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**Discussing the past: Moral virtue, truth, and benevolence in Plutarch’s**

*On the Malice of Herodotus*

**Abstract:** The importance of παιδεία in Plutarch’s works has long been recognised. Thorough familiarity with the rich Greek tradition is felt to be crucial for a man’s self-understanding and ‘Greekness’. In such a context, a work such as *On the Malice of Herodotus* is obviously significant, and we may be inclined to think that Plutarch’s reaction against Herodotus is primarily motivated by ‘patriotic’ reasons and a concern for Greek identity. Several scholars have adopted this position, and their view in fact gains some support from a short programmatic sentence at the beginning of the work, where Plutarch claims to react both for his ancestors and for the truth (854F). Yet on closer inspection, the matter is not so simple. In this chapter, I would like to argue that Plutarch’s main purpose throughout *On the Malice of Herodotus* is an ethical one and that the key of the work is not to be found in a concern for the historical truth or for Greek identity, but in Plutarch’s moral approach towards literature. That, however, need not imply that the programmatic sentence mentioned above should simply be ignored: I suggest that Plutarch there considers his project from a broader perspective.

**The scandal that is called Herodotus**

Questions concerning Greekness occur in many of Plutarch’s works.¹ In the *Roman Questions*, for instance, he explores different aspects of the Roman culture, trying to make sense of them from a Greek point of view,² whereas his lengthy treatise *On Isis and Osiris* provides an attempt at an *interpretatio Graeca* of Egyptian religion.³ In all such cases, the cross-cultural discussion of course stimulates the (re)consideration and (re)definition of Greek identity. Briefly, in Plutarch’s view, as in that of many contemporary authors, Greekness is no longer based on birth—a Roman such as Numa can even be called more Greek than his Spartan counterpart Lycurgus (*Comp. Lyc. et Num.* 1.10)—but on a thorough familiarity with the rich cultural, intellectual and historical tradition. Παιδεία

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¹ The secondary literature on this topic has increased during the last decades. Ground-breaking general studies on identity in imperial Greek literature are those of Swain (1996), Whitmarsh (2001a), and Goldhill (2001).


³ Richter (2001) argues that Plutarch in *On Isis and Osiris* fails to show genuine respect for Egyptian culture, and rejects everything that cannot be appropriated into his own Greek outlook.

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is now crucial for a man’s self-understanding and for what it means to be Greek. And this παιδεία expresses itself in an elaborate dialogue with the great, canonised authors and a discussion of the magnificent achievements of the past. The great military victories and the brilliant career of famous heroes can and should always be revisited and be used as a mirror and a source of inspiration.

Now if all this is true, a work such as On the Malice of Herodotus cannot but be highly relevant in such a context. For Herodotus had long been canonised in Plutarch’s age as one of the most important Greek historiographers. He had become a classical model, and his literary qualities are more than once praised by Plutarch himself. Moreover, his subject matter is directly constitutive of Greek identity. For he did not only discuss the earliest periods of Greek civilisation but also the Persian Wars, that tremendous clash between two different cultures, between Greeks and barbarians, which was also the absolute triumph and culmination point of Greek history. Historical events, in short, that were of the utmost importance for the definition of Greek identity. It is probably no coincidence that Plutarch’sThemistocles is characterised by a heavy ἔτι καὶ νῦν strand, as has recently been observed by Pelling; the relevance of these great days continues to be felt even in Plutarch’s time.

This does not mean, of course, that nothing has changed. Plutarch realises very well that such heydays definitively belong to the past. Greece has long lost its freedom and a repetition of the scenario at Marathon is simply impossible. In a celebrated passage from the Political Precepts, Plutarch makes this perfectly clear: ‘Marathon, the Eurymedon, Plataea, and all the other examples which make the common folk vainly to swell with pride and kick up their heels, should be left to the schools of the sophists’ (814C). This passage has often been regarded as evidence of Plutarch’s sound judgement and good political insight, and rightly so, but we should not forget that Plutarch does not say that this brilliant tradition should be entirely forgotten. It should not be relegated to some dusty corner, where it can be safely ignored, but should be transported from the political domain to that of rhetoric, that is: it can be embraced in the world of culture and παιδεία. Even Plutarch’s contemporaries can still derive lessons from it—though not subversive ones—and this is precisely what Plutarch is doing himself in his Themistocles and Aristides.

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4 On the importance of παιδεία in Plutarch, see the seminal articles of Pelling (1989) and (2000), and Swain (1990b); cf. (1996) 139 – 145.
6 Pelling (2007a) 150 – 151. See also Alcalde-Martín, Frazier and Oikonomopoulou in this volume.
7 All the translations of Plutarch’s works are from the Loeb, except for those taken from On the Malice of Herodotus, which are borrowed from Bowen (1992).
In this light, it is of course important that historical events are presented correctly and constructively, for that will allow the reader to appropriate history in a meaningful way within his own context and will thus help him in constructing his own identity. And it is exactly at this point that Herodotus becomes problematic. For in Plutarch’s view, Herodotus provides his readers with a highly biased, malicious account of Greek history, which interferes with such a meaningful appropriation of the past and thus with the self-definition of their Greek identity. In that sense, we can conclude that Plutarch’s decision to write a work such as On the Malice of Herodotus is motivated by his concern to obtain a correct, morally appropriated account of this significant period in Greek history. After all, an important part of his Greek identity is at stake. This point seems too obvious to be made, but every Socratic knows that even the most obvious point may turn out to be wrong.

**Plutarch’s moral concern in On the Malice of Herodotus**

And in fact, on closer inspection, things prove much more complicated. No one can deny, I think, that Plutarch’s principal point in this work is a moral one. The title (whether authentic or not) is fully accurate in this respect: it is all about Herodotus’ supposed κακοθεία, that is, about the author’s bad character (ἦθος)—a moral point indeed. The first sentence of the work shows the same moral interest: many, so Plutarch argues, have been deceived by Herodotus’ smooth style, but even more by his character (τὸ ἦθος αὐτοῦ). From the very beginning, Plutarch thus introduces several key themes that are part and parcel of his general approach towards literature. The possible dangers of a beautiful style are often mentioned and discussed at length in the treatise on How the Young Man should study Poetry, whereas the focus on character is no less typical of Plutarch’s thinking about literature. We may here recall a famous passage on Sophocles’ evolution (De prof. in virt. 79B): just as Sophocles finally turned towards the ‘most moral’ (ἠθικώτατον) style, so a student of philosophy makes moral progress if he turns to the kind of discourse that deals with character and passion (τὸν ἀπτόμενον ἦθους καὶ πάθους λόγον). Equally relevant is Plutarch’s advice to young politicians to use a discourse that is full of unaffected character (ἦθους ἀπλάστου ... ὁ λόγος ἔστω μεστός, Praec. 802F–803A).

Read against this background, the first sentence of On the Malice of Herodotus thus already suggests that there exists a complex relation between the author’s style, his character, and the content of his work, and this approach, as I said, is typical of Plutarch. That is the way he reads literature, the historians, and Herodotus. And thus, it is not surprising that while reading, he also pays attention to indications

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that could reveal an author’s character. In Herodotus’ case, he discovered traces of a bad character, κακοθεία, and that caused his reaction. There we, in all likelihood, come across the most important key to a good understanding of the work. In other words, this key is neither to be found in historiographical polemics nor in a concern about Greek identity, but in a moral reading of literature.

Moreover, we should not pass over the charge of κακοθεία too lightly. In so many of his works, Plutarch time and again emphasises the importance of virtue, moral progress, a good and harmonious disposition, which are in his view the necessary conditions for happiness and the good life. Accusing somebody of a κακὸν ἔθος from such a perspective is no trivial matter, and it is worthwhile to pause here for a moment and examine in more detail the precise meaning of the concept of κακοθεία in On the Malice of Herodotus.

Near the beginning of the work, Plutarch issues a series of clear and useful criteria that allow a reader to judge whether a narrative is written with malice. This list has often been regarded as ‘precepts for historians,’ although strictly speaking, the scope is more general, since the criteria can in principle be applied to every kind of narrative (διήγησις, 855B). Plutarch also takes care not to illustrate these general indications of malice with concrete examples taken from Herodotus, which is methodologically sound. It is true, however, that most examples are derived from the field of history (which facilitates the application to Herodotus later on) and even that Plutarch primarily had the historian in mind while drawing up his list (cf. 855E: σημεῖον οὐκ εὔμενοις ἐν ἱστορίᾳ τρόποι; 855F: ὁ δ’ ἱστορίαν γράφων, διήγησις ἱστορικῆ).

Throughout the work, the concept of κακοθεία is further refined. In the second sentence, it is already opposed to εὔκολία and ἀπλότης (854F). The latter term denotes uncomplicated simplicity (characteristic of women; Comp. Ar. et Men. 853D) and absence of all chicaneries, the former a good temper which Plutarch quite often connects with mildness (πραότης). Much has been written about the significance of this virtue in Plutarch’s works. In this context, it suffices to note that Herodotus proves blameworthy in this respect as well (868A).

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9 There is a good discussion of the list in Marincola (1994) 195–196.
11 Even the example from the comic poets (855F–856A) illustrates a historical point. A special case is that of Aristoxenus’ evaluation of Socrates in 856C–D. See on this Schorn (2011).
12 See, e.g., Crass. 3.6; De virt. et vit. 100D; De coh. ira 461A, 462A and 462C; De tranq. an. 468E; An virtitositas 499B; Cons. ad ux. 608D.
Further down, κακοήθεια is often understood as a lack of εὐμενεία, and this is an interesting position. Prima facie, one may be tempted to think of εὐμενεία as the most obvious opposite of κακοήθεια, but εὐμενεία is quite an ambivalent term. It also has a negative connotation of naïveté and as such does not really qualify as a straightforward (moral) ideal opposed to κακοήθεια. Plutarch therefore resorts to the notion of benevolence, thus killing no less than four birds with one stone: he avoids the above mentioned difficulty, keeps loyal to a distinguished philosophical tradition, takes the opportunity to underline the importance of a benevolent attitude, and introduces an important aspect of the method of working that he claims to use himself in his Lives. 

Plutarch also repeatedly connects κακοήθεια with κακολογία. Hence the numerous references to Herodotus’ slander (διαβολή), defamatory language (βλασφημία) and false accusations (συκοφαντεῖν). Plutarch thus again establishes a direct link between Herodotus’ λόγος and his Ἑθος, which reflects both the traditional conviction that an author’s character can indeed be detected in his work and Plutarch’s own thinking about literature as discussed above.

A last important characteristic of a malicious person is, in Plutarch’s view, his delight in another’s misfortune (ἐπιχαμέρακια). Such a base attitude is juxtaposed to envy, and both, so Plutarch argues, are born of one and the same vice (858B). Once again, all this illustrates that Plutarch’s preoccupation in this work is with a moral issue.

In the main part of On the Malice of Herodotus, Plutarch lists different traces of the great historian’s malice, proceeding in a fairly systematic way. Although the general list

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14 See, e.g., 855B (μη καθαράς μηδ’ εὔμενοὺς ... ἄλλα κακοήθους); 855B (οὐκ εὐμενής); 855E (οὐκ εὔμενοὺς ... τρόπου); 855F (διυμενής ... καὶ κακοήθης); 865B (διεν τιν ... ὤργην καὶ δυσμένειαν); 866D (οὐκ εὔμενης).
15 Rather than ἀγαθοθεία (thus Harrison [1992] 4664), which is more current in Neoplatonism (but cf. Plato, Resp. 509a3); cf. Pearson, in Pearson and Sandbach (1965) 2.
16 Cf. already Plato, Resp. 348c11–12 versus Epist. 360c7.
18 On Plutarch’s positive appreciation of goodwill, see Bucher-Isler (1972) 20–21.
19 In this context, scholars often point to the famous proem of Cimon (2.4–5); cf. Holzapfel (1884), 26 and 52; Russell (1972) 62; Hershbell (1993) 154.
20 See, e.g., 855C (ἡδόμενος τῷ κακολογεῖν); 864B (κακῶς εἴπη); 874B (κακολογεῖαι; against Fletcher (1931), who defends μικρολογίαν). The link between κακοήθεια and κακολογία returns in the Corpus Platonicum too; see Resp. 401a6–7.
21 See 859E; 862D; 863A; 863B; 863E; 865B; 867A; 868E; 870C; 870D; cf. also 856A and 856C in the list of general criteria.
22 See 858A (κακοήθειαν τῇ βλασφημίᾳ προστίθησι); 864A; 874B; cf. 855D; 870D.
23 See 863A; 866D; 868D.
25 See 855B and 858B.
of criteria soon fades into the background, it is never forgotten.²⁶ For it is not because Plutarch indeed refrains from applying his criteria one by one, as a pedantic schoolmaster, that the list has immediately lost all of its relevance. In fact, most of Plutarch’s arguments throughout the work can easily be regarded as a direct application of one of these general criteria that are listed at the beginning,²⁷ and this observation is important for a correct interpretation of the work as a whole. It shows that Plutarch never abandoned his specific goal, that is, the disclosure of Herodotus’ malice.

And this specific purpose is also clearly circumscribed in the small chapter 10, which is often ignored and which indeed presents itself as little more than a formal conclusion of the list of criteria and a transition towards the main part of the work. Yet here, Plutarch again makes it very clear what he precisely intends to do: he wants to observe the agenda and manner of Herodotus (856D: κατανόησιν τάνθρωπον τῆς προαίρεσις καὶ τοῦ τρόπου). This short programmatic sentence rings several bells. The term κατανόησις recalls the famous proem to Nicías, where Plutarch states that he has collected the material that serves the κατανόησις ἠθους καὶ τρόπου (1.5),²⁸ whereas προαίρεσις introduces one of the most important and basic concepts of Plutarch’s ethical thinking.²⁹ In light of this, the word τρόπου is here best understood as ‘manner’ (thus Bowen) or ‘character’, rather than as ‘method’ (thus Pearson in the Loeb). Plutarch is not so much concerned with Herodotus’ historical method or even with historical truth, as with the historian’s character. The whole work deals with an ethical topic.

**Plutarch the patriot**

a) The provisional conclusion, then, is that it is all about ethics. This has little to do with history and even less with identity, but everything to do with a moral reading of literature³⁰ and, more generally, with Plutarch’s view of παιδεία.³¹ However, an interesting phrase from the introduction considerably complicates this picture. After the above discussed sentence on κακοθεία and εὐκολία, there follows a lengthy lacuna. When the text resumes, we read (854F):

... μάλιστα πρός τε Βοιωτοὺς καὶ Κορινθίους κέχρηται, μηδὲ τῶν ἄλλων τινὸς ἀπεσχημένος, οίμαι προσήκειν ἡμᾶς ἀμύνεσθαι ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων ἄμα καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας, κατ’ αὐτὸ τούτο τῆς γρα-

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²⁶ Contra Lachenaud (1981) 112: ‘la partie principale de l’ouvrage ne répond guère, par la démarche qui est suivie, aux promesses du préambule’; Bowen (1992) 4: ‘when the list is done, ... Plutarch more or less ignores it. It provides neither the intellectual nor the formal framework of the attack that ensues’.
²⁷ See also Pomp. 37.1; Ca. Mi. 37.10; Reg. et imp. apophth. 172C; Praec. ger. reip. 799B.
φής τὸ μέρος· ἐπεὶ τὰ γ´ ἄλλα ψεύςματα καὶ πλάσματα βουλομένοις ἐπεξείναι πολλών ἀν βιβλίων δεήσειν.

<Since> he has employed <malice> against the Boeotians and against the Corinthians in particular while sparing no one else either, I think it becomes my duty to come to the rescue, both for my ancestors and for truth, as far as that aspect of his work goes. It would take many volumes to work through all his fictions and fabrications.

Here Plutarch strikes a completely different note. We here find another familiar aspect of Plutarch’s authorial persona, that is, his patriotism which we know from his enthusiastic interest in the history of Thebes and its great heroes Epaminondas and Pelopidas, from his detailed account of an episode from the history of his hometown Chaeronea at the beginning of Cimon (1.1–2.2), and in the first place from his famous proem to Demosthenes. And this motif of a patriotic spirit, strategically placed near the beginning of the work, apparently introduces the issue of the locally embedded identity. Plutarch seems to suggest that it is here that we can find the most fundamental motivation behind the work, and accordingly, the patriotic reflex has often been regarded as the main key to On the Malice of Herodotus. Plutarch claims to react for the sake of the Boeotians and Corinthians, and indeed, the sections dealing with Thebes (864B; 864D–865F; 866D–867B) and Corinth (859E–860C and 870B–871C) are among the longest of the work. Moreover, we may add that Plutarch also defends the oracle of Delphi, where he himself served as a priest. All this obviously casts some doubt on the above conclusion that the whole work only deals with a strictly circumscribed moral topic, that is, Herodotus’ κακοθεία. There seems to be more at stake, and this sentence may well invite us to return to the suggestion with which we began, namely that Herodotus’ account is a direct menace to Plutarch’s (locally embedded) identity and that Plutarch indeed reacts ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων.

The question, however, is how seriously we should take Plutarch’s assertion here. Unfortunately, the lacuna at the beginning of the sentence does not allow for confident conclusions, but it seems that the motif of patriotism is here primarily introduced as a convenient means in order to confine the focus of the following discus-

32 Bowen’s translation is based on Turnebus’ conjecture <ἐπειδὴ δὲ κακοθείᾳ>, which makes perfect sense with regard to content, but is far too short to fill the entire lacuna.
33 Discussed by Mossman (1999) and Zadorojnyi (2005b).
34 Weissenberger (1895) 77: ‘zudem darf auch nicht verkannt werden, dass hier der in seinem Nationalstolze durch den herodoteischen Bericht tief beleidigte Boeotier spricht, weshalb ja auch die Veranlassung zur Abfassung einer solchen Schrift für Plutarch sehr nahe lag’; Legrand (1932) 535: ‘cette animosité de Plutarque a pour cause principale, lui-même n’en fait point mystère, son particularisme béotien’; Teodorsson (1997) 440: ‘It is obvious that Plutarch’s strong patriotism is the main reason, if not the only one, for his attack on Herodotus’; Dognini (2007) 482: ‘Le motivazioni di queste critiche sono da ricercare senza dubbio nell’orgoglio beotico di Plutarco che esplicitamente dichiara di mal sopportare le critiche mosse da Erodoto a Beto e Corinto’.
sion. Since a comprehensive refutation of all Herodotus’ lies is simply impossible in a work of a limited size, Plutarch prefers to deal only with the issues that concern Boeotia and Corinth. The reason of this seemingly random selection Plutarch then finds in the care for his ancestors. This, briefly, is patriotism in the service of feasibility. But there is more. No sooner is this patriotic purpose introduced than it is almost completely forgotten. Plutarch does not at all confine himself to this aspect of Herodotus’ work, but deals with a wide variety of topics, gathered from nearly all of the books of the latter’s History (except the fourth one). In that respect, the chapters about the Thebans and the Corinthians are only part of a much broader discussion. Of course it cannot be denied that Plutarch enters at length into these topics, which may well suggest that he is far from indifferent to the matter, but that does not alter the fact that his spirited defences of Thebes and Corinth are in the end only two sections in a much larger whole. And thus, we end up with the embarrassing conclusion that patriotism has, at best, a very limited role in On the Malice of Herodotus, when it is proclaimed at the outset as the ultimate motivation of the whole work. How should this awkward tension be understood?

b) Before trying to answer this question, I would first like to broaden the perspective. Although Plutarch’s mention of his ancestors primarily points to the Boeotians, we may, for the time being, venture to interpret it more broadly as a reference to all the Greeks. After all, Herodotus spares nobody (μηδὲ τῶν ἄλλων τινὸς ἄπειροιμένος). He himself claims to write the history of Greece (862A) and some of his readers even think that he glorifies Greece (867C), but in Plutarch’s view, this conviction is completely erroneous. It may in fact be regarded as the result of Herodotus’ malice that disguises itself as εὐκολία (cf. 854F). For Herodotus is really a ‘barbarophile’ (φιλοβάρβαρος), and it is against this pro-barbarian stance that Plutarch time and again reacts in On the Malice of Herodotus. Near the beginning of the text, for instance, he refutes Herodotus’ assertion that the Persians learned pederasty from the Greeks (857C) and that the Greeks took over their venerable religious traditions and gods from Egypt (857C–E). Further on, he repeatedly opposes Herodotus’ alleged custom of minimising the great military achievements of the Greeks. Moreover, Plutarch observes that Herodotus more than once transposes his own wickedness to his heroes, for both the Spartans (861E) and Themistocles (869F) appear in the Herodotean account as malicious. The evaluative summary that Plutarch makes in the last chapter is particularly revealing: if one has to believe Herodotus, so Plutarch argues, nothing great or glorious is left from the four great battles which the Greeks fought against

36 Cf. Lucian, Herodotus 2, where it is said that Herodotus is known by everyone as the author who celebrated the Greek victories (ὁ τὰς νίκας ἣμιν ἐπινόησε); cf. also Hermogenes, On types of Style 408.9–25 Rabe (on Herodotus as the most panegyrical of the historians other than Xenophon), and Aelius Aristides, Or. 28.69.

37 Philipp (1984) 332: ‘Aus dem Vorwurf der Barbarenfreundlichkeit schließlich spricht ein gekränkter Nationalstolz’. The term φιλοβάρβαρος may have been coined by Plutarch himself; thus Schmidt (1999) 6 n. 21, 44 n. 90 and 280 n. 33.
the barbarians (874A), whereas, on the other hand, the tradition (φήμη) represents these events as excellent accomplishments (τῶν τότε κατορθωμάτων) (874B). One may be tempted to conclude that Plutarch’s defence of this renowned tradition is in that respect also a defence of his ancestors, now taken in a broader sense, and thus we come back to the above quoted sentence from the first chapter: Plutarch is indeed reacting ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων.

Yet even here, this conclusion is premature and problematic. For first of all, Plutarch occasionally also defends barbarians against the criticisms of the ‘barbaro-phil’ Herodotus, such as Croesus (858D–F) and Deīoces the Mede (858F). At least in these passages, the point is not a patriotic but an ethical one. And in fact, on closer inspection, this may well be true for the whole work. For in most cases, Plutarch’s defences of the Greek achievements can perfectly be understood as direct applications of the criteria he formulated at the beginning of his work. Every argument aims to lay bare Herodotus’ κακοθεία, and therein precisely lies its very raison d’être. Moreover, the direct reference to the ancestors comes as an isolated issue. Throughout On the Malice of Herodotus, Plutarch is, quite systematically, concerned with Herodotus’ bad character; the patriotic or Panhellenic agenda is secondary at best. And yet, Plutarch himself underlines this patriotic goal at a programmatic place, near the beginning of the work. We remain confronted with the same awkward tension mentioned above.

The importance of historical truth

Although I shall come back to this tension in due course, for the time being, I prefer to bracket it and stay with my basic contention that the primary goal of the work is an ethical one. But the programmatic sentence still contains a further difficulty: Plutarch also claims to react ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀληθείας. This raises the question of truth, and notably the historical truth. Are we, then, entitled to consider On the Malice of Herodotus as a historiographical polemic after all?

Here we should bear in mind Marincola’s pertinent remark that ethics and historiography cannot be separated in antiquity.38 This is absolutely correct, and it is illustrated by Plutarch’s own Parallel Lives and by so many other extant and non-extant historiographers. At the same time, however, Marincola’s remark reflects the point of view of a historian. It remains to be seen whether Plutarch himself writes On the Malice of Herodotus as a historian who carries on a historiographical polemic and thus evidently takes ethical considerations into account. Or is he rather a moral philosopher who focuses on a historiographer’s work and thus deals with historical matters from an ethical perspective? Of course, one may object that this distinction is to a certain extent artificial and even anachronistic, yet it may still be helpful in as-

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sessing the precise character and goal of the work. And in this context, it is important to note that there already existed a rich historiographical tradition of anti-Herodotean polemic before Plutarch, but that the particular charge of κακοθεία should apparently be traced back to Plutarch himself. And this reflects a moral point of view. Once again, the key to the work thus proves to be the moral approach towards literature.

Yet it would be unwise to discard Marincola’s remark too quickly. Plutarch’s programmatic sentence at the beginning of On the Malice of Herodotus unmistakably shows an interest in the problem of historical truth, and Plutarch explicitly blames Herodotus for his many ψεύσματα και πλάσματα. Those lies are refuted throughout the corpus, often by means of the argument from historical plausibility (τὸ εἶκός). Nevertheless, we should always keep in mind the specific orientation of Plutarch’s general argument. Particularly interesting here is Plutarch’s explanation that he does not deal with Herodotus’ lies but with his malicious lies (870A: ἀλλ’ ὁ μὲν ἐξευθείαται, λόγος ἡμῖν οὐδεὶς· ἀ δὲ γε κατέψευσται μόνον ἐξετάζοιμεν). Ordinary lies, then, are not the subject of this work: these are the ἄλλα ψεύσματα the refutation of which would require many books (854F). In On the Malice of Herodotus, Plutarch is only interested in a specific kind of lies: ἃ κατέψευσται. The verb καταψεῦδεσθαι is translated somewhat misleadingly in LSJ as ‘tell lies against’ or ‘speak falsely of’: in this case at least, the prefix κατα- has a derogatory connotation. The lies belittle the value of the achievements, literally bring them down to earth. And this notion fits in very well with one of the principal themes of the work, viz. the reply to Herodotus’ unjustified criticism of the Greek victories. As such, the prefix κατα- implies a clear moral component. Such καταψεῦσματα are relevant because they provide direct evidence for Herodotus’ character. If that is true, Plutarch is not so much interested in the correction of Herodotus’ neutral historical mistakes as in his malicious distortions of the truth rooted in his bad ἠθος.

This insight may allow us to nuance an often heard criticism of Plutarch’s position in On the Malice of Herodotus. Since Hauvette, scholars have often argued that Plutarch in this work shows an over-simplified view of Greek history, in that he sticks to the conviction that everything in the history of the Persian Wars was good and that

39 Ctesias already called Herodotus a liar (Photius, Bibl. cod. 72, 35b42 – 36a1). Manetho wrote a book against Herodotus (Eustathius, In II. III, 238.9 Van der Valk; Etymologicum Magnum, s.v. Λεοντοκόμως (560.22–23); cf. also Josephus, Ap. 1, 73). Later, Favorinus presented Herodotus as untrustworthy in his Corinthian Oration (7 and 18). Aelius Harpocratio wrote a work On Herodotus’ lies (Suda I, 367.3 A.), whereas Valerius Pollio wrote On Herodotus’ thefts (Eusebius PE 10.3.23) and Libanius composed a polemic Against Herodotus (Libanius, Epit. 615.3). Aelius Aristides, finally, refutes several of Herodotus’ statements about Egypt in his Egyptian discourse (Or. 36.41 – 63). For a survey of the reception of Herodotus, see esp. Priestley (2014); cf. also Dognini (2007).

1 See, e.g., 865C and D; 870D; 871A; 873D. On the importance of τὸ εἶκός as a criterion in Plutarch’s works, see, e.g., Nikolaidis (1997) 336 – 339 and Cook (2001) 336 – 337. Significant is also 859D, where Plutarch refers to other authors who have written ‘more accurately’ (ἀκριβέστερον)—a criterion that focuses on historical truth rather than on a moral point (cf. 861D).
he has a blind respect for the great heroes of the past.⁴¹ It is true that some such bias may be felt in On the Malice of Herodotus, but it is very important to realise that it is the direct consequence of the specific focus of the work. Plutarch is in this context evidently only interested in those passages where Herodotus seems to downplay the great achievements of the Greeks, because such passages are, according to Plutarch’s own criteria listed at the beginning, indications of malice. These are the passages which Plutarch selects, because they are grist to his mill. But we should take care not to generalise and we should not conclude from this specific focus in On the Malice of Herodotus that Plutarch always showed the same positive bias. As a matter of fact, he was not naïvely uncritical towards every detail of the history of the Persian Wars. In his Themistocles and Aristides, for instance, he was not blind to the character flaws of his heroes. But in On the Malice of Herodotus, this is simply not the point. Of course, he there confines himself to those passages where Herodotus καταψεύδεται. It is the direct consequence of his specific methods and goal and should not be explained by his uncritical attitude towards Greek history.

A few words should finally be said about a different kind of argument that repeatedly returns in On the Malice of Herodotus. Plutarch often notes that Herodotus in fact contradicts himself (see, e.g., 856F: καίτοι ... φησίν αὐτός; 857C–D; 858D; 863B; 865B). This argument from inconsistency, which can very often be found in the Corpus Plutarcheum, especially in the philosophical polemics, adds a rhetorical flavour to the work.⁴² This is not the place to enter at length into the significant parallels between the eristic strategies that are used in On the Malice of Herodotus and the polemical treatises against the Stoics and Epicureans, a topic that would definitely repay further study. Here, the point is that these arguments from inconsistency suggest a theoretical interest and a concern for the historical truth. Is Plutarch, then, in such sections arguing ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀληθείας? Well, probably yes, although this need not imply that his arguments are irrelevant to the general ethical thesis concerning Herodotus’ malice. In an interesting passage (861A), Plutarch in fact directly connects Herodotus’ inconsistencies with the general topic of κακοθεία, and this is not unin-

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⁴¹ Hauvette (1894) 101: ‘Le seul principe qu’il suive, sans d’ailleurs l’exprimer formellement, est celui-ci: ‘Tout est beau dans l’histoire de la lutte victorieuse des Grecs contre les Perses; les ancêtres n’ont laissé que de grands exemples; ce qui tend à faire tache dans le tableau lumineux de cette brillante époque est contestable, et doit être effacé’; cf. Ziegler (1951) 871: ‘... den leichtgläubig-optimistischen P., der insbesondere das hellenische Altertum allein durch die rosenrote Brille des schwärmenden Romantikers betrachtet und nicht nur bei den einzelnen Persönlichkeiten, sondern auch bei den griechischen Staaten der klassischen Zeit von nichts anderem als von Ruhmestaten und überschwänglichem Edelmut hören will’, and Barrow (1967) 157: ‘Plutarch is fanatically biased in favour of the Greek cities; they can do no wrong’.

⁴² Seavey (1991) has argued that On the Malice of Herodotus should be regarded as an epistolary forensic oration. His view has gained some support (see Hershbell [1993] 158–159 and Ragogna [2002] 28; Cf. Bowen [1992] 4: ‘There is a semi-forensic air to the whole work’), but Marincola (1994) 198 n. 44 objects, correctly to my mind, that the many judicial characteristics of the work are not without parallel in other historiographical criticism; cf. Schorn (2011) 192.
telligent. Plutarch’s point is that Herodotus’ malice slips into his account on any excuse and that he thus always καταιρεύδεται. It is unavoidable that this entails crooked distortions and thus inconsistencies, even more so because in Plutarch’s view, harmony is the work of virtue.⁴³

**Conclusion**

Let us now, by way of conclusion, try to weave the different threads of our argument together. Plutarch did not remain indifferent towards Herodotus’ account of Greek history. He discovered in him clear indications of a bad character, and this he wants to lay bare in his work *On the Malice of Herodotus*. In this work, Plutarch’s principal aim is an ethical one, and his basic argument is rooted in his moral and pedagogical approach towards literature. Yet at the very beginning of the work, one short programmatic sentence introduces a completely different perspective: Plutarch claims to react out of patriotic motives and because he is concerned for the truth. Now it is quite striking that this perspective, which throughout the rest of the work entirely fades into the background, all of a sudden surfaces at the very end. After having admitted that Herodotus is a good writer, Plutarch warns one more time against his malicious defamations (874B–C):

> ἰδίες δὲ καυθαρίδα φυλάττεσθαι τὴν βλασφημίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ κακολογίαν, λείοις καὶ ἀπαλοῖς σχήμασιν ὑποδύεσθαι, ἵνα μὴ λάθωμεν ἀτόπους καὶ ψευδεῖς περὶ τῶν ἀρίστων καὶ μεγίστων τῆς Ἑλλάδος πόλεων καὶ ἄνδρῶν δόξας λαβόντες.

As in roses we must watch out for the rose-beetle, so in Herodotus we must watch for the mean and partisan attacks that are disguised by a smooth and soft appearance. Otherwise we shall accept all unawares opinions which are false and out of place about the best and greatest of Greek cities and Greek heroes.

In this concluding sentence, the two poles of ancestors and truth indirectly return, in reverse order. The reference to the absurd and false opinions points to the problem of historical truth, whereas the latent enthusiasm about the best and greatest cities and men of Greece recalls Plutarch’s *pietas* towards his ancestors.

And thus, the work concludes with a marvellous circular structure, but what is the point? What is the final relevance of this different perspective for the whole work? Is this a mere rhetorical *flosculum* that helps in constructing Plutarch’s own persona as an author? A beautiful exercise in image building? I think there is more to it. I suggest that Plutarch, both at the beginning and at the end of his work, takes some distance and considers the relevance of his work from a broader point of view. *Mutatis mutandis*, he is doing what he usually does at the end of the *Lives*, in the concluding *Synkrisis*. There too, he evaluates the matter from a new, more distant perspective—ἀπόθε-

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⁴³ *Maxime cum principibus* 777C; parallels can be found in Roskam (2009) 170.
ωρεῖν, as he calls it himself. Here too, we find a similar approach to ἀποθεωρεῖν that considers the whole careful, systematic and lengthy study of Herodotus’ κακοήθεια from a broader perspective. A perspective where moral virtue and truth finally meet each other in a benevolent, constructive discussion of the past and where the greatest and best achievements of the Greeks get the praise they deserve. The perspective, in short, that is typical of Plutarch himself.
