases to you? It is some time since Aesop composed, it seems, a fable for each of them…”

However, in the next two cases, included by Perry with numbers 433 and 460 in his compilation, there is no record of it being a matter of fables. On the contrary, the first one, included by Plutarch in his Aet. Gr., 54 (303A), is, as Plutarch’s classification suggests, an explanatory story, an aition, of Aphrodite’s name “of Dexicreon”, that the goddess received in Samos. According to him, this Dexicreon was a sailor who baptized the goddess with his name, because, on a trading journey to Cyprus, when he was going to load his boat, Aphrodite ordered him to fill it with water, which he later sold and made a lot of money from.11

The second tale, included in Perry’s compilation as no. 460, is presented in Plutarch, Vit. X orat. (848A), which is its main testimonial, not as a fable, but rather, I believe, in the form of that other related rhetorical component that the authors of progynmnasmatic theory classify as chreía with dicta.12 The story

10 Leutsch & Schneidewin II, 193.
11 This case is also denied its nature as fable by Adrados 1979, despite his not very restricted conception of the same and the recognition that in the fable writers of the empire this conception was even broader, when he argues (56 et sq.): “Por este camino todos los αὑτα culturales y mitológicos, Calímaco y Ovidio casi enteros, entre otras mil cosas, serían fábulas”("According to this, all the αὑτα, both cultural and mythological, almost all of Callimachus and Ovid, among thousands of other things, would be fables")
12 Cf. Theo, 97 Sp…This interpretation should be endorsed by the fact that the story is attributed to a typical character of chreíai (an orator) and presents its final dictum in a somewhat witty and enthymematic way, cf. Hock & O’Neil, 4–7. The criterion of functionality is also important for Adrados (1979, 47) when trying to separate the concept of fable from that of other similar genres.
is put into the mouth of Demosthenes on an occasion when the Athenians prevented him from speaking and he said that he wanted to say something to them briefly, they were quiet and he told them that one day in summer, a young man hired an ass from the city to Megara and at midday, when the sun was at its highest, both the owner and the renter struggled to get into the shade, one arguing that he had hired out the ass, not its shade, the other that he had a right to the whole thing. The orator was about to leave when, being retained by the Athenians to end the story he said: “So, you want to listen to me about the shade of an ass, but not when I speak of serious things?”

However, the proverbial expression “the shade of an ass” to designate something without importance, and apart from Plutarch’s tale, is also recorded, among other cases, in Lucian (Hermot., 71), Dio of Prusa (XXXIV 48) and even earlier, in Plato (Phdr. 260c) and, apart from being the title of a comedy by Archytus, also in Aristophanes (Vesp. 191), in which a scholium refers to the story of the hiring of the ass almost in the same terms as Plutarch, as an explanation of the saying. Thus, if on the one hand there is nothing to make us think that it should be catalogued as a fable, as it is by Perry, on the other hand, and in spite of the testimonial of the scholium to Aristophanes, we cannot be certain whether the proverbial expression came from the story, as is assumed in the case of the saying related to the testimonial cited 315 a P., or if on the contrary the latter is an explanatory aition of the former.13

2. No. 53 of the Perry collection comprises two of Plutarch’s adaptations in the form of chreia with facta, of which the second, Apophth. (174F), is an amplificatio (based on an addition of information on the protagonist, Scilurus, “king of the Scythes” and the rhetorical duplicatio of several terms) of the first, Garr., 17 (511C), with respect to fab. 86 Ch. of Aesop.14 Unlike those, which in accordance with the characteristics of the genre, have a typical character of chreia as protagonist, a king from the 2nd to the 1st century B.C.,15 and which consist of a lesson without words, merely gestural, with the apophthegma being introduced in Garr. 17 as the response given by Heraclitus to his fellow citizens when they asked him his opinion on concord, in Aesop’s fable the protagonist is an anonymous peasant (of whom it is not said, as was the case in Plutarch, that he was about to die) whose sons (of whom it is not said either that there were eighty as in the Plutarchean version) were fighting among themselves, and who, not being able to persuade them by talk, decided to do it by way of

13 Lasso de la Vega, 133–135, suggests that this saying arose from another, ὁμέρου σκιά “the shade of a dream”. On the close relationship between the proverb and the fable and the possibilities of mutual generation, cf. also Adrados 1979, 218 et sq.
example, although at the end of the demonstration, contradictorily, the message implied is also expressed by the father verbally. The gestural lesson, which is the essentially fixed part in the different versions of the story (and what underlies the well-known heraldic emblem of the bundle of arrows) consists of the father ordering his sons to break a bundle of darts (or sticks in the case of the fable), and when they see that this cannot be done he takes the darts out one by one and breaks them with ease, thus showing them the strength to be found in union as opposed to the weakness of discord. In this case, then, we can see more clearly than in others the derivation and change of attribution of both chreic incidences in Plutarch from Aesop’s fable, which is not lacking a moral, the content of which is exactly that of the message of the chreía.

3. The series of cases that we shall examine below all have in common, first, that they lack any reference made by Plutarch to their supposedly fabulous nature, which is only considered as such by Perry, within the most well-known collections (Chambry, Hausrath); second, that they are presented in the form of chreía, even when other rhetorical elements can sometimes be identified within them.

3.1. We shall approach them in the same order in which Perry has numbered them, although we shall put before the cases of Moralia the only case belonging exclusively to Vitae (441 P.), where the fable is less abundant. This one takes place in the Life of Themistocles (18), of whom it is said that, when one of his generals bragged to him, comparing his own feats with his, Themistocles told him that, when a dispute arose between the day after and the holiday, and the former argued that it was full of work and fatigue, whereas in the latter everyone enjoyed what was prepared without doing anything, the holiday replied: what you say is true, but if I hadn’t existed, you would not be here. And thus also, said Themistocles, if I had not existed before, where would you be now?

The story is introduced by Plutarch, as far as we can see, as a chreía with dicta, attributed to a character known as the protagonist of many others. But, apart from its use as an exemplum (another rhetorical component which in turn is easily confused with the chreía), it can constitute the story, a fable or not, from which, as in the case of 315 a P. and perhaps 460 P. quoted, has arisen the expression, perhaps proverbial, although not documented as such: ἐσρτὴ καὶ ὑστεραία.18

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16 Cf. M. Bellu, passim. It is a symbolic chreía in the form of example and of enthymem.
17 Cf. Guerrini; Aragüés Aldaz.
18 The attempted dispute between these two entities seems to respond to the type of debate or agonal confrontation, an antecedent of the theatrical agon itself, between natural phenomena, seasons, animals, plants, sexes.... frequent in popular Greek
3.2. No. 440 P. gives the story of someone who, seeing a slave who had escaped from him some time before, began to chase him; the slave took refuge in a mill and he said: what better place than here could I have wished to find you? And this is referred to by Plutarch, Coniug. Praec., 41 (144A), as a dissuasive example for the woman who is suffering from jealousy and is getting ready for divorce, so that she may think about what attitude her rival would like to see her in rather than like that.

The chreic nature of the tale, and not only its application, is endorsed by another, this time, however, not included by Perry, which, although different in its details, contains the same message and conclusion, being put by Plutarch into the mouth of the Athenian leader Phocion on two occasions, which differ very little in their expression: in Life of Phocion (10.9) and in Apophth. (188A–B). According to this story, when the sycophant Aristogiton was in prison, condemned to death, and having asked to see Phocion, the latter said to his friends, who wanted to stop him from going: where could one have a more pleasant talk with Aristogiton? The only structural difference between the anecdote in which Phocion was involved and that of Coniug. Praec. 41 is the impersonal form of the latter, which could be interpreted as a trait of its possible making into a fable; Theon (96), however, on defining the chreia, points out that this could be attributed to a generic character, in this case to the owner of a fugitive slave.

3.3. A similar process of fable-making, in the sense of attribution to diverse protagonists, all indeed Spartans, and with some variations, is the only strictly fabulous trait that can be glimpsed in the saying numbered 450 P. and included by Plutarch in Apophth. Lac. “Agesilaos”, 56 (212 E) attributed to king Agesilaos, and in Apophth. Lac. “Lysandros”, 8 (229E) and Apophth., 5 (190F) (as well as in V. Lys. XXII 3 and Adulat. (71E) attributed to General Lysandros: the attribution to different personages, however, was another phenomenon which a chreia could undergo. Both apophthegmas possibly inspired by this, but without its satirical “pointe” (against the city of Megara), are also attributed by Plutarch in Apophth. Lac. “Agis Archidamou”, 13 (216A) to king Agis, son of Archidamos, in Apophth. Lac. “Ádela”, 3 (232D) to anonymous Spartans.

19 According to the testimony of Hdt. VIII 61, Themistocles would also have been offended in the same way by the Corinthian Adimantus. Cf. Arist. Pol. III 13, 2 (1284a).

According to the most mentioned anecdote – undoubtedly a chreía with dicta kata charientismόn,\(^{21}\) as is demonstrated by its classification among the Apophthégmata-, its protagonist (namely, Agesilaos) said to a Megarian who was boasting of his city: your words, my lad, do not have much strength. The most significant variation of the version attributed to Lysandros substitutes “much strength” (πολλής δυνάμεως) with “city” (πόλεως).

3.4. The passage of Cap ex inim. ut., 2 (86E–F) included as no. 467 in Perry’s compilation does not contain either a fable or a chreía strictly speaking, but rather a literary quotation used as a chreía. This means that the quotation also belongs to that constellation of rhetorical-literary components structurally related and destined to carrying out similar functions, basically of an exemplary nature. As a chreía, the passage forms part of a simile, that of fire, which, together with sea water, both elements that are harmful in themselves but which provide great benefits, serves as a comparison for exhortation to know how to make use even of enemies. The same as in a chreía with dicta there is a circumstance, a protagonist with a good reputation and a saying by him, and the same as in a chreía with dicta kata charientismόn, the way the protagonist handles the situation is really congenial. However, the circumstance has been extracted from a passage of the satirical drama Prometheus Pyrkaios by Aeschylus, in which the satyr sees fire for the first time and wants to kiss it; the protagonist is not a historical character but Prometheus; and the saying is the iambic trimeter “satyr, you’re going to cry for your beard”, which constitutes the fr. 207 N. of the work.\(^{22}\)

3.5. The story numbered as fable no. 468 in Perry’s collection fulfils, like the previous one, the function of a chreía with dicta kata charientismόn. Put by Plutarch, Sept. sap. conv., 14 (157A–B), into the mouth of one of the Seven Sages, Cleobulus, who in turn refers it to his no less wise daughter, Cleobuline, it is used as a simile of the lack of measurement of wealth among the common people, whose needs change according to circumstances. The story in itself, according to which the moon asked her mother to weave her a shirt and the mother asked how she was going to make it the right size if sometimes she saw her full, sometimes a half and sometimes a quarter, rather than a fable, the nature of which makes it difficult to reconcile with the absurdness of the petition and the mother of the moon, seems to suggest a type of tale or enigma – αὐνήμα comes from αύνος, the old name of the fable –

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22 Τρόγγος γένειον ἄρα πενθήσεις σύ γε. On the use of literary passages handled as real chreía, cf. the elaboration of the famous verse 1252 (Ἄλλοι φρονόντες ἐν κρατοῦσι πανταχόω) of the Sophoclean Aiax in the Rhet. Marciana I 602, 1-I 605, 18 Walz.
perhaps based on a riddle formulated in more ambiguous terms (e.g., what sometimes uses a full size, others a half size, and others a quarter size?). 23

3.6. Finally, no. 495 P., the same as the former case and another quoted at the beginning, comes from Sept. sap. conv., 3 (149E) – a particularly appropriate framework, this of the symposion, for the deployment, and at the same time generic contamination of all these ingenious elements 24 – and, the same as the former, it can be classified as an amusing chreía of sayings, the ingenuity of which in this case, however, is not at the service of any teaching, but is consumed in itself, is a true joke. 25 Indeed, after asking the tyrant Periander his opinion concerning the prodigy born in his house, a being whose upper half was man and whose lower half was horse, Thales advised him not to use young stable boys or else to provide them with women (a reply which caused Periander to burst out laughing).

The justification of its inclusion in Perry’s catalogue is based on the fact that Phaedrus has a fable (III 3) with this same plot. With the difference that: with a clear intention to make it a fable, instead of the tyrant of Corinth there is an anonymous peasant, the prodigy consists of agnos humano capite, the recommendation is directly to find wives for the shepherds and the one who gives the advice, instead of Thales, is Aesop himself. However, the fact that Aesop appears as protagonist of the saying could be an indication, but not at all a guarantee that the story existed as one of Aesop’s fables.26

4. The diverse cases analysed here thus show, indeed, the profound affinity existing between all these rhetorical-literary elements of a basically exemplary nature – the fable, the chreía, the proverb, the mythical-fictitious or enigmatic tale, the literary quotation itself… – which actually constitute the most visible and homogeneous component of Plutarchean style. Of all these, those that are most confused with the allusion to the fable are undoubtedly the three mentioned after this one, i.e. those that, apart from their traditional structural and terminological affinity with the fable, with it constitute precisely the block of the first four in the series of progymnasmata which served as an introduction to the study of rhetoric strictly speaking, sharing among them one similar type of elaboration and similar topoi of arguments. But, the very criteria used for differentiating between these four exercises by progymnasmatic theory, which shows great impact on Plutarch’s preparation as a literary author, can serve as a pattern for a better classification of the corresponding literary forms, and, in

25 In general, the chreía with dicta kata charientismón are the remote forerunner of our current jokes, as is shown by many of the contents in Philogelos.
26 Other fables by Phaedrus are not considered as such by Adrados (1979, 56 et sq.). On the complex question of the sources of Phaedrus and the differentiation between inherited and added material, cf. Adrados 1983.
the cases examined here, to correct their unjustified cataloguing as manifestations of fables in most cases, both in Perry’s edition of Aesop’s fables and in Helmbold-O’Neil’s repertory of Plutarchean quotations of fables.

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