



Reading Plutarch: Language and Style

The purpose of trying to understand an author's style is not just to be able to identify an instance of a hendiadys or polysyndeton. In isolation, the observation of a rhetorical device is of little use. It is crucial to consider a technique in the context of the passage it appears and, when discussing it, to focus on how the style of the ancient Greek affects the meaning of the text.

The use of rhetorical flourishes was not only to make a text more artistic but also to complement it, reinforcing a point, contrasting it and so on. It is not enough to say, for instance, that a word in the accusative case is promoted to the start of a sentence or clause for emphasis. The word and its meaning should be considered, and its placement be weighed up in relation to what Plutarch is trying to say in that sentence or even in the relevant surrounding text. Most likely its appearance at the start of the sentence, the spot usually reserved for the subject in the nominative case, will be to contrast it with a previous idea or to add a further example to a larger point being made, or there will be an element of the unexpected in it, hence it is brought to the attention of the reader earlier than usual.

In each case the student who looks to explain what a stylistic device achieves will gain a far richer understanding of both text and author, which in turn serves to make the text more meaningful and memorable, and the learning of it significantly more manageable.

Below is the Greek text and a translation of Section 9 of Plutarch's *Life of Alcibiades*, a section included in the English selection and immediately preceding the first section of the Greek selection.



For context, the overview of some of the themes and of some features of style in Plutarch's *Life* on pgs. 190-193 in the OCR Anthology for Classical Greek 2021-2023 should be read first. Following the text, words and phrases are picked out which are typical of Plutarch's writing style and his approach. This is in no way exhaustive or in-depth but this sample should provide at least a flavour of what to look for throughout the *Life of Alcibiades*.

Section 9

ὄντος δὲ κυνὸς αὐτῷ θαυμαστοῦ τὸ μέγεθος καὶ τὸ εἶδος, ὃν ἑβδομήκοντα μνῶν ἔωνημένος ἐτύγχανεν, ἀπέκοψε τὴν οὐρὰν πάγκαλον οὖσαν. ἐπιτιμώντων δὲ τῶν συνήθων καὶ λεγόντων ὅτι πάντες ἐπὶ τῷ κυνὶ δάκνονται καὶ λοιδοροῦσιν αὐτόν, ἐπιγελάσας, 'γίνεται τοίνυν,' εἶπεν, 'ὃ βούλομαι: βούλομαι γὰρ Ἀθηναίους τοῦτο λαλεῖν, ἵνα μὴ τι χεῖρον περὶ ἐμοῦ λέγωσι.'

Having a dog marvellous in size and beauty, which he had purchased for seventy minas, he had its tail cut off, though it was a very beautiful tail. His friends criticized him for this, and said that everybody was distressed about the dog and were abusive of him, but Alcibiades, bursting out laughing, said: 'Then what I want is happening; for I want the Athenians to chat about this, so that they may not say anything worse about me.'

ὄντος δὲ κυνὸς αὐτῷ: the subject of the main clause is Alcibiades (unexpressed) but note how the dog is introduced first, since the anecdote focuses on the treatment of it.

θαυμαστοῦ: there is an element of awe and wonder in most things connected with Alcibiades.



τὸ μέγεθος καὶ τὸ εἶδος: the use of the couplet creates a balanced description of why this dog was of particular merit, making Alcibiades' behaviour seem more scandalous.

ἑβδομήκοντα μνῶν: clearly a significant sum, deserving mention by Plutarch. Alcibiades' extravagance is a trait often referred to throughout the *Life* (it is included in a list of his traits in 16.1).

[We gain an idea of the value of this amount of money from Demosthenes (27.5-6), where 70 minas was the sum of an interest-free loan given by Demosthenes' father to a friend for ten years, to ensure he looked after Demosthenes' finances until he reached 18. Additionally Demosthenes' mother had brought a dowry of 50 minas with her, and as Demosthenes' father neared death he gave his wife and a dowry of 80 minas to his nephew Aphobus, who became a guardian of Demosthenes. When he came of age, Demosthenes says his house, 14 slaves and 30 minas in cash were worth a total of 70 minas.]

ἀπέκοψε τὴν οὐρὰν πάγκαλον οὔσαν: Alcibiades does not shy away from dramatic and provocative action, especially when it will be seen or talked about by the Athenians.

Plutarch's addition of 'though it was a beautiful tail' represents his own opinion, highlighting the unexpectedness of Alcibiades' behaviour. ἀπέκοψε is one of only two main verbs in this section.

ἐπιτιμώντων δὲ τῶν συνήθων καὶ λεγόντων: instances of the genitive absolute are extremely common throughout the *Life*, especially since they allow Alcibiades to remain the subject – and focus – of most sentences. Here there are two balancing participles which detail how his companions react to his behaviour.

ὅτι πάντες ἐπὶ τῷ κνὶ δάκνονται καὶ λοιδοροῦσιν αὐτόν: the friends report that 'everyone' is upset by this behaviour; this hyperbole adds to the theatricality of this episode while reflecting how his friends reported this gossip to him. As someone wanting to have an impact



on the life of everyone – as his words below show - Alcibiades welcomes this news. The people's views are reported through a couplet of verbs which highlight the strength of feeling provoked – δάκνω means 'I bite' (and can refer to the bite of a dog). The chiasmic arrangement brings the two verbs close together while their feelings start with the dog but end with targeting Alcibiades.

ἐπιγέλασας: Alcibiades rarely seems to take things too seriously and reacts here by brushing off his friends' concerns and turning it round to work out positively for him.

‘γίνεται τοίνυν,’ εἶπεν: Alcibiades' reply is supplied in direct speech, which contrasts with the indirect speech reporting his friends' words. This is a typical method of giving Alcibiades prominence in anecdotes and incidents. εἶπεν is the only other main verb in this section, with Alcibiades remaining as the (unexpressed) subject.

ὁ βούλομαι: βούλομαι γὰρ Ἀθηναίους τοῦτο λαλεῖν: the placement of the verb βούλομαι and its repetition serve to highlight that Alcibiades is a man who knows what he wants – to be on everyone's lips - and how to get his way.

ἵνα μή τι χεῖρον περὶ ἐμοῦ λέγωσι: the conclusion of the anecdote sums up Alcibiades neatly. He makes light of criticism of him, turning the tables so that he appears to be masterminding the incident, while his less appealing character traits are hinted at, even by himself. The repetition of verbs of speaking, both with 'the Athenians' as their subject, highlights how Alcibiades is a man whose life is much discussed. As a clever and shrewd operator, Alcibiades is always looking to make political capital out of this.