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978-1-107-12912-2 - Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization

Edited by Koen De Temmerman and Kristoffel Demoen

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## WRITING BIOGRAPHY IN GREECE AND ROME

Ancient biography is now a well-established and popular field of study among classicists as well as many scholars of literature and history more generally. In particular biographies offer important insights into the dynamics underlying ancient performance of the self and social behaviour, issues currently of crucial importance in Classical Studies. They also raise complex issues of narrativity and fictionalization. This volume examines a range of ancient texts which are or purport to be biographical, and explores how formal narrative categories such as time, space and character are constructed and how they address (highlight, question, thematize, underscore or problematize) the borderline between historicity and fictionality. In doing so, it makes a major contribution not only to the study of ancient biographical writing but also to broader narratological approaches to ancient texts.

KOEN DE TEMMERMAN is Research Professor of Ancient Literatures and European Literary History in the Department of Literary Studies, Ghent University. He is the recipient of prestigious awards, such as the Triennial Prize for Humanities of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts (2008), and a ERC Starting Grant (2013). He has published extensively on ancient narrative literature, and is the author of *Crafting Characters: Heroes and Heroines in the Ancient Greek Novel* (2014) and the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography* (forthcoming).

KRISTOFFEL DEMOEN is Professor of Ancient and Byzantine Greek in the Department of Literary Studies, Ghent University. He is the author of three books and over seventy scholarly articles, and (co-) editor of seven books. His main research interests are related to the transmission, transformation and adaptation of the ancient literary and cultural tradition, especially from the post-classical to the Byzantine period. He is co-editor of *L'Antiquité Classique*, and president of the Belgian Society for Byzantine Studies.

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*Narrative Technique and Fictionalization*

EDITED BY

KOEN DE TEMMERMAN and  
KRISTOFFEL DEMOEN



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ERAN ALMAGOR is the co-editor of *Ancient Ethnography: New Approaches* (London, 2013). He is the author of articles and chapters on the history of the Achaemenid Empire, its image in Greek literature (especially in Herodotus and Ctesias), the *Lives* of Plutarch and imperial Greek writers (in particular Strabo, Josephus and Lucian). Among his interests is the reception of antiquity in modern popular culture.

RHIANNON ASH is Fellow and Tutor in Classics at Merton College, Oxford. She has research interests in Roman historiography, especially Tacitus, and in Latin literature of the imperial age more generally. She has published widely in these areas, including *Ordering Anarchy*, her monograph on Tacitus' *Histories* (London, 1999), and her commentary on the Latin text of *Histories 2* (Cambridge, 2007). She is currently in the final stages of writing a commentary on Tacitus *Annals 15* for Cambridge University Press.

MARK BECK received his PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1998. He is currently Associate Professor of Classics at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. In addition to publishing several articles and chapters on Xenophon and Plutarch, he has most recently edited the *Companion to Plutarch* published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2014.

DIEDERIK BURGERSDIJK is a Postdoctoral Fellow and Lecturer in Latin and Ancient History at Radboud University, Nijmegen. In 2010 he received his PhD with a study, 'The Style and Structure of the *Historia Augusta*', and he is currently working on a monograph about the panegyric speech by Nazarius (CE 321) addressed to Constantine the Great. He holds a position as guest researcher at the University of Amsterdam, and in this capacity has edited several books and museum catalogues on East–West relationships in the Mediterranean.

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JOHN PAUL CHRISTY is Director of Public Programs of the American Council of Learned Societies. He holds a PhD in Classical Studies from the University of Pennsylvania, and his research interests include reception studies, literary imposture and forgeries, and digital scholarship.

KRISTOFFEL DEMOEN (PhD 1993) is Professor of Greek Literature at Ghent University. His main research interests are related to the transmission, transformation and adaptation of the ancient literary and cultural tradition, especially from the post-classical to the Byzantine period.

MAARTEN DE POURCQ is Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen. He works on Greek literature, literary theory and classical reception studies. He received two postdoctoral fellowships from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Together with Geert Roskam and Luc Van der Stockt he has edited *The Lash of Ambition: Plutarch, Imperial Greek Literature and the Dynamics of Philotimia* (Leuven, 2012).

KOEN DE TEMMERMAN (PhD 2006) is Research Professor of Ancient Literatures and European Literary History at Ghent University. He is a visiting member of the Classics Centre at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and was a Stanley J. Seeger Fellow on the Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton University. He is the Principal Investigator of an ERC Starting Grant (2013) on late antique and early medieval hagiography, the author of *Crafting Characters: Heroes and Heroines in the Ancient Greek Novel* (Oxford, 2014) and the editor of *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Biography* (forthcoming).

CHRISTA GRAY is a Lecturer in Classics at the University of Reading. She worked on the 'Fragments of the Republican Roman Orators' project at the University of Glasgow and is the author of *Jerome, Vita Malchi: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Oxford, 2015).

GRAMMATIKI A. KARLA is Assistant Professor of Classical Studies at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She is the author of *Überlieferung, Sprache und Edition einer frühbyzantinischen Fassung des Äsopromans* (Wiesbaden, 2001), and editor of *Fiction on the Fringe: Novelistic Writing in the Post-Classical Age* (Leiden and Boston, 2009). Her research interests include ancient Greek popular literature, specifically, the *Life of Aesop* and the *Alexander Romance*, and the rhetorical texts of the late antique orators such as Julian, Themistios and Libanios.



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ELENI KECHAGIA studied classics and ancient philosophy at the Universities of Thessaloniki and Oxford. She held a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at Keble College, Oxford, during which she wrote a monograph on Plutarch's *Adversus Colotem*. Her research interests lie broadly in the field of history of philosophy, with a special focus on Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic philosophy, Plutarch, and ancient scientific thought. She is currently Senior Tutor at Nuffield College, Oxford.

RANJA KNÖBL, BA (Berlin) MA (Munich) PhD (Durham), studied classics, English literature, and philosophy. Her main interests are Greek literature, especially Euripides and the reception of his work and life in antiquity, Patristic literature, especially the reception and transformation of early and classical Greek literature by Christian authors, the varieties of embedded quotations in Greek literature, the mechanisms of canonization, and the dynamics of biographical narratives in antiquity. She has contributed to the *Lexicon on Ancient Slavery* (HAS, edited by the Mainzer Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011) as well as to the *Lustrum* volume on Euripides (2005), multi-contributor volumes on heroism (2010), Jewish-Hellenistic literature (2012), the semiotics of shipwreck (2012), and epistolary literature (2015).

DAVID KONSTAN is Professor of Classics at New York University. Among his publications are *Friendship in the Classical World* (1997); *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* (2006); *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (2010); and *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (2014). He is a past president of the American Philological Association, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

LUKE V. PITCHER is Fellow and Tutor in Classics at Somerville College, Oxford. He has published articles on Plutarch's *Moralia*, Lucan, epigram, and the reception of classical literature in twentieth-century speculative fiction, but his principal interests are in the Greek and Roman historians. He is the author of *Writing Ancient History: An Introduction to Classical Historiography* (London, 2009) and he has edited several fragmentary writers for *Brill's New Jacoby*.

TRISTAN POWER has taught Classics at the University of Reading. His publications include a number of articles on Suetonius, and he is also (with R. K. Gibson) co-editor of *Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives* (Oxford, 2014).

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DANNY PRAET is Professor of Ancient Philosophy and History of Christianity at Ghent University, where he is member of the Department of Philosophy and head of the Center for the Study of Christian Traditions. He has published on the Christianization of the Roman Empire, on ancient biography (e.g. Apollonius of Tyana), on the *Acts of the Martyrs*, and on Franz Cumont, whose collected works are being edited in the *Bibliotheca Cumontiana*.

PATRICK ROBIANO is a member of the PLH-CRATA at the University of Toulouse Jean Jaurès and a contributor to the *Dictionnaire des Philosophes antiques* (CNRS). He is a specialist in the Greek literature of the Roman Empire, particularly the Greek novels and the *corpus Philostrateum*.

GEERT ROSKAM received his PhD in classics at the University of Leuven and is Associate Professor in the Leuven Faculty of Arts. He is the author of many articles on later Platonism and Hellenistic philosophy and of several monographs on Stoicism (2005), Epicureanism (2007), and Plutarch (2007 and 2009).

ROBYN WALSH is an Assistant Professor in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Miami. Her research interests include the letters of Paul, the history of the interpretation of the Synoptic problem, theory and method, cognitive science, and archaeology of the Jewish diaspora. She is currently working on the influence of Romanticism on the field of early Christian studies.

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## *Preface*

This volume aims to contribute to two broad fields of classical scholarship: the study of biography and that of fictionality in narrative literature. As its title indicates, it combines both fields in that it approaches ancient biography as narrative, thereby following insightful work of other classicists (Pelling 2002a, Hägg 2012a) and at the same time departing from a number of traditional strands in scholarship on this genre, such as a long-standing concern with the vexing problem of its 'origins' and a tendency to accommodate the extant texts in different typologies (e.g. Leo 1901 on 'Suetonian' and 'Plutarchan' *Lives*). Most notably, for our purposes, scholarship on ancient biography has a long fascination with examining and assessing the individual *Lives*' historical reliability and authenticity. It has often been noted that the borderline between historicity and fictionality is profoundly blurred in many ancient biographies and that it is inadvisable to use these texts unproblematically as historical sources (e.g. Momigliano 1993, Lefkowitz 2012). Other scholars (e.g. Graziosi 2002) have drawn attention to the relevance of biographical traditions in their own right as creative reworkings of earlier traditions. And the consciousness with which some ancient authors inscribe themselves in the distinctive practice of writing *bioi* equally invites questions of a literary nature (see, for example, Papaconstantinou, Debié and Kennedy 2010).

The chapters of this volume explore questions of a literary nature as far as they relate to the main theme: interconnections between narrative technique and fictionalization. The first chapter acts as the introduction to this theme – and to the book as a whole. It offers a contextualization of the volume's overall approach, a state of the art and some theoretical background. It also draws together the themes of the volume and clarifies the various ways in which they unite the different chapters. The second chapter of the introductory Part I (Konstan and Walsh) sketches a broad survey of different biographical traditions.

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Parts II and III turn to specific biographies. The distinction between these parts corresponds to one of the major distinctions underlying the ancient biographical genre as a whole: whereas Part II deals with individual biographies, Part III deals with their collective counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Part IV, finally, broadens the concept of biography by discussing a number of texts that are not traditionally regarded as part of the ancient biographical canon but unmistakably use biographical modes of discourse: letter-writing (Christy and Knöbl) and the novel (Pitcher). We are confident that the case studies offer a diverse and fairly representative sample of biographers and biographees: major highbrow authors (e.g. Philostratus by Robiano, Plutarch by Almagor and by De Pourcq and Roskam) pair with anonymous authors of popular literature (the *Life of Aesop*, by Karla); several categories of historical persons are dealt with as they are portrayed in important biographical sub-genres (emperors' biographies in the chapters by Ash and Burgersdijk, philosophers in those by Beck, Kechagia, Christy and Knöbl; writers in those by Power, Karla and Pitcher; Christian saints in those by Gray and Praet).

This book is not, and cannot be, an exhaustive study of narrative technique and fictionalization in ancient biography. Rather, it comprises a number of case studies that share methodological premises. If only to keep the book's number of pages within reasonable limits, the selection of texts discussed is 'classical' in the sense that there is little direct engagement with, for example, the traditions of Jewish biography, included in recent scholarship such as McGing and Mossman (2006), or with biography in ancient languages other than Latin and Greek. Similarly, a glance at the table of contents indicates that the volume's emphasis is on biographical writing from the Roman imperial period (although, importantly, Konstan and Walsh take Xenophon as their starting point and many chapters make reference to earlier material). Not only do the first centuries CE constitute the genre's best-documented period, but they also offer the richest material from our specific point of view. Since the literary tradition has important roles to play in how biographical accounts are fictionalized (see Chapter 1 on 'literary modelling'), later texts, which inscribe themselves in a fully developed tradition, constitute both a safer and a more fertile ground for our approach than earlier, formative ones.

This volume is the result of the combined efforts of individually invited contributors. We want to thank them all for their work, their patience

<sup>1</sup> On these two types, and the specificities of collective biography in particular, see Adams (2013: 68–115).

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and their willingness both to adopt our approach and to revise their abstracts and chapters along the lines suggested to them by us and by the anonymous referees of Cambridge University Press. These referees deserve our gratitude for their supportive reactions to the original book proposal and the diligence and accuracy with which they have commented on the abstracts and, at a later stage, the first versions of all chapters. Michael Sharp, Cambridge University Press's Senior Editor in Classics and Byzantine Studies, encouraged us greatly with his interest in our work and his patience. The Flemish Research Council (F.W.O.-Vlaanderen) deserves our thanks for the financial support of one of the editors' post-doctoral research project, as part of which this volume originates. Last, but by no means least, our warm thanks go to Pauline De Groote, Sylvie Geerts, Thierry Oppeneer, Klazina Staat, Sarah-Helena Van den Brande and Julie Van Pelt for much-appreciated help with the layout of all chapters, the bibliography and the indexes.