

Chapter 3

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Feeling Scaphism: *Enargeia* and Assimilation in the *Artaxerxes*

Halfway through Plutarch's *Life of Artaxerxes*, his only extant biography to feature a subject who is neither Greek nor Roman, Plutarch describes the young Persian soldier Mithridates' execution by scaphism. In punishment for publicly contradicting the king, Mithridates is sentenced to lie between two hollowed-out boats with only his head and limbs protruding.¹ Over time, the condemned man's refuse attracts maggots and vermin, who begin to feed on Mithridates' insides as he slowly wastes away and eventually dies. The scene is often considered a turning point or revelatory moment in the *Life*:² while Artaxerxes receives a generally positive portrayal in the biography's first half, Mithridates' horrific execution exposes the king's underlying cruelty and volatility, which become thematic in the second half.³

Scholars frequently characterize this portion of the *Life* as a spectacle of Persian cruelty. In considering Plutarch's motives for writing the life of a barbarian, Judith Mossman suggests

1 Both Mithridates and a Carian soldier claim to have killed the king's younger brother Cyrus in combat (*Art.* 10.3-11.6; cf. *Xen. An.* 2.1.11 and 2.3.19), contradicting the king's official claim (*Art.* 14.2). The conflicting stories may have larger moral implications for the Persians; on the dichotomy of Good and Evil in Persian religion as Truth and Lie, see Orsi 1988: 140f. and Lincoln 2007: 17-32.

2 See Almagor 2014 and 2017: 138-142. Scholars disagree on the exact nature of this turning point. For *Art.* 16 as a contradiction of Artaxerxes' previously developed character, see Schmidt 1999: 317 and Soares 2007: 95. On Artaxerxes' internally consistent character, see Mossman 2010: 150 and 157. For consideration of both views, see Almagor 2014: 284. On character development in the *Lives*, see Gill 1983, esp. 478-481.

3 For Artaxerxes as a positive model of *πραότης*, see Manfredini & Orsi 1987: xxvii-xxviii; cf. Hood 1967: 68-85. Schmidt (1999: 323) argues for both a positive and negative portrait. On the ways in which the characters surrounding Artaxerxes implicitly reflect the king's character, see Almagor 2017: 151.

that the “Eastern extravaganza” of Artaxerxes’ *Life* offers Plutarch’s Greek and Roman readers a parade of otherness which they can observe with “a comfortable sense of distance and superiority”.⁴ Thomas Schmidt similarly comments that Plutarch seems interested less in offering a detailed portrait of Artaxerxes and more in describing “le monde fascinant des barbares” for the reader’s entertainment.⁵ We can see how the execution of Mithridates contributes to this general spectacle, as readers are disgusted and enthralled by the Persians’ grotesque and unorthodox methods of punishment.⁶ At the same time, however, by emphasizing the strangeness of the Persian court and arguing for a sense of cultural detachment, such interpretations overlook the biography’s potential for moral instruction through the reader’s intimate engagement with macabre depictions of Persian cultural practices. Building on recent reassessments of sensory experience in ancient literature, I argue that Plutarch’s engagement of the senses in the scaphism scene implicates his audience in the very practices they are condemning, forcing readers to confront their own susceptibility to vice.

Plutarch’s moral instruction in this scene is accomplished not through cultural detachment but through aesthetic engagement and assimilation with the Persian other. By aesthetic engagement, I mean the reader’s sensory experience and appreciation of the world within an artistic medium, in this case the literary text. “Aesthetic” here has two different meanings: sensory perception (*aisthēsis*) and artistic appreciation.⁷ Plutarch’s technique of affectively rich and vivid description, or *enargeia*, elicits the reader’s disgust and indignation at Persian methods of torture by turning the audience into an eyewitness or even participant in the scene unfolding before their eyes.⁸ While vision is the most common sense associated with *enargeia*, taste, touch, and smell – the “lower” senses frequently engaged in experiences of disgust – are also often involved in creating a fully immersive literary experience.⁹ *Enargeia* imparts a “bodily sense of presence,” or the illusion of being physically present at the original

4 Mossman 2010: 159. On Plutarch’s three-fold conception of cultural identity (Greek, Roman, barbarian), see Mossman 2010: 145 and Stadter 2015: 65n2.

5 Schmidt 1999: 324.

6 See further Flacelière & Chambry 1979: 31n1.

7 For definitions of the aesthetic, see further Halliwell 2002: 8–14 and Dressler 2016: 48f. On aesthetics as both art and sense-perception, see Porter 2010: 40.

8 On *enargeia*, see Zanker 1981; Webb 1993; Scholz 1998: 77; Webb 2009: 87–130; Montiglio 2014: 164. For ancient definitions of vividness, see Arist. *Poet.* 1455a; Plut. *De gloria Athen.* 346f–347d; Demetr. *Eloc.* 209–220; ps.-Long. *Subl.* 20.1–3 and 25.1; ps.-Hermogenes 10.23.

9 On vision and *enargeia*, see Dion. Hal. *Lys.* 7 with Zanker 1981: 297. For smell, see Lucian *Fug.* 1 with Lateiner & Spatharas 2017: 33f. On the multisensory nature of *enargeia*, see Webb 2016: 211–213. On disgust and the senses, see Rozin & Fallon 1987; Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin 1994: 201–213; Miller 1997: 60–88.

event.¹⁰ Ancient authors create this illusion by focalizing the event through internal spectators and characters, who connect the reader directly to their own sensory experiences. In Plutarch's account of scaphism, the reader's sustained proximity to sensory descriptors of death and decay is focalized through the original spectators of Mithridates' death, the Persians.

The multisensory and even embodied nature of the reader's experience of scaphism belies the comfortable distance scholars have suggested Plutarch's audience might feel when reading the *Artaxerxes*. Rather than remaining distant and culturally superior, Plutarch's Greek and Roman readers assume a role not dissimilar to the Persian onlookers and participants within the scene: both groups are captivated spectators, engrossed in the sight of Mithridates' rotting corpse. The gruesome anecdotes used to illustrate Persian barbarism depend on the reader's close inspection and, as other scholars have pointed out, even fascination with the very practices a Greek or Roman would presumably regard as evidence of barbarism and otherness. Initially, readers may respond to Mithridates' death with horrified revulsion, seeking to distance themselves from the described event through a false sense of cultural superiority. Experiences of disgust, however, also possess a paradoxical attraction, as the disgusted subject seeks to understand and engage with the disgusting object.¹¹ In his foundational study of disgust, William Ian Miller comments that "the way disgust in fact works, means that it has to get its hands dirty... To the extent that disgust defends us against pollution it must be alert to the polluting; it has to study it and know it well."¹² In order for Plutarch's readers to gain insight into Plutarch's representation of Artaxerxes' character, they must engage with Mithridates' death on a sensory and affective level. This engagement, achieved through the reader's identification *with* the internal spectator, presents an opportunity for moral education not through cultural detachment but through aesthetic assimilation with the Persian other.

10 Webb 2016: 211. See further Huitink 2019 on "enactivist" readings of ancient literature.

11 On disgust as a means of philosophical instruction through engagement rather than abstraction, see Moorman forthcoming 2022.

12 Miller 1997: 111. For various theoretical approaches to disgust's "paradox of aversion", see Kristeva 1982; Miller 1997: 109-142; Menninghaus 2003: 372-387; Korsmeyer 2011: 39-59.

Disgust and Condemnation

Before delving further into scaphism’s paradoxical allure and instructive potential, we should first consider the potential readerly responses of rejection. For Plutarch’s Greek and Roman audience, the outlandish practice of executing prisoners by force-feeding them milk and honey has typically been read as a vivid illustration of Persian brutality.¹³ In his presentation of Mithridates’ death, Plutarch uses highly visual and sensory rhetoric to implicitly condemn Persian cruelty. Readers are confronted with a horrific description of death and decay (*Art.* 16.3–7):¹⁴

Τὸ δὲ σκαφευθῆναι τοιοῦτόν ἐστι· σκάφας δύο πεπονημένας ἐφαρμόζειν ἀλλήλαις λαβόντες, εἰς τὴν ἑτέραν κατακλίνουσι τὸν κολαζόμενον ὕπτιον· εἶτα τὴν ἑτέραν ἐπάγοντες καὶ συναρμόζοντες, ὥστε τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὰς χεῖρας ἔξω καὶ τοὺς πόδας ἀπολαμβάνεσθαι, τὸ δ’ ἄλλο σῶμα πᾶν ἀποκεκρύφθαι, διδόασιν ἐσθίειν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, κἂν μὴ θέλῃ, προσβιάζονται κεντοῦντες τὰ ὄμματα· φαγόντι δὲ πιεῖν μέλι καὶ γάλα συγκεκραμένον ἐγχεοῦσιν εἰς τὸ στόμα καὶ κατὰ τοῦ προσώπου καταχέουσιν. εἶτα πρὸς τὸν ἥλιον ἀεὶ στρέφουσιν ἐναντία τὰ ὄμματα, καὶ μυιῶν προσκαθημένων πλῆθος πᾶν ἀποκρύπτεται τὸ πρόσωπον. ἐντὸς δὲ ποιούντος ὅσα ποιεῖν ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστιν ἐσθίοντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ πίνοντας, εὐλαὶ καὶ σκώληκες ὑπὸ φθορᾶς καὶ σηπεδόνης ἐκ τοῦ περιττώματος ἀναζέουσιν, ὑφ’ ὧν ἀναλίσκεται τὸ σῶμα διαδυομένων εἰς τὰ ἐντὸς. ὅταν γὰρ ἤδη φανερός ἦ τεθνηκώς ὁ ἄνθρωπος, ἀφαιρεθείσης τῆς ἐπάνω σκάφης ὀρώσι τὴν μὲν σάρκα κατεδηδεσμένην, περὶ δὲ τὰ σπλάγχνα τοιούτων θηρίων ἐσμούς ἐσθιόντων καὶ προσπεφυκότων. οὕτως ὁ Μιθριδάτης ἑπτακαίδεκα ἡμέρας φθειρόμενος μόλις ἀπέθανε.

Scaphism happens in the following way: taking two boats, fashioned to fit closely with one another, they lay the condemned on his back in one boat. Then, fastening the other boat onto the first and fitting them together so the man’s

13 See, e.g., Soares 2007: 98, who surmises that the Artaxerxes “would have appealed to readers who liked well documented information, lively descriptions, and the most horrible details of death by torture.” Accounts of scaphism from antiquity are rare. Apart from *Art.* 16, Photius mentions that a certain eunuch named Aspamitres was executed by scaphism for conspiring against Dareius and Xerxes (*Bibl.* 72.40a). Both accounts are likely drawing on Ctesias as their source, and their historicity is suspect; see Flacelière & Chambry 1979: 31n1 and Binder 2008: 228–231 and 248.

14 See Schmidt 1999: 317 and Lateiner & Spatharas 2017: 34; on this passage as a “prime example of Oriental despotism” for Greek audiences, see Lincoln 2007: 94. Text is from Flacelière & Chambry 1979. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

head, hands, and feet protrude, while the rest of his body is entirely concealed within, they give him food to eat. If he refuses, they force him to eat by pricking his eyes. After he has eaten, they pour milk mixed with honey into his mouth and they smother his entire face with it. Then they turn his eyes to face the sun at all times, and a swarm of flies entirely covers his face. Since within the boats he does whatever is necessary for men to do when they eat and drink, maggots and worms bubble up from the stench and putrefaction of his refuse; from there they devour his body and seep into his bowels. For whenever the man is clearly dead, they remove the upper boat and see that his flesh is entirely gnawed through, and around his entrails swarms of these sorts of vermin eat and pullulate. In this way Mithridates slowly decayed for seventeen days and then finally died.

In their introductory discussion of disgust in antiquity, Lateiner and Spatharas cite Mithridates' execution as a paradigmatic instance of disgust's role in creating the literary experience of *enargeia*.¹⁵ Readers vividly imagine the sight of Mithridates' decaying corpse, the cloying taste of too much milk and honey, the feel of flies settling onto his face, and the smell of his feces filling the boat. Physical details such as the maggots devouring Mithridates' intestines threaten the reader's sense of biological safety, attacking the bodily envelope and exposing Mithridates' inner organs.¹⁶ The stench of Mithridates' fecund, rotting body, as he clings to life for seventeen days before succumbing, warns bystanders away from potential contamination.

There is also a significant moral component to these physical elicitors of disgust.¹⁷ The rupturing of boundaries between Mithridates' intestines and the outside world is a physical manifestation of his social and moral transgression. His boast claiming sole responsibility for Cyrus' death exposes the king as a potential liar and puts the entire kingdom at risk morally and ideologically. As Benjamin Lincoln has argued, within its Persian context scaphism is more properly understood as a "judicial ordeal".¹⁸ The executioners carrying out this ordeal feed Mithridates nothing but sweet honey and milk, foods "associated with goodness, light,

15 Lateiner & Spatharas 2017: 34f.

16 Haidt, McCauley, & Rozin 1994 identify seven "domains" of disgust: contaminated food; animals; bodily products; sex acts; violations of the bodily envelope; death; and hygiene. On elicitors of disgust in ancient Rome, see Kaster 2005: 104–133 and Lateiner 2017.

17 On the manner in which disgust connects ethical judgment with sensory-based impulses, see Nussbaum 2004: 1–18. For an ancient example, see the discussion of Philoctetes' sore in Allen–Hornblower 2017.

18 See Lincoln 2007: 87–94.

happiness, and peace”.¹⁹ If Mithridates were telling the truth, he would in theory remain as pure and clean as the milk and honey he ingests. His decaying body and the foul excrement it produces are physical evidence for the moral corruption of his lie. This may explain why Plutarch is strangely prudish when discussing defecation, elliptically reported as ὄσα ποιεῖν ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστιν, but does not show any restraint when it comes to the feces itself. The focus is on the product which marks Mithridates’ guilt. This product and its threat of contamination are at first carefully contained by the boats that surround him. Eventually, however, even these must be lifted for the executioners to determine his culpability, breaking the final boundary between Mithridates and the world surrounding him.²⁰

While the Persian spectator’s revulsion would presumably begin and end with Mithridates’ corpse, for Plutarch’s readers the moral disgust elicited by Mithridates’ physical decay may also transfer to Artaxerxes and the Persian court in general, contributing to readings of the scene as a major turning point in the *Life*. The apparent arbitrariness of Mithridates’ sentence bolsters culturally specific impressions that the Persians possess a macabre satisfaction in developing multiple, grotesque methods of torture. Two different men, a Carian soldier and then Mithridates, are condemned to death for contradicting the king’s claim that he alone was responsible for Cyrus’ death.²¹ Although each man commits the same crime, they receive vastly different penalties.²² Artaxerxes at first decides to behead the Carian before his mother intervenes to impose a harsher punishment: under her direction, the Carian suffers on the rack for ten days before his eyes are gouged out and molten brass is poured into his ears (14.5).²³ The discrepancy between the Carian’s death and Mithridates’ execution by scaphism does not appear to have any rational basis, making Artaxerxes (and the Persians in general) appear all the more brutal and capricious. Without a proper understanding of the judicial connection in Persian culture between foul excrement and a foul soul, Plutarch’s Persians appear to approach torture as a form of entertainment, as a man’s excruciatingly slow putrefaction becomes a fascinating spectacle.

The Persian cultural background to scaphism, in contrast to an outside reader’s understanding of the scene, offers us a model for thinking about disgust’s ability to instruct

19 Lincoln 2007: 90.

20 On disgust’s role in boundary creation and identity formation, see further Wilson 2002: 77-79.

21 For the mystery of Cyrus’ murder see *Art.* 10-11, with Almagor 2016: 71-73.

22 See Binder 2008: 248-251.

23 For the motives behind Parysatis’ cruelty (vengeance), see *Art.* 17.1. For consideration of the Carian’s execution from a Persian perspective, see Lincoln 2007: 85f.

through sensory engagement. While disgust is the basis of both the Persian's and the Greek or Roman reader's experience of scaphism, for the Persian spectator this disgust, specifically the stench of Mithridates' feces, is a powerful means of exploration and examination. From an outsider's perspective, the cause of Mithridates' suffering is connected directly to Artaxerxes and the Persian executioners. Mithridates' stinking waste is a symptom of Persian brutality. From a Persian perspective, on the other hand, Mithridates causes his own suffering, as the evil within him transforms milk and honey into feces and maggots. Rather than seeking distance from Mithridates' decaying corpse, the Persian executioners exhibit a productive fascination, as they must lift up the boats and look (ὀρῶσι) at Mithridates' corpse to determine his guilt.

***Enargeia* and Aesthetic Assimilation**

The executioners' actions demonstrate the need for sensory connection to gain insight through disgust. If Plutarch's readers pull away and seek distance from the description of Mithridates' corpse, they put an end not only to their engagement with the scene but also to their ability to gain insight into Artaxerxes' character and Persian culture more generally. At the same time, readers who *do* become fully immersed in the narrative are themselves participants in the same spectacle that the Persians are being condemned for designing and viewing. The scaphism scene is focalized through the sensory experiences of the internal Persian spectators, meaning that Plutarch's readers comprehend and enjoy the scene not by distancing themselves from the Persians but by *aligning* with them. Plutarch's readers can only maintain their sense of cultural superiority for so long, as they look down upon the Persians for "delighting" in the contrivance of such horrific forms of torture while they themselves enjoy reading about it. By focalizing the reader's experience of Mithridates' death through internal Persian spectators, the narrative implicates Plutarch's readers in the same spectacle of execution that characterizes the Persians as stereotypically cruel barbarians.

This implication is achieved through Plutarch's use of *enargeia*, or vividness. Earlier in the *Artaxerxes*, Plutarch praises Xenophon's account of the Battle of Cunaxa for its vividness, which makes it unnecessary for Plutarch to provide a full description of the battle in his own work (*Art.* 8.1):

τὴν δὲ μάχην ἐκείνην πολλῶν μὲν ἀπηγγελκότων, Ξενοφῶντος δὲ μονονουχὶ
δεικνύοντος ὄψει καὶ τοῖς πράγμασιν ὡς οὐ γεγενημένοις, ἀλλὰ γινομένοις,

ἐφιστάντος ἀεὶ τὸν ἀκροατὴν ἐμπαθῆ καὶ συγκινδυνεύοντα διὰ τὴν ἐνάργειαν, οὐκ ἔστι νοῦν ἔχοντος ἐπεξηγεῖσθαι, πλὴν ὅσα τῶν ἀξίων λόγου παρήλθεν εἰπεῖν ἐκεῖνον.

But since many others have written about that battle, and since Xenophon all but displays it **in appearance and in reality**, as though it hadn't happened in the past but is happening now, always placing **his audience in a state of emotion and through vividness making them share in the scene's dangers**, a sensible person would not describe it in detail, except however much he has skipped over that deserves mention.

The sights and actions of the battle are “all but” (μονονουχί) right before the reader and seem to take place in the present rather than in the past (ὡς οὐ γεγενημένοις, ἀλλὰ γινομένοις).²⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus likewise observes that when reading history, people take pleasure “not only from **hearing** things said, but also from **seeing** things being done [τὰ πραττόμενα ὁρῶσα]” (*Ant. Rom.* 11.1.3; trans. Walker). The present tense of the participle ὁρῶσα, as Walker points out, suggests that events are not happening in the past but “transpiring before the reader’s eyes.”²⁵ It is almost as though the readers were physically present at the scene.²⁶ This sense of direct participation (as Plutarch says, readers “share in the scene’s dangers,” συγκινδυνεύοντα) contributes to a feeling of benign masochism, or the enjoyment of experiences initially deemed unpleasant or dangerous, among readers during Mithridates’ death.²⁷ The pleasure of the reader’s experience hinges, in part, on the illusory aspects of the scene. *Enargeia* tricks the body into thinking it is under attack or in danger of pollution; pleasure then arises from the triumph of “mind over body” felt when the mind recognizes the threat is only an illusion.

While the audience’s sense of physical involvement is located in the imagination, “like” that of a spectator or participant without actually being one, their emotional involvement can be

24 This sense of simultaneous action is a key component of *enargeia*; see ps.-Long. *Subl.* 25.1–27.4. For instances of direct speech and the present tense in *Art.* 1–19, see Soares 2007: 90f.

25 Walker 1993: 364.

26 The “almost” is another key component of *enargeia*. If readers are completely immersed, they experience not illusion but delusion, unable to distinguish between reality and representation. See further Werner 2013: 14–19 and Webb 2009: 103–105. Cf. Walker 1993: 358.

27 On the role of compound *sun-* verbs in creating a sense of direct involvement for the reader, see ps.-Long. 20.2 with Huitink 2019: 180f. and 187. On benign masochism, see Rozin, Guillot, Fincher, Rozin, & Tsukayama 2013 and Lateiner & Spatharas 2017: 35.

very real, as the act of reading prompts tears, gasps, or shudders of horror.²⁸ The audience’s active role in visualizing and mimicking the actions of a scene (this is the force of Plutarch’s ὄψει καὶ τοῖς πράγμασιν) is complemented by a passive state of emotional affect (ἐμπαθῆ). Emotional involvement in past historical realities is accomplished not through cultural detachment but through close association and affective identification with the original eyewitnesses and participants. These connections are perhaps most clear in a famous passage from Thucydides’ account of a pivotal battle off the coast of Syracuse, often cited in ancient discussions of *enargeia* (7.71.1–5). Thucydides’ reader shares in the battle’s confusion and uncertainty through the chaotic variety of reactions among eyewitnesses, whose emotions mirror the varied experiences of the sailors in the thick of battle.²⁹ Discussing this passage, Plutarch tells us that Thucydides aims at *enargeia* “because he desires to make the listener like a spectator and to make vivid in the reader’s mind all the emotions of dismay and disturbance which the eyewitness felt” (*De gloria Athen.* 347a; trans. Russell & Winterbottom, adapted).³⁰ The listener is οἷον θεατῆν but still experiences the very real emotions of the internal spectators, who sway back and forth in fear and sympathy with their comrades fighting at sea (περιδεῶς συναπονεύων, *De gloria Athen.* 347c; cp. Thuc. 7.71.3). These internal spectators model an emotional response for readers, whose identification with the scene’s original eyewitnesses and participants situates them within the narrative.

Even without an explicitly defined internal audience, Plutarch’s vivid description of Mithridates’ death in the *Artaxerxes* creates what Ruth Webb has described as a “chain of images” connecting the original spectator first to the author and then to the reader.³¹ According to ancient theories of imagination and aesthetic immersion, the author visualizes in his mind’s eye the experiences of his character and then with his words projects that image to his audience. The image that the reader receives was thought to be identical both to the image produced by the author and “to the *direct perception* of a thing”.³² This suggests that, even without a detailed description of emotional responses like those in Thucydides’

28 See, e.g., Quint. *Inst.* 6.1.26–27 with Webb 2009: 104.

29 On the close connection between visibility and emotion in experiences of *enargeia*, see Walker 1993: 360f. On the importance of emotional appeals for creating *enargeia*, see Webb 2009: 90.

30 οἷον θεατῆν ποιῆσαι τὸν ἀκροατῆν καὶ τὰ γινόμενα περὶ τοὺς ὀρώντας ἐκπληκτικὰ καὶ ταρακτικὰ πάθη τοῖς ἀναγιγνώσκουσιν ἐνεργάσασθαι λιχνευόμενος. See further Zanker 1981: 311; Walker 1993: 357–359; Webb 2009: 19f.

31 Webb 2009: 97.

32 Webb 2009: 93, my emphasis. In an important departure from modern views of a highly subjective reader response, ancient critics assumed that most readers would respond to a text in a uniform way. See Webb 1993: 112f. and 2009: 24 and 121–124.

account, there is still a direct sensory link between Plutarch’s readers and Plutarch’s Persians through Plutarch himself.

Quintilian models this phenomenon by describing his own reaction to Cicero’s *Against Verres*. Upon reading Cicero’s description of an unkempt Verres carousing on the beach (*Verr.* 5.86), Quintilian asks (*Inst.* 8.3.65; trans. Russell):

non solum ipsos intueri uideatur et locum et habitum, sed quaedam etiam ex iis quae dicta non sunt sibi ipse adstruat? ego certe mihi cernere uideor et uultum et oculos et deformes utriusque blanditias et eorum qui aderant tacitam auersationem ac timidam uerecundiam.

Could anyone be so unimaginative as not to feel that he is seeing the persons and the place and the dress, and to add some unspoken details for himself into the bargain? I certainly imagine that I can see the face, the eyes, the disgusting endearments of the pair, and the silent loathing and abashed fear of the bystanders.

Just as Thucydides’ Athenian spectators situate readers within the emotional turmoil of the battle, Quintilian’s mortified imaginary bystanders share in his revulsion and contempt, creating an affective connection that places Quintilian right in the middle of the scene. Cicero imagines the scene so brilliantly that the reader seems to see (*intueri uideatur*) not only the details Cicero explicitly provides but even certain details he omits (*quae dicta non sunt*). It is as though the reader were personally standing in front of Verres.³³ In a subsequent discussion of a room damaged during a drunken party, Quintilian claims that anyone who had actually entered the room would have seen no more than what Cicero’s readers see when reading his description (*Inst.* 8.3.67).³⁴ Quintilian’s elision of the reader’s imagined experience and the eyewitness’ actual one suggests that ancient critics thought *enargeia* provided not a detached bird’s eye view of a scene but an embodied experience, in which readers come into direct “contact with the experiences of another person”.³⁵ This

33 See further Webb 2009: 107–109 and Huitink 2019: 172–174.

34 See Webb 2009: 91–93.

35 Webb 2016: 213.

embodiment creates, in Webb’s words, both “empathy and insight” as the reader aligns with internal spectators and participants.³⁶

The sensory and affective connection that *enargeia* creates between Plutarch’s readers and Persian spectators in the *Artaxerxes* presents a paradox between cultural condemnation and aesthetic appeal. Readers face a conflict between their strong urge to pull away and gain distance from potential contaminants (moral and physical), and the need for sustained connection with the Persians within the narrative to experience and understand barbarian cruelty. If readers feel only repulsion without fascination, they avoid assimilation with the Persian spectators and maintain their sense of distance and cultural superiority, but they also cannot become immersed in the narrative. In fact, the way in which Plutarch presents the scene makes such a response of pure rejection impossible: even reading the passage entails alignment with the Persians who focalize the scene.

Ancient conceptions of *enargeia* indicate that Plutarch’s readers are not just watching, from a detached perspective, the Persians watch Mithridates; they are actually sharing in the spectacle as present-day witnesses or participants. The Greek or Roman reader’s initial response of rejection and detachment is ironically only possible through their sensory and affective link with the Persians within the narrative. All the sensory details that might elicit feelings of disgust and cultural superiority – the insects feasting on Mithridates’ organs, his stinking excrement and rotten entrails – in turn depend on the reader’s close association and even identification with the internal Persian spectator. In other words, the reader’s multisensory, embodied experience of Mithridates’ death, achieved through an alignment with Persian spectators, not only enables but in fact *requires* sustained proximity to and assimilation with the very group the scene is condemning.

This assimilation, accomplished through *enargeia*, turns the reader’s initial experience of rejection into an opportunity for fertile inquiry and self-exploration. The educational potential of disgust lies in the feeling’s properties of boundary creation and boundary transgression. Constructed boundaries between Greek, Roman, and Persian evaporate as readers recognize their own complicity in the enjoyment of Mithridates’ death. Like the Persian executioners who must lift up the boats to explore Mithridates’ corpse, Plutarch’s readers must lean into their fascination with the scaphism scene to explore vice.

³⁶ Ibid.

The Moral Lesson of Scaphism

Plutarch's stated aim in the *Lives* is to cultivate personal growth and the development of virtue through the examples of famous men, which act "like a mirror" for the benefit of Plutarch and his readers (*Tim.* 1.1). These examples include both positive and negative models. Just as medical professionals study disease to learn about health or musicians study discord to learn about harmony, Plutarch's readers can learn about virtue through vice (*Demetr.* 1.3).³⁷ In a rhetorical technique reminiscent of disgust's need to "get its hands dirty," negative examples in the *Lives* act like a mirror, too, reflecting readers' susceptibility to vice by "sensitizing" them to the deleterious effects of unrestrained passion.³⁸ In the *Artaxerxes*, Plutarch offers readers a moment of reflection as they connect with the Persian other on a sensory and affective level. Plutarch's ideal readers approach Mithridates' execution from a position not of distance and superiority, but of curiosity and self-recognition.

The paradoxical attraction of scaphism suggests not only the psychic disorder of Plutarch's Persians but also a potential conflict within the reader's own soul. Like Plato, Plutarch divides the soul into a rational and irrational part (*De virt. mor.* 441d-442a).³⁹ Virtue is a product of the well-ordered soul; reason controls and balances irrational desires. Vice, on the other hand, arises from a fundamental psychic conflict between various desires, as reason fails to hold them in check. Plato's discussion of psychic conflict in the *Republic* offers a model for Plutarch's own use of an executed criminal to instruct readers in moral virtue. During an exchange about the tripartite soul, Socrates cites the well-known story of Leontius to demonstrate the perils of a soul unrestrained by reason (439e-440a). Socrates' anecdote closely parallels the conflict between fascination and disgust in Plutarch's account of Mithridates' death but deals much more explicitly with the emotions at play. Leontius is torn between an appetitive desire to look at recently executed corpses and his spirited disgust (*δυσχεραῖνοι*) at bodies that, as criminals, should not deserve his attention.⁴⁰ While Leontius' irrational attraction to the corpses signals his inability to control base appetites, his disgust, first at the bodies and then at his own incontinence, is an "embodied moral response" that reflects a rational recognition of the inappropriate nature of his desire.⁴¹ The spirited part of

37 See further Stadter 2003 and Duff 2004. Plutarch makes a similar argument on the importance of listening to morally suspect passages of poetry and rhetoric; see, e.g., *Quomodo adol.* 32e and *De rec. rat. aud.* 38b-c.

38 Stadter 2003: 91.

39 On Plutarch and the Platonic soul, see Duff 1999: 72-76 and Opsomer 2012.

40 See Liebert 2013. Cf. Reeve 1988: 129 and Lorenz 2008: 260. The paradox of Leontius' desire, in that he yearns to gaze upon that which repulses him, recalls the tragic paradox; see Ferrari 2007: 181-182.

41 Liebert 2013: 186.

the soul is still irrational, but it could have aided the rational part of the soul by curbing the soul's most base desires through the elicitation of anger and disgust.

Following Plato's view that the irrational part of the soul can at times support the rational (*De virt. mor.* 442a), Plutarch argues that the passions are essential for attaining and practicing virtue (443d; 444b).⁴² Reason controls inappropriate physical desires for sex or food through emotions like fear and disgust. Lust for a sister or daughter “cowers with fear as reason takes hold” (ἔπτηξε τὸ ἐπιθυμοῦν ἀψαμένου τοῦ λόγου, 442e). After realizing a recently devoured meal was polluted, the mind's “distress and regret” quickly elicits a visceral response, as the body “shares in the revulsion” and immediately vomits (συνδιατρεπόμενον, 442f).⁴³ Within Plutarch's conception of moral virtue, then, disgust is an affective response to an irrational desire for pleasure. Like any other passion, disgust can be either beneficial or harmful depending on its habituation to reason. In the case of Leontius, reason was unable to control disgust, leading to agonizing psychic conflict. In this case from Plutarch, on the other hand, disgust aids reason by drawing boundaries between clean and unclean, virtuous and vicious.

The discriminatory and boundary-defining qualities of disgust make the emotion particularly useful in reason's efforts to control improper desires, but these efforts paradoxically require connection and sensory engagement. Without experiencing the taste or smell of rotten food, the mind cannot recognize pollution. Plutarch uses this need for connection to educate his readers in moral virtue, making rhetorical arguments based on the reader's sensory experience of disgust. Plutarch's rhetoric works by playing with the pleasure of disgusting experience, and the reader's own involvement in this experience. In his treatise *On the Eating of Flesh*, for instance, Plutarch affectively engages the reader in a noisome experience of meat consumption to argue that eating animals is unnatural and unethical.⁴⁴ Plutarch transforms an activity normally associated with pleasure into a stomach-churning massacre, asking how the first person to eat a dead animal could have endured the sight of slit throats, the stench of raw meat, or the taste of mutilated flesh (*De esu carniū* 993b). As Daniel King has recently argued, Plutarch utilizes the instructive power of sensory experience and disgust in his arguments on vegetarianism to “resensitize” readers to the pain and suffering of the animal other.⁴⁵ Contemporary society has become dangerously

42 On reason and the passions in Plutarch's *Lives*, see Duff 1999: 78–98.

43 The act of vomiting is both a physical and a moral response. Retching follows after men “perceive and learn” (αἰσθωνται καὶ μάθωσι, 442f) that what they have just consumed is unclean (μὴ καθαροί) or taboo (μηδὲ νόμιμοι).

44 On animals and vegetarianism in Plutarch, see Tsekourakis 1987; Newmyer 2006; Beer 2008; Steiner 2010.

45 King 2018: 217–231. Cf. Boddice 2019: 150f.

desensitized to the trauma involved in the production of meat. By “fetishiz[ing] the animal body for the consuming pleasure of the reader” while simultaneously accosting the audience with horrific accounts of animal slaughter (997a), Plutarch forces his readers to confront their own role in the violent consumption of animals, shocking them into an acceptance of the moral and physical necessity of vegetarianism.⁴⁶

The pleasure of the reader’s experience in *De esu* and in the scaphism scene moves in opposite directions: in *De esu*, the delicious becomes disgusting; in the *Artaxerxes*, the disgusting becomes fascinating. But in both instances, a disgusting sensory experience is presented for the reader’s pleasure, implicating readers in the same activities the text condemns. Plutarch’s audience confronts, in the first case, the humanity of the “ultimate other” and, in the second case, the reader’s own inner barbarian.⁴⁷ In both instances, too, the reader’s recognition of their complicity is achieved through sensitization or resensitization to the experiences of the other – *feeling* rather than detaching.

The close engagement entailed in the reader’s experience of scaphism precludes the sort of comfortable distance other scholars have used to characterize the reader’s relationship to Plutarch’s *Artaxerxes*. Barbarian cruelty in the biographies of Plutarch’s Greek and Roman heroes is often used as a point of contrast, to highlight a hero’s positive traits.⁴⁸ As we have seen, stereotypes of barbarian cruelty also characterize Artaxerxes and his Persian court, but in this case, there is no Greek or Roman hero to garner the reader’s sympathy. This lends itself to interpretations of the *Life* as a spectacle of vice, with no redeeming figures within the *Life* with whom the reader can align. However, the same scenes of violence that serve to highlight Persian vice in the *Artaxerxes* also highlight the reader’s own potential involvement. The more readers lean into the scene to investigate Persian brutality, the closer they come to the Persians within the narrative. The barbarian other, in this case, enables moral growth in the reader not through contrast, but through assimilation. The reader must *feel* the text to appreciate Plutarch’s argument, aligning, however briefly, with the internal Persian spectators. Rather than maintain a false sense of superiority in the face of vice, Plutarch’s ideal readers will recognize themselves in the Persian spectators of Mithridates’ death, taking the scene as an opportunity to examine their own souls.

46 King 2018: 230. See further Beer 2008: 103f.

47 Beer 2018: 231.

48 See Schmidt 1999: 328f. For examples of barbarians that reflect on a hero’s vice, see Stadter 2015.

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