PLUTARCH AND SAINT BASIL AS READERS OF GREEK LITERATURE

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Abstract: Basil's *Address to Young Men on How to Read Greek Literature* is often read as an imitation of Plutarch's *How to Study Poetry*. Exploring the authors' connections more generally, I suggest that Basil has relied on Plutarch's approach in both the *Moralia* and the *Lives* to make the central argument of his essay, which is a justification for the reading of pagan literature in a Christian context. Basil follows Plutarch in his moralizing interpretations of historical anecdotes and in turning to Plato's *Republic* for philosophical support, but he also adapts Plutarch's approach to fit the social, religious, and political climate of his times.*

The *Address to Young Men on How to Read Greek Literature*, written by Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, probably in the 370s, has often been compared with works by Plutarch, to find a model for the essay and to suggest general Plutarchan influence on Basil's thought and writing. Olga Alieva has summarized the history of this comparison in a paper recently delivered in Moscow. As Alieva shows, some scholars have concluded that Basil was borrowing directly from Plutarch, while others have found the evidence for Plutarch's influence more ambiguous. Max Pohlenz, for instance, argues that Basil drew directly from Plutarch's *Progress in Virtue* (*Prof. in virt.*), while Ernesto Valgiglio and Mario Naldini argue for the fundamental influence of Plutarch's similarly-themed essay *How to Study Poetry* (*De aud. poet.*). Valgiglio, however, also finds in Basil an independence of form and spirit, and Naldini mentions originality in interpretation, especially as related to Basil's discussion of what is profitable,

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or χρήσιμον, in pagan literature.¹ N. G. Wilson takes a more analytical tack, admitting that he is not in fundamental disagreement with Pohlenz (he wrote before Valgiglio and Naldini), but nevertheless claiming not to have found “enough verbatim similarities to prove with ... certainty that Basil was borrowing directly from Plutarch” (12). Even so, Wilson’s commentary identifies twenty points of contact between Basil’s text and the works of Plutarch, including similarities in vocabulary and phrasing, shared literary references, and common anecdotes about historical figures.²

Because of their shared themes and similarity of argument, Plutarch’s *How to Study Poetry* has sometimes been read in conjunction with Basil’s essay. In 1902 Frederick Padelford published English translations of the two essays in a single book, along with interpretive and comparative introductions. He notes in his preface that the essays had been paired as early as 1600, singling out the 1694 edition published at Oxford by the future Archbishop of Canterbury (8). In this article I also compare these two essays, following the lead of Valgiglio and Naldini, however, by taking into account the spirit and the form of the essays rather than focusing on verbatim borrowings from Plutarch in Basil’s text. My aim is to compare the authors’ approaches to the fundamental problem that motivates both essays, namely, how to justify the reading of literature (for Plutarch, that means Greek poetry, while Basil also includes prose works and speeches), when that literature is judged to be inferior to and even at odds with philosophy, in the case of Plutarch, or with Holy Scripture, in the case of Basil. While Basil probably turned to Plutarch for some of his anecdotes and even for some of his arguments, as Alieva’s survey shows, in what follows I demonstrate that both authors also draw upon different passages from Plato’s *Republic* in order to frame the problem of reading Greek literature, and they justify this reading by claiming that it serves as preparation for more advanced study. Making use of examples from Plutarch’s *Lives* as well as *How to Study Poetry*, I conclude that it is the authors’ like-minded, moralizing approach to Greek literature that is most responsible for the similarities between the two essays.³

¹ See Alieva 1–2.

² See also Boulenger 28–29, Pastorino, *La Matina* 84, and Hunter and Russell, who call Basil’s essay an imitation of Plutarch’s *How to Study Poetry* (2).

³ For an examination of Plutarch’s influence on early Christian authors, including Basil, see *La Matina*, who provides further bibliography. For Plutarch’s influence on

I will begin by examining the introductions to the essays, to consider the authors' own statements about who their readers are and why they are writing. Plutarch addresses his essay on the study of poetry to Marcus Sedatus, who has a son, Cleander, about the same age as Plutarch's son, Soclarus. Although he does not provide exact ages, Plutarch says that it would not be possible to keep the boys from studying poetry, implying, as Richard Hunter writes, that they are "beyond 'elementary schooling'" and, in modern terms, "young adolescents" (169 n. 1). Thus they are ready to move ahead in their education with the serious reading of poetic literature. This is an urgent matter, according to Plutarch, because the young men might well need more oversight in their reading than they need when out on the streets (15a). Poetry can be dangerous because it presents fictional stories that are pleasant to hear, and therefore young students might read it indiscriminately and only for enjoyment, without concern for discovering anything that is true or otherwise valuable within the fiction. But rather than address this danger by eradicating poetry altogether from his son's curriculum, Plutarch advises Sedatus to seek out works of poetry that have beneficial, philosophical themes, and then to reject everything else (15f).

This is really the crucial point in Plutarch's justification for his essay, namely that reading poetry is not an end in itself:

οὕτω τοὺς λόγους ἢ ποιήσεις ἐκ φιλοσοφίας ἀναλαμβάνουσα
μυγνυμένους πρὸς τὸ μυθῶδες ἐλαφρὰν καὶ προσφιλεῖ παρέχει
τοῖς νέοις τὴν μάθησιν. ὅθεν οὐ φευκτέον ἐστὶ τὰ ποιήματα τοῖς
φιλοσοφεῖν μέλλουσιν, ἀλλὰ προφιλοσοφητέον τοῖς ποιήμασιν
ἐθιζομένους ἐν τῷ τέρποντι τὸ χρήσιμον ζητεῖν καὶ ἀγαπᾶν.

Thus poetry, by taking up its themes from philosophy and blending them with fable, renders the task of learning light and agreeable for the young. And so those who are intending to pursue philosophy should not avoid poetry, but they should use poetry as an introductory exercise in philosophy by training themselves habitually to seek out and to be fond of what is profitable in pleasure (15f–16a).⁴

Byzantine literature in general, see Humble (forthcoming a), who shows that his works were known sporadically from the fourth century but appear to have enjoyed wide appeal and influence particularly beginning in the tenth century.

⁴ Text of Plutarch's *How to Study Poetry* is from Babbitt; text of the *Lives* comes from the Teubner editions. Text of Basil's essay is from Boulenger as corrected by Wilson. All translations are my own.

Seeking out what is profitable (τὸ χρήσιμον) in literature makes the most obvious connection between the essays of Plutarch and Basil. Before turning to the Bishop of Caesarea, however, I would like to consider an unspoken component to Plutarch's argument. Plutarch makes his case for reading literature in opposition to the idea that one should reject all poetry because some of it is dangerous. Lurking behind this opposition is likely to be the decision of Plato to ban poets from his fictitious city in the *Republic*, and by extension, to keep poetic influences away from the training of the human soul.⁵ Now, in the third book of the *Republic* where Socrates states that he will ask poets to leave the city (398a), Plato is primarily interested in keeping the guardian class from becoming imitators of base men, as actors and singers of epic poetry are required to be when performing.⁶ But when he returns to the question of poetry in the tenth book, he is concerned about both imitation and the influence of performances on the audience. Socrates consents to giving poetry the chance to defend itself, but he also shows his skepticism by warning that "there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (παλαιὰ μὲν τις διαφορὰ φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητικῇ, 607b), and he does not really expect that poetry will acquit itself. He will allow it to return to his city, however, if its defenders can show "that it is not only pleasurable but also beneficial both to constitutions and to human life" (ὡς οὐ μόνον ἡδεῖα ἀλλὰ καὶ ὠφελίμη πρὸς τὰς πολιτείας καὶ τὸν βίον τὸν ἀνθρώπινόν ἐστιν, 607d).⁷

Scholars have interpreted the nature of the "ancient quarrel" mentioned by Socrates in various ways, but in general it must refer to the fact that poets and philosophers take different approaches to questions about political constitutions and human life. And regardless of what it might mean in the narrow context of Socrates' argument in the *Republic*, Plutarch and other later readers would surely have interpreted it within the wider context of Plato's fully developed philosophy. In a recent overview and reinterpretation of this quarrel, Glenn Most writes that, "From the early *Ion* through the more mature *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and

⁵ Cf. Hunter and Russell 79.

⁶ *Resp.* 392c–398b; cf. White 97; Reeve 220–26.

⁷ Here Plato uses "ἡδεῖα" for "pleasurable" and "ὠφελίμη" for "beneficial," whereas in the passage quoted above Plutarch used "τὸ τέρπον" and "τὸ χρήσιμον" for the corresponding nouns. Text of the *Republic* is from Slings.

Republic, until the late *Laws*—to mention only these dialogues—Plato's own quarrel with the poets is well established, deep-rooted, persistent, recurrent, explicit, and intense."⁸ Plutarch would have been keenly aware of Plato's various arguments for the danger to be found in poetry, and in considering the *Republic* in particular, he could have recalled the narrow criterion for allowing poetry back into the curriculum.⁹ He responds to this resistance by assuring Sedatus that he is advocating a very careful management of their sons' educations:

μηδ' ἡμεῖς οὖν τὴν ποιητικὴν ἡμερίδα τῶν Μουσῶν ἐκκόπτωμεν
μηδ' ἀφανίζωμεν, ἀλλ' ὅπου μὲν ὑφ' ἡδονῆς ἀκράτου πρὸς δόξαν
αὐθάδως θρασυνόμενον ἐξυβρίζει καὶ ὑλομανεῖ τὸ μυθώδες αὐτῆς
καὶ θεατρικόν, ἐπιλαμβανόμενοι κολούωμεν καὶ πιέζωμεν· ὅπου
δ' ἄπτεται τινος μούσης τῇ χάριτι καὶ τὸ γλυκὺ τοῦ λόγου καὶ
ἀγωγὸν οὐκ ἄκαρπὸν ἐστὶν οὐδὲ κενόν, ἐνταῦθα φιλοσοφίαν
εἰσάγωμεν καὶ καταμινύωμεν.

Let us not cut out or destroy the Muses' poetic vine, but wherever the fabulous and dramatic part, being boldly encouraged toward glory because of immoderate pleasure, becomes insolent and runs riot, let us gain control over it by pruning and pressing it back. But wherever the sweetness of speech touches upon sophistication through grace and as a guide is neither fruitless nor empty, let us bring in philosophy and mix it with the poetry (15f).

Plutarch, willing to heal the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, nonetheless will keep the dramatic and fabulous elements of poetic performance in check, acknowledging, it seems, Plato's special concern for the harm done when actors or singers imitate men of poor character or performers of bad deeds.

Basil tackles a similar problem in the introduction to his essay, seeking to allay the fears not of Platonists in this case, but of Christians who would object to the pagan values transmitted along with Greek literature. He responds to the presumed criticism in two ways. First, he takes a selective approach very similar to Plutarch's, though in place of

⁸ Most 2. See also Walker 294–302; Hunter 175–77; Barfield 10–31; Hunter and Russell 2–17.

⁹ For the influence of Plato's *Republic*, *Protagoras*, and *Laws* on Plutarch's view of poetry in this essay, see Hunter and Russell 2–9. On Plutarch's Platonism in general, see Jones; Dillon 184–230; Opsomer.

the vinedresser, pruning the bad and encouraging the good, Basil turns to the ship's pilot for his analogy:

τοῦτο μὲν οὖν αὐτὸ καὶ συμβουλευσων ἦκω, τὸ μὴ δεῖν εἰς ἅπαξ τοῖς ἀνδράσι τούτοις, ὥσπερ πλοίου τὰ πηδάλια τῆς διανοίας ὑμῶν παραδόντας, ἥπερ ἂν ἄγωσι, ταύτη συνέπεσθαι, ἀλλ' ὅσον ἐστὶ χρησίμων αὐτῶν δεχομένους, εἰδέναι τί χρὴ καὶ παριδεῖν.

This is precisely the advice that I have come to share with you: that you should not once and for all hand over the rudders of your mind, as of a ship, to these [pagan authors] and to follow them wherever they may lead, but accepting from them whatever is profitable, you should also know what to overlook (1.24–28).

The imagery of the ship might be inspired by Plutarch, who often speaks of reason as the pilot, or κυβερνήτης, of the soul, but ultimately it comes from Plato.¹⁰ In fact, the phrase used here, “handing over the rudders of your mind, as of a ship,” is almost certainly borrowed from the *Clitophon*.¹¹ But this phrase might also have been inspired by, and so remind the knowledgeable reader, of a passage from the *Republic*, making Basil's analogy richer and linking him even more generally to the Platonic tradition with which Plutarch also engaged. In book 6 of the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates compare the treatment received by a philosopher at the hands of his fellow citizens to the selection of a pilot (κυβερνήτης) of a ship. Sailors with no skill or training in piloting attempt to persuade the ship's owner to turn the rudder (πηδάλιον) over to them, claiming that the one who succeeds in this persuasion is “a sailor, good at steering, and an expert about sailing” (ναυτικὸν ... καὶ κυβερνητικὸν καὶ ἐπιστάμενον τὰ κατὰ ναῦν), when he really knows nothing at all about being a pilot, while the one who is not successful in persuading the ship's owner but is nonetheless best suited to be the pilot because of his wisdom, they call “unprofitable” (ἄχρηστον, 488a–489a). The sailors, of course, are not wise enough themselves to recognize the

¹⁰ In *How to Study Poetry*, Plutarch refers to education in general as traveling on the sea (15d, 37b); cf. Hunter 169. For κυβερνήτης as standing generally for reason that governs the soul in Plutarch, see Beneker 46–48.

¹¹ At 408b2, Plato has Clitophon argue that it is better for a person to live as a slave than as a freeman, “having turned over the rudders of the mind, as of a ship, to someone else who has learned the skill of steering people” (καθάπερ πλοίου παραδόντι τὰ πηδάλια τῆς διανοίας ἄλλω, τῷ μαθόντι τὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων κυβερνητικήν); cf. Wilson 40.

man who in fact possesses the wisdom to be the ship's true pilot, just as the average citizen in a city cannot perceive the wisdom or political skills of the philosopher. If we recall this passage from the *Republic* while reading Basil's admonition, then we can see that he is warning his nephews not to give in to the persuasion of the crowd of Greek authors, who might be appealing because their works give pleasure, but who in reality have nothing of value to offer. Rather, they should be discriminating, seeking out the works of those authors who are truly wise because they illustrate virtue.

Basil returns to this point in section 6 of his essay, once he has established that learning about virtue is the thing that is profitable (χρήσιμον) in reading Greek literature:

καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπαντες ὧν δὴ καὶ λόγος τίς ἐστιν ἐπὶ σοφία, ἢ μικρὸν ἢ μείζον εἰς δύναμιν ἕκαστος ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῶν συγγράμμασιν ἀρετῆς ἔπαινον διεξήλθον· οἷς πειστέον καὶ πειρατέον ἐπὶ τοῦ βίου δεικνύναι τοὺς λόγους.

And nearly all [writers] who have some reputation for wisdom have recounted a praise of virtue in their works to a greater or lesser extent, depending on their ability. We must trust in these writers and attempt to demonstrate their words in the way we live (6.1–4).

Basil goes on to emphasize the importance of making virtue real, and he concludes this portion of his argument with what might be a double reference to the third book of the *Republic*. First, he says that the person who has not internalized virtue “will pursue the appearance of being good without in fact being so” (καὶ τὸ δοκεῖν ἀγαθὸς πρὸ τοῦ εἶναι διώξεται, 6.24). Here he seems to be loosely quoting a sentiment from Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* (οὐ γὰρ δοκεῖν ἄριστος ἀλλ’ εἶναι θέλει, 592), which has been filtered through Plato, who names Aeschylus as his source (ἄνδρα ἀπλοῦν καὶ γενναῖον, κατ’ Αἰσχύλον «οὐ δοκεῖν ἀλλ’ εἶναι ἀγαθὸν ἐθέλοντα,» *Republic* 361b).¹² Second, in the next sentence Basil cites Plato by name, borrowing the assertion that to seem just while not being so is the extreme of injustice (ἀλλ’ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ ἔσχατος τῆς ἀδικίας ὅρος, εἴ τι δεῖ Πλάτῳ πείθεσθαι, τὸ δοκεῖν δίκαιον εἶναι μὴ ὄντα, 6.25–26). The reference is to *Republic* 361a (ἐσχάτη γὰρ ἀδικία δοκεῖν δίκαιον εἶναι μὴ ὄντα), which comes just before Plato’s quotation of Aeschylus.

¹² Cf. Wilson 56–57.

Basil, then, has Plato very much in mind as he establishes his theme and lays the groundwork for his argument. If he has been inspired by Plutarch's essay, then he appears to have looked not simply to its form, but also to have followed Plutarch's lead in turning to Plato as he considered the problem of selecting the right readings from the great corpus of Greek literature. It seems likely to me, in fact, that both Basil and Plutarch are sailing the same sea (to continue the analogy) and engaging with a larger dialogue about how and why philosophers should read literature. The Platonic foundation of this dialogue would have been well known to both of them, and Plutarch might have served as an inspiration or a model of how to approach this ancient and fraught question.

Plutarch's approach might also have shaped the second element of Basil's response to his presumed critics. Another implied question that Plutarch addresses in his introduction may be phrased something like this: even if there is philosophical value in some poetry, why bother with this dangerous game of finding it among all sorts of empty pleasures when you can simply read philosophy directly? In response, Plutarch argues that poetry softens philosophy and, because it contains philosophical principles in an easier-to-understand form, serves as an introductory exercise in philosophy, or "pre-philosophy," for young students: *προφιλοσοφητέον τοῖς ποιήμασιν*, Plutarch writes (15f).¹³ Reading poetry, therefore, trains young men in philosophical principles and teaches them to seek out what is useful in what is pleasant.¹⁴ As Hunter puts it, Plutarch is advising that the young reader "be actively engaged in the reading process in a manner which prepares [him] for the cut and thrust of philosophic debate" (172). Basil takes a similar approach, although he is rebutting a slightly different hypothetical question: why read pagan literature when we have Holy Scripture? His answer, however, is essentially the same. The study of Greek literature is not a replacement for the study of Scripture, but it serves as preliminary training for that later and more challenging endeavor:

ἕως γε μὴν ὑπὸ τῆς ἡλικίας ἐπακούειν τοῦ βάθους τῆς διανοίας
αὐτῶν οὐχ οἶόν τε, ἐν ἑτέροις οὐ πάντα διεστηκόσιν, ὥσπερ ἐν
σικαῖς τισι καὶ κατόπτροις, τῷ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄμματι τέως προγυ-
μναζόμεθα, τοὺς ἐν τοῖς τακτικοῖς τὰς μελέτας ποιούμεενους
μιμούμενοι.

¹³ See the full passage quoted above, p. 97.

¹⁴ Plutarch returns to this point in the essay's conclusion (36d–e); cf. Hunter 169–70.

So long, then, as it is not possible due to your age to grasp the depth of the meaning [in the Scriptures], with the aid of the other writings, which are not entirely different, as if with the aid of shadows and mirrors, we must in the mean time do preliminary exercises for the eye of the soul, imitating those who practice military maneuvers (2027–31).¹⁵

In both essays, the assertion that reading Greek literature is a preliminary exercise must be made at the outset; otherwise the whole argument for the philosophical value of this literature becomes unnecessary. Furthermore, the idea of engaging in preliminary exercises as preparation for more advanced study is likely to have seemed quite natural to Basil, who himself might have been educated through rhetorical *progymnasmata* while studying as a young man under Libanius.¹⁶

If it is true that Basil followed Plutarch's approach without verbatim borrowing or strict imitation, we might have an explanation for a minor but rather curious difference between the essays. Plutarch addresses his advice for studying poetry, as I have said, to Marcus Sedatus. This seems entirely logical, since the young Cleander's education would be carried out under the supervision of his father, and indeed, careful supervision is just what Plutarch advocates. Basil is similarly concerned with the education of his nephews, but rather than address his argument to their parents, he writes to the young men directly. The boys' ages, conjectured to be fifteen to sixteen years old, present something of a problem, since many of the literary references in the essay assume quite a lot of reading already in Greek literature, not only in standard authors, such as Homer and Hesiod, who might be encountered early in one's schooling, but also

¹⁵ By "the aid of shadows and mirrors" Basil is probably referring to the indirect observation of the truths that young men will eventually observe directly in Scripture. Plutarch uses the analogy of the mirror at *Progress in Virtue* 85a–b and *Aemilius* 1.1 (see below) to refer to the observation of the character of historical figures via reading. Cf. Pelling, who explains that in the *Aemilius* Plutarch is suggesting that his readers "explore the experiences and dilemmas of those figures from the past, and ask what we would have done ourselves in their circumstances, or what they would have done in ours" (17); see Pelling's n. 37 for further bibliography.

¹⁶ Libanius has left the largest collection of these preliminary rhetorical exercises and might have been the author of the treatise on *progymnasmata* that is usually ascribed to Hermogenes; see Kennedy 58–59; Gibson xx–xxv. For the influence of rhetoric on Basil's theological writings, see Kustas.

in more “advanced” authors such as the sophist Prodicus. “This argues,” Wilson writes, “a considerable degree of knowledge [in the young men], if not downright precocity” (8). This considerable degree of knowledge might indicate that Basil was, in fact, addressing the boys’ parents indirectly, and intending to reach other adult readers as well. Although his thesis is narrowly focused on education, this larger audience might well have needed convincing about the general value, and even the safety, of pagan literature only a decade or so after the brief reign of Julian, the apostate emperor. Julian himself had studied pagan Greek authors in a Christian environment as a youth. Thus he might have been a symbol of the danger that Basil seeks to mitigate.¹⁷ In any case, if Basil followed Plutarch’s example even to a small degree, he would not have left oversight of the critical and risky process of selection to the boys themselves.¹⁸ It seems that direct address to the boys’ parents might not have been well received, and so this might be the reason, perhaps deriving ultimately from political necessity, for Basil’s addressing his argument to the young men instead.

Turning from the framing of the problem to the authors’ general approach to the reading of literature, we notice how the two are again like-minded. Here I would like to broaden the comparison to include Plutarch’s *Lives*. In the introduction to the *Aemilius Paulus*, Plutarch claims that he began to write his biographies for the sake of others, but that he is continuing the series for himself, since he enjoys the effort of trying to arrange his life according to the virtues demonstrated by historical figures:

ἐμοὶ τῆς τῶν βίων ἄψασθαι μὲν γραφῆς συνέβη δι’ ἑτέρους, ἐπιμένειν δὲ καὶ φιλοχωρεῖν ἤδη καὶ δι’ ἑμαυτόν, ὥστερ ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ τῇ ἱστορίᾳ πειρώμενον ἀμῶς γέ πως κοσμεῖν καὶ ἀφομοιοῦν πρὸς τὰς ἐκείνων ἀρετὰς τὸν βίον. οὐδὲν γὰρ ἀλλ’ ἢ συνδιαιτῆσει καὶ συμβιώσει τὸ γινόμενον ἔοικεν, ὅταν ὥστερ ἐπιξενούμενον ἕκαστον αὐτῶν ἐν μέρει διὰ τῆς ἱστορίας ὑποδεχόμενοι καὶ παραλαμβάνοντες ἀναθεωρῶμεν «ὅσος ἔην οἶός τε» (Hom. *Il.* 24.630), τὰ κυριώτατα καὶ κάλλιστα πρὸς γνῶσιν ἀπὸ τῶν πράξεων λαμβάνοντες.

¹⁷ On the date of Basil’s essay, see Wilson 9; Naldini 16–17. On Julian’s education in Greek literature, see Browning 34–39; Bowersock 23–24.

¹⁸ Cf. Hunter 174, on Plutarch: “Although the discussion of poetry will indeed sharpen the young man’s desire and aptitude to question, there is no suggestion that he is free to interpret outside the strict parameters with which he will be supplied by his teachers.”

I happened to undertake the writing of these lives for the sake of others, but now I am continuing and enjoying them for my own sake. As if looking into a mirror (in some way or other), I try to use my investigation to give order to my life and to shape it according to the virtues of these men. For this experience is just like keeping a daily routine and living with them, whenever I welcome and receive each one of them in turn through my investigation, as if receiving a guest, and I observe “how great and of what character” each man is, deriving from his deeds what is most important and finest to know (1.1–2).

Basil expresses a similar sentiment, as part of his argument that reading Greek literature (of all types, not simply poetry) is critical to the preliminary training that later allows one to understand Holy Scripture:

καὶ ποιηταῖς καὶ λογοποιοῖς καὶ ῥήτορσι καὶ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις
ὁμιλητέον ὅθεν ἂν μέλλῃ πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπιμέλειαν ὠφέλεια
τις ἔσεσθαι.

One must keep company with poets, prose writers, and orators,
and with all men from whom one may find some benefit when it
comes to the care of the soul (2.37–39).

Although Basil here focuses on the authors, he clearly has “kept company” with the characters from literature and history as well. For instance, he recounts anecdotes about Odysseus (4.10–11, 5.25–42), Pericles (7.9–11), and Polydamus, an Olympic athlete (8.22–24), in addition to quoting from such authors as Plato, Prodicus (5.55–77), and Euripides (6.22–24).

An anecdote about Alexander the Great creates another point of comparison between the two authors, showing again how Plutarch and Basil sailed the same interpretive sea. In the *Alexander* Plutarch relates the story of how the Macedonian king behaved with great moderation after capturing the wife and daughters of the Persian king, Darius, despite their exceptional beauty. He relates the story so as to make Alexander’s self-control fundamental to his identity as king:

καίτοι λέγεται γε τὴν Δαρείου γυναῖκα πολλὴν πασῶν τῶν βασι-
λίδων εὐπρεπεστάτην γενέσθαι, καθάπερ καὶ αὐτὸς Δαρεῖος
ἀνδρῶν κάλλιστος καὶ μέγιστος, τὰς δὲ παῖδας εἰσφέρειν τοῖς
γονεῦσιν. ἀλλ’ Ἀλέξανδρος ὡς εἶκε τοῦ νικᾶν τοὺς πολεμίους
τὸ κρατεῖν ἑαυτοῦ βασιλικώτερον ἡγούμενος, οὔτε τούτων ἔθιγεν,
οὔτ’ ἄλλην ἔγνω γυναῖκα πρὸ γάμου πλήν Βαρσίνης.

And yet it is said that Darius' wife was by far the most attractive of all the royal women, just as Darius himself was the finest and tallest of the men, and that his daughters took after their parents. But Alexander, as it seems, believed that it was more king-like to master himself than to conquer his enemies, and so he neither touched these women, nor was he intimate with any other woman before marriage, except for Barsine (21.6–7).

In framing the anecdote in this way, Plutarch connects his portrait of Alexander to Classical Greek notions about the intersection between a statesman's private, personal behavior (especially his ability to exercise self-restraint), and his public, political success.¹⁹ Xenophon, for instance, expresses a similar sentiment in his encomium of Agesilaus, praising the Spartan king for acknowledging the danger in accepting a young man's kiss and remarking that "I am quite sure, however, that many more men are able to master their enemies than to master such desires as these" (ἐγὼ μέντοι δοκῶ εἰδέναι ὅτι πολὺ πλεόνες τῶν πολεμίων ἢ τῶν τοιούτων δύνανται κρατεῖν, Xen. *Ages.* 5.6).

Basil also invokes the example of Alexander, reading it in essentially the same way as Plutarch and drawing a similar conclusion. In the spirit of his argument, which conceives of such anecdotes as preliminary to the study of Scripture, Basil goes on to make the connection to Christian teaching overtly:

οὐδ' ἂν παρέλθοιμι τὸ τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου, ὃς τὰς θυγατέρας Δαρείου αἰχμαλώτους λαβὼν θαυμαστόν τι οἶον τὸ κάλλος παρέχειν μαρτυρουμένας οὐδὲ προσιδεῖν ἠξίωσεν, αἰσχρὸν εἶναι κρίνων τὸν ἄνδρα ἐλόντα γυναικῶν ἡττηθῆναι. τοῦτ' ἂν εἰς ταῦτόν ἐκείνῳ φέροι, ὅτι ὁ ἐμβλέψας πρὸς ἡδονὴν γυναικί, κἂν μὴ τῷ ἔργῳ τὴν μοιχείαν ἐπιτελέσῃ, ἀλλὰ τῷ γε τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν τῇ ψυχῇ παραδέξασθαι, οὐκ ἀφίεται τοῦ ἐγκλήματος.

Nor should we pass by the story of Alexander, who took the daughters of Darius prisoner and, although they were reported to exhibit an amazing beauty, he did not think it right to look upon them. Rather, he judged it to be a shameful thing for a man who had conquered other men to be defeated by women. For this amounts to the same thing as in that saying, that the one who has looked upon a woman with pleasure has committed adultery, even if he has not acted, but because he has admitted desire into his soul, he is guilty of the crime (7.40–47).

¹⁹ For Classical attitudes, see e.g. Dover 208; Davidson 250–308.

“That saying” comes from the Gospel of Matthew (5.28). The notion of a crime is, of course, part of Judeo-Christian ethics, but Plutarch (and Plato and Xenophon, too, for that matter) would have acknowledged the transgression that lies behind the guilt: allowing ἐπιθυμία free reign is something that must be guarded against. For Basil, this element of the anecdote is solidly based in Scripture, since in Matthew the crime also results from looking upon a woman with desire:

ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ βλέπων γυναῖκα πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν ἤδη ἔμοιχευσεν αὐτήν ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

And I say to you that anyone who looks upon a woman so as to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Mat. 5.28).

Both authors' use of this anecdote, then, neatly demonstrates the ethical connection between pagan and Christian thought that Basil found so valuable, and we may observe how their like-minded reading of the same literature has led to similar conclusions. Plutarch's interpretation of this anecdote might have been appealing to Basil, and Plutarch might even have been his source.²⁰ Even so, Basil's effort to give the anecdote a particularly Scriptural, Christian interpretation shows that he is grappling with a problem common to other Byzantine writers. In her study of the Anacreontic poems by John of Gaza, for instance, Frederica Ciccolella argues that John turned to allegory in order to circumvent “the ethical rejection of myth promoted by Neoplatonism and Christianity.” This allegorical interpretation, she argues, “was a way of keeping the study of pagan literature alive in a Christian background” (94–95).²¹ While not relying on allegory in his reading of the anecdote about Alexander, Basil nonetheless adapts (or updates) the earlier, pagan interpretation of Alexander's self-restraint so that it matches the expectations of his contemporary, Christian audience.

In conclusion, I would like to quote part of a short, eleventh-century Byzantine poem by Johannes Mauropus, written well after Basil's time but expressing a sentiment which, given his adaptation of Plutarchan

²⁰ See Valgiglio 77; Naldini 192.

²¹ On the date of John of Gaza, see Cameron. For Basil's relationship to Neoplatonism, see Rist.

and Platonic ideas to Christian theology, the Bishop of Caesarea probably would have endorsed:

εἴπερ τινὰς βούλοιο τῶν ἀλλοτρίων
τῆς σῆς ἀπειλῆς ἐξελέσθαι, Χριστέ μου,
Πλάτωνα καὶ Πλούταρχον ἐξέλοιό μοι·
ἄμφω γὰρ εἰσὶ καὶ λόγον καὶ τὸν τρόπον
τοῖς σοῖς νόμοις ἔγγιστα προσπεφυκότες.

If you should wish to exempt anyone among the pagans from your punishment, my Christ, may you exempt for me Plato and Plutarch. For both of these men clung most closely to your laws in their thought and their manner.²²

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²² For the full text, see Trypanis. See Humble (forthcoming a) and (forthcoming b) on the general compatibility between Plutarch's ethics and the Christian values of Byzantine writers, and also for the possible influence of his *Lives* on the form of historical writing in the tenth century.

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