

## REVIEW

## ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY AND FICTIONALISATION

K. De Temmerman and K. Demoen, edd., *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiii + 354. Hardback, £74.99/\$120.00. ISBN 978-1-107-12912-2.

Life writing in antiquity is complex, especially if one seeks to understand it in terms of its adherence to historicity or fictionality. Most ancient biographies are ‘hybrids’ sharing aspects of both the ‘fictional’ and ‘non-fictional’ modes. The volume under review explores biographical narratives as well as narratives that purport to be biographical from a new exciting perspective, that of the interconnection between narrative technique and fictionalisation. The volume is made up of sixteen chapters, and is divided into four key parts: (1) ‘Ancient Biography Revisited’; (2) ‘Individual Biographies’; (3) ‘Collective Biographies’; and (4) ‘Biographical Modes of Discourse’.

The first introductory part (‘Ancient Biography Revisited’) begins with a very helpful chapter (‘Ancient Biography and Formalities of Fiction’, 3–25), in which Koen De Temmerman draws together the themes of the volume and elaborates on some methodological issues. He discusses in particular the distinction between ‘fictiveness’ and ‘fiction’ and clarifies some theoretical background of the study, especially with reference to the qualities of fiction and the narrators’ method of (re)construction of the characters, which is closely related to the process of ‘fictionalisation’.<sup>1</sup> The *process of fictionalisation* is defined as ‘the use of narrative techniques that interrogate, destabilize or challenge, if only for a minute, the narrative’s intention to be believed or its claim to be truthful’ (14). The present volume (as De Temmerman states) purports to examine the techniques of fictionalisation in ancient biographical writing, their interconnection with the construction of formal narrative categories such as time, space and character as well as their significance in addressing questions about historicity and fictionality (14). A neat summary of the most important themes and techniques of fictionalisation (16–25), with which the following chapters deal, concludes De Temmerman’s chapter.

<sup>1</sup> For comprehensive overviews of current theories of fictionality and fiction, see Zetterberg (2016) and J.-M. Schaeffer (2012). On fictionality and the relation between fictional and non-fictional narration in antiquity, see Rösler (1980) and (2014), Halliwell (2015), and Zimmermann (2015).

Chapter 2 ('Civic and Subversive Biography in Antiquity', 26–43), by David Konstan and Robyn Walsh, identifies and discusses two different (although not always clearly distinguishable) traditions of ancient biographical writing: the 'civic' and the 'subversive'. It is argued that the civic biographical tradition (exemplified, for instance, by Nepos, Plutarch, and Suetonius) has its origins in Xenophon's *Agesilaus*; it is about respected and powerful individuals who are central figures of the social system, and it lays emphasis on character—as this is displayed in public actions (recounted more or less in temporal sequence)—and ethics. The 'subversive' tradition, which seems to have its basis in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, evinces interest in 'those who are on the margins of power, and more or less subtly undermines or challenges the conventional ideology' (28). It follows a more episodic structure whereby collections of anecdotes or conversations of a subject with (clever) interlocutors underline her/his verbal and intellectual capacities. It is noteworthy, as Konstan and Walsh stress, that the same person may be amenable to both the civic and the subversive biographical treatments. Their discussion of Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* in tandem with the *Alexander Romance* brings that clearly into relief, with the former leaning towards the civic tradition and the latter towards the subversive. The Gospels and the *Lives* of the immediate disciples of Jesus, as suggested next, belong to the subversive tradition, while it is only in the fourth century, with the establishment of Christianity, that the biographies of saints shift their focus from the marginalised figure of the subversive tradition to the Christian heroes of a civic tradition, (now) underlining the excellence of character and Christian virtues. Konstan and Walsh succeed in offering an introductory holistic view of ancient Greek and Roman biographies, which points to new ways of reading and understanding them. Seeing the ancient biographical genre through the prism of their civic and subversive traditions, we are allowed to get a better sense of how ancient biography developed, how very different *Lives* ancient authors were ready to write, and how very different things interested them from one work to another, even in the case of a single person like Alexander the Great. The distinction might be particularly appealing in those instances where the civic and subversive modes are mingled together within a single biographical narrative that combines a thematic arrangement with a chronological structure, thus tracing particular aspects of an individual's character and personality. Plutarch's *Lives* of Demosthenes and Cicero might be an interesting case in point. It would certainly have been rewarding if the following chapters had made more use of that introductory discussion and closely applied it to questions about fictional and non-fictional modes of writing.

Part 2 focuses on 'Individual Biographies'. In Chapter 3 ('*Life of Aesop*: Fictional Biography as Popular Literature?', 47–64), Grammatiki Karla offers an illuminating study of the *Life of Aesop* as a work of popular literature, showing

how a careful analysis of the linguistic and stylistic registers of ancient biographical works can reveal important aspects of their audience reception. Following the works of Bourdieu and Hansen, she analyses elements of popular aesthetics in the *Life*. She considers features of both form and content, and neatly demonstrates that the language, motifs and images, style and structure, in conjunction with the lack of temporal precision and the fairly precise specifications of space, contribute to the popularity of the work, which becomes both appealing to and didactic for the readers. What is also attractive in Karla's chapter is the metanarrative connection between the double function of Aesop's *Life* (which is both recreational and didactic) and the similar character of Aesop's own fables (58–9). She also associates the strong presence of the influence of the Cynics in the *Life* with the 'popular' nature of the work: 'Of all the philosophical schools of antiquity, Cynicism was most embraced by the lower classes and most likely to provoke response from them' (60).

In Chapter 4 ('Parallel Narratives and Possible Worlds in Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes*', 65–79), Eran Almagor examines Plutarch's reflections on possible worlds and alternative realities, focusing especially on Plutarch's self-standing *Life of Artaxerxes*. He asserts that Plutarch uses the fictional device of counterfactuals in order to study reality and that he often gives alternative (and clashing) courses of events that depict 'the point in time when the various alternative routes of action were available to the figures in question' (70). Although I do not entirely agree that most of these alternatives were actually available to the figures in question, i.e. they were part of their actual concerns, Plutarch's narrative method does offer a comprehensive picture of the situation described and succeeds, as Almagor aptly shows in the rest of his chapter, in depicting the complexities of an individual's character. With regard to Almagor's discussion, moreover, one might ask if and to what extent Plutarch's technique of possible stories and alternative worlds, especially in the case where Plutarch weighs up alternative sources critically, constitutes not simply a means of fictionalising but also of authenticating, building the authority of the narrative and validating Plutarch's insight and circumspection as a researcher.

In Chapter 5 ('Lucian's *Life of Demonax*: The Socratic Paradigm, Individuality, and Personality', 80–96), Mark Beck examines Lucian's representation of Demonax's character in the light of Christopher Gill's distinction of 'character' (centred on moral evaluation) and 'personality' (centred on the individuation and unique identity of a person). He successfully shows that Lucian accommodates both the 'character-approach' and the 'personality-approach', the former through the patterning of Demonax's life against the Socratic paradigm and the latter through Demonax's *apophthegmata* and the revelation of his wit and humour. Beck's argument that the characterisation in Lucian's *Life of Demonax* explores both character and personality is in line with, and further

verifies recent research on the characterisation in Plutarch's *Lives* and the ancient Greek novel.<sup>2</sup> Beck also suggests that Lucian modelled his *Life of Demonax* on Xenophon's *Agesilaus*, although he advanced beyond Xenophon's biographical technique by depicting the individuality and personality of his hero. He concludes that 'it is likely that Lucian's *Life of Demonax* is a true biography and not a fictional account' (96).

Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is the subject of Chapter 6 by Patrick Robiano ('The *Apologia* as a *mise-en-abyme* in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*', 97–116). Robiano takes as granted the fictiveness of the *Apologia* and raises the question of its literary and poetic function within the *Life* as a whole. Through a close examination of intratextual connections, parallels and similarities between the *Apologia* and the wider biographical narrative as well as the function of intertexts, citations, and allusions within the *Life*, Robiano illustrates that the *Apologia* reflects retrospectively the architecture of the overall narrative and throws into sharp relief connections between the author, the narrator, and the character Apollonius, thus fictionalising the whole work within which it figures. In the next chapter ('The Emended Monk: The Greek Translation of Jerome's *Vita Malchi*', 117–32), Christa Gray discusses some of the formal changes made to the Latin text of the *Vita Malchi* in its Greek translation. After offering some very useful details about the content of the Latin work and its generic affinities with the Greek erotic novel and the biographical tradition, Gray carefully examines how the Greek translation receives, reshapes, and adapts the Latin original. The Greek translation, according to Gray, omits or modifies most of the 'factual' remarks found in the Latin text, gives more space to supernatural agents and actions, and inserts continual explanatory comments as well as additional biblical quotations. Gray concludes that these differences in the narrative technique are indicative of the different function of the narrative of the Greek translation in which 'the frame of reference is the truth of Scripture rather than that of history, nature, philology, or experience' (126). The Greek text, as Gray observes, seems to be designed to exercise greater control over the reader's reception of the plot and the moral message of the story. All in all, Gray offers a valuable analysis of the Latin text of the *Vita Malchi* and its Greek translation, which not only enlightens the relationship between the two, but also shows how different versions of a single work may exhibit different degrees of attachment to the fictional or non-fictional modes which, in turn, become suggestive of shifts in the purposes of a narrative and its generic interactions.

In Chapter 8 ('The Divided Cloak as *redemptio militiae*: Biblical Stylization and Hagiographical Intertextuality in Sulpicius Severus' *Vita Martini*', 133–59), Danny Praet focuses on Christian narrative literature as well. Praet examines

<sup>2</sup> On Plutarch's biographies, see Pelling (1990) 228–35 and (2002) 321–2, 324. On the ancient Greek novel, see De Temmerman (2014) 323–4.

how Sulpicius uses the Bible to convey his message about Martin. He notices several acute parallels between Martin and Christ in the childhood stories as well as in the scenes that depict the final years and the death of the saint, thus stressing the important role that Scripture and hagiography played in Sulpicius' process of characterisation. Praet's discussion contributes significantly to the relationship between fictionalisation and intertextuality, raising interesting questions about whether the parallelism between Martin and Christ belongs to Martin, i.e. within the narrative universe, or Sulpicius, who constructs Martin à la Christ. Praet argues for the latter, and connects this with Sulpicius' need to defend Martin's military service, which was a stain on his position as a cleric. Commenting especially on the famous passage of the *Vita Martini*, the division of the cloak, Praet argues that it affords a glaring example 'of complex biblical stylization' (139). The famous dramatic gesture, according to Praet, 'is not only an instance of fictionalization inherent to the metaphorical, intertextual construction of Martin as a counterpart of Christ, but ... it is a creation out of nothing rather than a reconstruction of earlier traditions' (158).

Part 3 shifts the focus towards 'Collective Biographies'. Maarten De Pourcq and Geert Roskam ('Mirroring Virtues in Plutarch's *Lives* of Agis, Cleomenes and the Gracchi', 163–80) examine the interconnection between two fundamental aspects of Plutarch's biographical programme—moral problematisation and comparison (*synkrisis*)—and Plutarch's narrative technique. They first study narrative time, addressing in fact issues related to narrative 'rhythm'. They rightly observe that Plutarch employs a slowing down or acceleration of the narrative in order to pinpoint specific character traits of the protagonists of his biographies and prompt reflection on several moral issues. They next examine 'focalisation', and particularly Plutarch's use of the reactions (often opposing reactions) of the main characters and of the onlookers of the time, in order to stress a hero's moral excellence and stir readers' (complex) moral inquiry. Christopher Pelling and Timothy Duff have already discussed the core of this argument.<sup>3</sup> De Pourcq and Roskam also apply the 'actantial model' of Algirdas Greimas and suggest that the biographical material of the four biographies is arranged according to a similar actantial form that serves to facilitate a comparative reading of the four *Lives* and point to 'general ethical scenarios' that 'prove valid regardless of historical time, place and context' (179). The actantial approach offers an original perspective from which to examine Plutarch's biographical narratives and his timeless ethical truths. It should certainly encourage further work.

In the next chapter ('Dying Philosophers in Ancient Biography: Zeno the Stoic and Epicurus', 181–99), Eleni Kechagia draws attention to 'philosophi-

<sup>3</sup> See Pelling (1988) 335 (index 2. subjects, s.v. characterisation by reaction); Duff (1999) 421 (index of themes, s.v. onlookers as mouthpiece for author); id. (2011) 65–7, 71–2.

cal' rather than historical or ethical truths. She examines the death stories relating to Zeno the Stoic and Epicurus as conveyed mainly through the work of Diogenes Laertius. Her close readings are persuasive and illuminating. She clearly demonstrates that the fictional details of the death stories about the two philosophers reflect their doctrines, but here one might perhaps have problematised the question whether and to what extent our knowledge about these doctrines is precisely drawn from these and similar texts.

Death scenes lie at the core of the next chapter as well ('Never Say Die! Assassinating Emperors in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*', 200–16), in which Rhiannon Ash examines Suetonius' assassination scenes of Julius Caesar, Caligula, and Domitian. Ash offers a sophisticated analysis of a wide range of techniques that Suetonius uses to enhance verisimilitude and give a sense of historical accuracy—the use of precise numbers, times, and dates; the naming of minor characters; direct appeals to the audience; appeals to eyewitness evidence; and the deft use of picturesque details. She also alerts us to other devices that highlight the fictionality of his account: the use of motifs and language associated with drama and performance and of a standard structural template for presenting accounts of different killings; the imitation of earlier scenes; echoes of events in Tacitus; and the introduction of counterfactual elements. Suetonius, as Ash efficiently shows, negotiates the boundary between historicity and fictionality in meaningful ways, which contribute to the moral complexities and didactic value of his narrative.

Tristan Power ('Poetry and Fiction in Suetonius' *Illustrious Men*', 217–39) examines Suetonius too, although his focus rests on two lives from Suetonius' *Illustrious Men*. His aim is to examine how Suetonius uses poetical, and thus fictional material. His argument that poetry is used as a source for the history of the subject's life and career as well as a means of portraying something about a subject's character is persuasive. Similar handling of poetical sources is found (though to a lesser extent), as Power maintains, in Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*. His comparison of Suetonius with Plutarch's preference for ethical truth over factuality is apposite. One might think of Plutarch's *Life of Solon*, which would be an ideal case study for comparing Plutarch's method of using (Solon's) poetry as direct evidence for his subject's life and character. Diederik Burgersdijk, in the last chapter of part 3 ('*Qui vitas aliorum scribere orditur*: Narratological Implications of Fictional Authors in the *Historia Augusta*', 240–56), proceeds to examine fictionality in the *Historia Augusta*. Burgersdijk analyses several narratological devices that the author of the *Historia Augusta* employs—a plurality of alleged authorship, a shift in time of narrating, the equation of fictional and historical sources, and a mixture of fictive and historical elements—thus offering useful insights into the author's work method and compositional techniques, an important aspect of which is the constant challenge of the borderlines of fiction and historicity.

Finally, the fourth and last part of the volume ('Biographical Modes of Discourse') seeks to broaden the concept of biography by taking into account a number of texts that are not traditionally treated as biographical, but certainly owe much to the biographical mode of writing: letter-writing and the novel. In Chapter 14 ('Chion of Heraclea: Letters and the Life of a Tyrannicide', 259–77) John Paul Christy dwells on a pseudohistorical letter collection, the *Letters of Chion of Heraclea*, a young student of Plato who turned against and successfully assassinated Clearchus, the tyrant of Heraclea. Christy's analysis sheds light not only on the engagement of the author of the *Letters* with Plato's work (mainly the Platonic *Epistles*) but also on the degree of Chion's duty to Platonic philosophy as well as his manipulative use of the epistolary discourse. Christy comments specifically on *Letter 3* of the collection, which describes Chion's meeting with Xenophon in Byzantium. This is a clear instance of distortion of historical chronology (according to Christy) and thus of the work's fictionality, which the author of the *Letters* fits into the work's complex programme of exemplarity, especially its concern about the role of the philosopher in society. Besides, Christy interestingly supports the notion that *Letter 17* connects the collection with Imperial narratives about other tyrannicides, particularly Plutarch's *Dion and Brutus*, thereby inviting the reader to compare Chion with other anti-tyrannical paradigms.

In the next chapter ('Brief Encounter: Timing and Biographical Representation in the Ps.-Hippocratic Letters', 278–92), Ranja Knöbl examines a collection of letters from the first century CE preserved in the *Corpus Hippocraticum* (hereafter called 'pseudo-Hippocratic letters'), which depict a correspondence between Hippocrates, Democritus, and the people of Abdera. Knöbl's emphasis lies on temporal devices and techniques (such as haste, delay, and brevity) and their role in creating exemplarity, authenticity, and illusion in the biographical narrative of the pseudo-Hippocratic letters. The discussion illustrates that the construction of time and timelessness in this collection defines to a great extent the biographical representations of Democritus and Hippocrates; and that it plays a part in the delight of reading, especially through suspense and expectation, and in the blurring of the boundaries between historicity and fictionality.

The volume ends with a chapter by Luke Pitcher on Heliodorus' *Aithiopika* ('A Shaggy Thigh Story: Kalasiris on the *Life of Homer* (Heliodorus 3.14)', 293–305). Pitcher closely examines Kalasiris' account of Homer's life in relation to other extant biographies of Homer and examples of biographical and pseudo-biographical works in antiquity. Among Pitcher's contentions in this chapter are that Kalasiris' certainty about Homer's birthplace contrasts with the circumspection of the extant *Vitae Homeri* (except the *Vita Herodotea*); that Kalasiris' use of Homer's own words to support his claim about Homer's origin constitutes a practice of authentication that is characteristic of ancient literary

biography; and that Kalasiris' justification of Homer's failure to give any conclusive proof for his nationality is a typical strategy of (pseudo-)biographical argumentation. Pitcher shows beautifully that in Kalasiris' account there is a strong interaction with usual practices of ancient biographical and pseudo-biographical writing, the use and subversion of which enlighten the nature of fictionality and verification in the *Aithiopika* and the dialogue of the novel with ancient modes of writing about the historical past (especially biography and historiography).

Overall, this is a thought-provoking and valuable volume. It does succeed in its principal aim, which, as De Temmerman states in his introductory chapter, is to 'illustrate the complexity and versatility of fictionalization in ancient biographical narrative' (25). It focuses on both Greek and Latin texts from the Imperial period, and it takes into account and showcases the (main) diverse modes of Greek and Roman biographical writing in antiquity: civic and subversive biographies; fictional biography and popular literature; historical, political, and ethical *Lives*; philosophical and literary biographies; hagiography and Christian narrative literature; epistolary biography and novelistic narratives. The individual chapters are well researched, with relevant ancient sources and modern literature. The choice to include translations of the original texts certainly keeps a wider readership on board.

The volume, although it 'is not, and cannot be, an exhaustive study of narrative technique and fictionalization in ancient biography' (xii), as the editors modestly state in the preface, does sensitise us to several formal strategies by which the boundaries between historicity and fictionality are questioned and challenged in ancient biographical writing: narrative time, voice, and authorial intrusions; space and focalisation—unfortunately these two aspects are, to a large extent, overlooked (the chapter of Karla and that of De Pourcq and Roskam are two exceptions accordingly)—characterisation, inter- and intra-textuality; literary (and generic) modelling; theatricality and the use of anecdotes. Speech-representation (especially interior monologue and free indirect speech) is neglected as a potential fiction-specific feature. One thing worth emphasising, moreover, is that the contributors do not try to establish any sort of repertoire of fictionalising (and authenticating) techniques for its own sake, but efficiently use these techniques as a means of exploring the form and meanings of ancient narratives. They thus offer new ways of capturing storylines and characters and of understanding the different needs in specific forms of biographical writing. It is clearly shown, for example, that ancient biographers tend to subordinate historical truth to other sorts of truth (e.g. ethical, philosophical, ideological, and religious), which force us to go beyond questions about historical reliability and probe the relations between narrative, authenticity and veracity, verisimilitude and fiction. This approach is paradigmatic for the felicitous interaction of Classics and narrative theory.



The volume will no doubt stimulate further study of the issues of ancient narrative and fictionalisation. Its findings can (and should) be applied to other authors and other genres. Historiography and oratory are two suitable case studies that will offer rewarding results. Besides, the questions about narrative technique and fictionalisation/fictionality, which the volume raises, can also be explored further in a number of (slightly) different directions: for example, how factual narratives in antiquity accommodate techniques that are typical of fiction; how fictional narratives use techniques that are typically identified with factual narratives (Pitcher's chapter has some suggestive remarks on this); how a particular technique functions in both fictional and non-fictional narratives of a specific historical period or of different historical periods; and how and to what extent specific narrative concepts and analytical instruments can be used for the analysis of both factual and fictional types of narration in antiquity (cf. Fludernik's discussion of whether or not a division between factual and fictional narratology is necessary and useful).<sup>4</sup>

To conclude, the volume makes a major contribution to the study of ancient biographical writing, its narrative technique and concerns with aspects of fictionalisation. It will find appreciative readers not just with specialists in the field of Classics and narratology, but also with those interested in questions of narrative, truth, and fiction more generally. Its innovative theoretical approach offers a fresh interpretative way of understanding how biography was written in antiquity. It definitely deserves a place alongside other reference works on the ancient biographical genre.<sup>5</sup>

*Universität Heidelberg*

CHRYSANTHOS S. CHRYSANTHOU  
chrysanthou@uni-heidelberg.de

<sup>4</sup> Fludernik (2013).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Momigliano (1993); Edwards and Swain (1997); Burrige (2004); McGing and Mossman (2006); Hägg (2012).

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