Quenching Greedy Souls in Metal Lakes. A Metallurgic Image in Thespesius's Vision of the Afterlife (Plutarch, *De sera num.* 30, 567c-d)

Templando almas codiciosas en lagos de metal. Una imagen metalúrgica en la visión del más allá de Tespesio (Plutarco, *De sera num.* 30, 567c-d)

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Abstract

Plutarch's theological dialogue *De sera numinis vindicta* ends with an eschatological myth narrating the afterlife vision of Thespesius (22-33, 563b-568a), centred on the souls' "purification" from their earthly vices – obtained by means of punishments – and on the process of their reincarnation. This myth includes symbolic images of metallurgic interest. The most elaborate of these corresponds to the description of the chastisement of the "insatiable" and "greedy" souls, which are cyclically immersed into lakes of gold, lead, and iron, enduring painful transformations in each lake (30, 567c-d). This article focuses on the analysis of the implications and literary genesis of this scene, in the frame of the rest of the myth and of the dialogic part of *De sera num.*, of Plutarch's ethical and scientific ideas, of his culture, and of the tendencies of his metaphorical and analogical prose (as evidenced by his other works). It begins with an introduction to Plutarch's religious thought and use of Platonic myths, defending the assumption that these should be treated as

Riassunto

El diálogo teológico de Plutarco *De sera numinis vindicta* termina con un mito escatológico que narra la visión del más allá de Tespesio (22-33, 563b-568a), centrada en la "purificación" de las almas de sus vicios terrenales – obtenido mediante castigos – y en el proceso de su reencarnación. Este mito incluye imágenes simbólicas de interés metalúrgico. La más elaborada de ellas corresponde a la descripción del castigo de las almas "insaciables" y "codiciosas", que se sumergen cíclicamente en lagos de oro, plomo y hierro, sufriendo dolorosas transformaciones en cada lago (30, 567c-d). Este artículo se centra en el análisis de las implicaciones y génesis literaria de esta escena, en el marco del resto del mito y de la parte dialógica de *De sera num.*, de las ideas éticas y científicas de Plutarco, de su cultura y de las tendencias de su prosa metafórica y analógica. Comienza con una introducción al pensamiento religioso de Plutarco y al uso de los mitos platónicos, defendiendo la suposición de que estos deben ser tratados como cuentos "enigmáticos" no literales y, por lo tanto, inter-

non-literal "enigmatic" tales and thus interpreted symbolically. A section is then dedicated to the narrative frame of Thespesius's vision – the story of the moral conversion of an unscrupulously hedonist and greedy man – and to Plutarch's symbolic presentation of the stains of vice (26, 565b-d), each associated with a colour, focusing on the stain of "miserliness and greed". After an overview of the other punishments witnessed by Thespesius, mainly to be interpreted as forms of contrapasso and exhibitions of the souls' hidden, wicked selves, the analysis of Plutarch's treatment of greed is completed with an extensive discussion of the scene of the metallic lakes. Previous scholarly treatments of the scene are also discussed, with a focus on those which connected it with alchemy. Considering a recently proposed comparison between Plutarch's scene and some of the images used by the alchemist Zosimus in his allegorical dreams (*MA* X, XI, XII Mertens), the hypothesis of their affinity is explored with mainly negative results. However, a further hypothesis is suggested without full endorsement: namely, that the symbols used by Plutarch, like those used by Zosimus, were influenced by the aesthetics of Egyptian and/or Jewish religion in the syncretising environment of 1st-cent. CE Alexandria.

pretados simbólicamente. Luego se dedica una sección al marco narrativo de la visión de Tespesio – la historia de la conversión moral de un hombre hedonista y codicioso sin escrúpulos – y a la presentación simbólica de Plutarco de las manchas del vicio (26, 565b-d), cada una asociada a un color, centrándose en la mancha de "la avaricia y la codicia". Después de una descripción general de los otros castigos presenciados por Tespesio, principalmente interpretables como formas de contrapaso y exhibiciones del yo oculto y malvado de las almas, el análisis del tratamiento de Plutarco de la codicia se completa con una discusión extensa de la escena de los lagos metálicos. También se discuten los tratamientos académicos previos de la escena, con un enfoque en aquellos que la conectaron con la alquimia. A partir de una comparación propuesta recientemente entre la escena de Plutarco y algunas de las imágenes utilizadas por el alquimista Zósimo en sus sueños alegóricos (*MA* X, XI, XII Mertens), se explora la hipótesis de su afinidad con resultados mayoritariamente negativos. Sin embargo, se sugiere otra hipótesis sin respaldo total: a saber, que los símbolos utilizados por Plutarco, como los utilizados por Zósimo, fueron influenciados por la estética de la religión egipcia y/o judía en el entorno sincretizante de la Alejandría del I siglo d.C.

1. The Delphic Priest and His Philosophical Myth

1.1. Pythian Propaganda and Mythic Symbolism

The whole literary production of Plutarch of Chaeronea (1st-2nd cent. CE) – author of the *Vitae parallelae* and of the variegated body of philosophical works passed down to us under the title *Ēthiká* or *Moralia* ("Ethical Works") – is scattered throughout with religious themes. Much material of interest to the historian of religions or theology may not only be found in those of his *Moralia* that have been dubbed (somewhat reductively) as "religious writings proper"[1] – a category which broadly corresponds to what Konrat Ziegler influentially defined as "*theologischen Schriften*" in 1951[2] –, but also in his other philosophical and historical works: both in the form of ethnographic or antiquarian reports on religious practices and myths,[3] and embedded as assumptions, fundamental concepts, and motivations in many of his philosophical enquiries or discussions.[4] The theological and "rationally" pious (*i.e.*, simultaneously anti-mechanistic and anti-superstitious)[5] approach characterizing his "Middle" Pla-

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1. Hirsch-Luipold, 2014, p. 163, who lists *De E apud Delphos*, *De Pythiae oraculis*, *De defectu oraculorum*, *De sera numinis vindicta*, *De genio Socratis*, *De Iside et Osiride*, and *De superstitione*.

2. Ziegler, 1951, sec. III,7, coll. 825-851.

3. See Hirsch-Luipold, 2021, pp. 16-17.

4. Cf. Hirsch-Luipold & Roig Lanzillotta, 2021, "Introduction", p. 1, who label Plutarch's intellectual endeavour as a "religious philosophy or philosophical religion".

5. In *De facie*, the idea of a teleological arrangement of the cosmos is defended against the reductive Stoic and Aristotelian physics (see, *e.g.*, 13, 927a), but Plutarch's model of causality is "double", as it allows for the co-existence of higher, teleological motives subject to divine rationality with natural, contingent causes (a development of Plato, *Tim.* 46d-48a): see especially Plutarch, *Per.* 6,4-5 and *De def. or.* 48, 436d-e, with Meeusen, 2021. Plutarch's sharpest attacks on "superstition" (δεισιδαιμονία) are found in his treatise *De superstitione*: on the features of δεισιδαιμονία, as presented in this work, see most recently Kuin, 2021.

tonism[6] – which he may have well inherited from his master M. Annius Ammonius[7] – can hardly surprise us, if we consider that he spent the last part of his life (probably multiple decades) as a priest of the Delphic oracle.[8]

Whether Plutarch's priestly office significantly influenced his late philosophical activity or not (or rather, whether the features and assumptions of the two were closely correlated or not) can be the object of debate, but there are many clues suggesting a positive answer,[9] some of which – and not the least important – are included in *De sera numinis vindicta* ("On the Slowness of the Divinity to Punish"), the theological dialogue ending in the 'Platonic' myth which is the object of the present article.[10] The opening of the dialogue, set in Delphi (see *De sera num.* 12, 556f and 17, 560c), unambiguously frames the discussion on the workings and reasons of the divine punishments as a theodicy, which is prompted by the "strange" and "false" arguments made by a certain Epicurus – representing the Epicurean school – against "providence" (πρόνοια) before leaving the scene; his attack, assimilated to a "spear" (1, 548b-c), upsets the characters Patrocleas, Timon, and Olympichos, who, unsure on how to deflect it, seek argumentative support in the person of Plutarch, who will speak for the great part of the dialogue with the tone of a theological authority, and then follow his reasoning with an eschatological myth, centred on the description of the souls' "purification" from their earthly faults by means of afterlife punishments, as well as on the process of their reincarnation (22-33, 563b-568a). In the first, argumentative part of the work, religious beliefs such as that of a punishing god and of his goodness and care for human souls are manifestly embedded as axioms in what is characterized as a dialectical investigation: as written by Herwig Görgemanns, the "'*Glaube' an eine gerechte Vorsehung liegt also dem Logos axiomatisch zugrunde*", without being proven, and this definitely informs the *lógos*'s outcomes.[11]

These beliefs, in addition to shaping the philosophical profile of the dialogue, are also positively promoted by its means, so that we seem to have some reason to

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6. On this label, see Boys-Stones, 2018, pp. 1-23 (with discussion of the earlier bibliography).

7. On this Platonist philosopher, who clearly had "a strong interest in theology and religion, including divination", see Opsomer, 2009 (my quotation is from p. 175). See also below, n. 187.

8. See Ziegler, 1951, sec. I,6, coll. 659-662 and Roskam 2021, p. 14, with recent bibliography.

9. See Hirsch-Luipold, 2021, pp. 13-15.

10. On the clues suggesting that the dialogue was composed very late in Plutarch's life, perhaps later than his other dialogues containing eschatological myths (*De genio Socr.* and *Fac.*), and most probably at an advanced stage of his priestly office, see especially Vernière in Klaerr & Vernière, 1974, pp. 93-96; see also De Lacy & Einarson, 1959, p. 173, n. a, and Görgemanns, 2009 (2003), pp. 327-328.

11. Görgemanns, 2009 (2003), p. 326. Such analysis in terms of logical assumptions and premises is further developed in Opsomer, 2016, pp. 37-41.

consider it a work of propaganda. If it is such, the religion it promotes is undoubt-edly Delphic. This ideological affiliation is not only suggested by the setting of the dialogue. Françoise Frazier has rightfully insisted on the Delphic character of the work by illustrating its "*arrière-plan religieux et delphique*",[12] suggesting that it could be put side by side with *De E apud Delphos*, *De defectu oraculorum*, and *De Pythiae oraculis* under Plutarch's own label "Pythian discourses" (Πυθικοὶ λόγοι, in *De E* 1, 384e).[13] Although the importance of the "Apollonian" proof of the immortality of the soul presented by Plutarch in *De sera num.* 17 (560c-d) is arguably over-stressed in Frazier's analysis, the ending myth does include a prominent oracu-larly-themed scene which seems to be only functional to promote the sanctuary's religion against its "lower" alternatives, taking advantage of the opportunity given by the otherworldly setting of the myth to make a metaphysical statement (28-29, 566b-d).[14] This partisan "*propagande delphique*",[15] in any case, cannot be abstracted from a coherent philosophical agenda, most clearly stated in Ammonius's symbolic interpretation of the Apollonian cult in *De E* 20-21 (in which ontological plenitude is contrasted with the multiplicity of earthly life, senses, and opinion, 393c-394c), and it is uncontroversial to claim that Plutarch's "Delphic theology"[16] develops ten-dencies that were already present in Plato's thought.[17]

The Platonic inspiration is also evident in the formal composition of *De sera num.* As has been unanimously recognized for a long time, the myth of Thespesius

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12. Frazier, 2010a, p. 73; her arguments are at pp. 83-87.

13. This expression is used by Plutarch as part of the book's inscription to Sarapio (one of the interlocutors in *De Pyth. or.*) and referred to the bundle of books among which he sent to him *De E apud Delphos*. The inscription of *De sera num.*, instead, is to (Avidius) Quietus.

14. See especially Méautis, 1935a; Vernière, 1977, pp. 218-219, 243-247; Taufer, 2010, n. to 566b-c. Cf. the oracular insertions in the myth of *De facie* (26, 942a and 30, 944c): note that oracles and divination are never thematized in the argumentative part of this work.

15. Vernière, 1977, pp. 218-219.

16. Brenk, 1977, p. 138.

17. Vernière, 1977, pp. 243-247 stresses the coherency with Plato's earlier promotion of the cult of Apollo and Helios as the optimal state cult in *Leges* V, 738b-d; VI, 754c; VIII, 828a. The preference for Apollo, as noted by Alesse, 2001, pp. 49-50 (with n. 23), was after all a "fundamental element" of the Socratic tradition. *Contra* Roskam 2021, pp. 162-166, who downplays the clear centrality of Apollo in Plutarch's hermeneutics and religious thinking, apparently assuming that the only place in Plutarch's *corpus* where Delphic religion is promoted is Ammonius's speech in *De E* ("it would be rash to conclude on the basis of this speech that Apollo has, for Plutarch, taken the place of Zeus", p. 164). I do not mean to claim that "Apollo, rather than Zeus, occupies the highest position in Plutarch's pantheon" (*ibidem*) – such ranking would probably be of no interest to Plutarch –, but only that Plutarch engaged in the promotion of the Apollonian cult specifically (in its Platonically elaborated form), coherently with his own activity as a Delphic priest.

is modelled on the myth of Er at the end of Plato's *Respublica* (X, 614b-621b): not only do the two share the eschatological themes of afterlife punishments and reincarnations, as well as the visions' framing in a state of temporary "death" (note that Er came back to life on the tenth day, see 614b), but also a multitude of minor details, all already collected by Matteo Taufer.[18] It is notable that the "earlier" name of the protagonist himself, *i.e.* Aridaeus, renamed during his afterlife experience as Thespesius (*i.e.* "divinely inspired", *De sera num.* 24, 564c),[19] might itself be an allusion to the name of Ardiaeus, a vicious tyrant whose chastisement was presented emblematically in Plato's myth (*Resp.* X, 615c-616a).[20] Plutarch also took clear inspirations from the mythic sections of Plato's *Phaedo* (108b-115a) and of the *Gorgias* (522e-527a) – some of which I will mention below –, and many connections can be found with other Platonic dialogues;[21] in all these cases of imitation, he always made sure to add some original details and developments.[22] Another possible model, sometimes credited with the innovation of an afterworld placed in the sky – like the one in Plutarch's myth –, rather than in the underworld is the eschatological myth of Cleonymus told by Aristotle's disciple Clearchus of Soli,[23] and it has been suggested that this author's city of origin might have itself inspired Plutarch's attribution of his protagonist to Soli.[24] Considering all these models, we should be aware that behind every symbol in the myth of Thespesius might always hide an imitation of an earlier image, and thus a second-hand use by Plutarch of its earlier meanings, connotations, or allusions.

Remarkably, this consideration does not seem to apply to the imagery which I examine in this article. In correspondence with the theme of the present volume, I have searched the myth of Thespesius for all the images of a possible "metallurgic" interest and found no fewer than three: the "smoothing away" of moral stains in chapter 26 and the colour of the stain of greed (565b-d); the immersions of the

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18. See Taufer, 2010, pp. 22-34, based on Taufer, 1999.

19. On the name Thespesius and its etymology see Brenk, 1994, p. 11 with n. 21 and Taufer, 2010, n. to 563b, spec. p. 81, n. 9.

20. See Taufer, 2010, p. 27 and n. to 564c (or Taufer, 1999, pp. 309-310).

21. See Taufer, 2010, pp. 34-35; Frazier, 2019a, p. 211.

22. Plutarch's originality in *De sera num.* is stressed by, *e.g.*, Soury, 1942, p. 227; Görgemanns, 2009 (2003), pp. 325-327; Taufer, 2010, p. 56; Frazier, 2019a, p. 192; Bremmer, 2021, p. 288.

23. On this author and on his myth see Tsitsiridis, 2013, pp. 3-4 and his commentary to Fr. 8 (= Proclus, *in Rp.* II 113,19-115,7 Kroll), spec. pp. 71-72. The idea that Clearchus's celestial afterlife was his original innovation has been problematized by Culianu, 1983, pp. 40-43 and Pérez-Jiménez, 2001, pp. 202-203, 205, who both argued that it was already present in Plato.

24. It was Taufer, 1999, p. 318 n. 41 to call attention onto the 1901 suggestion by E. Rohde. See also Vernière, 1977, pp. 290-291; Santamaría Álvarez, 2007, p. 884; the preceding footnote.

greedy souls in metallic lakes in chapter 30 (567c-d); and the forceful reshaping of souls in chapter 32 to adapt them for their reincarnations (567e-568a). For none of these images is it possible to find any antecedent, neither in the Platonic models nor in Clearchus's; for what it seems, they were all produced by Plutarch's own imagination. Of the three, the previous interpreters have offered varying interpretations, all with different shortcomings and showing a general disregard for the evidence of textual parallels in Plutarch's *corpus* (privileging external connections, often with chronologically distant texts, or sometimes not giving any proof as a complement to personal intuition), which might be the main reason why an adequate agreement has not yet been reached on the matter. Given the limited space of this article, I will analyse only the image of the metallic lakes in chapter 30, after a cursory introduction to the stain of greed as presented in chapter 26: these two passages can form a unit as they concern the same moral fault (*i.e.* greed), whose symbolic treatment, both in its direct representation as a stain and in the representation of its chastisement, might be interpreted to be cohesive in theme and inspiration. Such unifying position underlies two 'alchemical' interpretations of the two images proposed independently by Jacques Boulogne in 1994 and Aurelio Pérez-Jiménez in 1996, which connect them in a process of metal purification and transmutation.[25] Since I intend to reject both proposals for the scene of the three lakes – in favour of a simpler explanation centred on the properties of metals and on ordinary artisanal treatments – they are the only interpretations I will discuss with regard to the stain of greed, reserving all the others for future treatment. In fact, I plan to provide a fully detailed account of the chromatic symbolism in the myth of Thespesius and of its earlier scholarly discussions in a follow-up article, to appear soon. For the moment, I will be exhaustive only about the metallurgic image in chapter 30, which has also been compared very recently, by Olivier Dufault, with some of the details of the 'alchemical' visions told by Zosimus of Panopolis in his three *Práxeis*.[26] I will show that the similarities, although present, are quite loose, but I will take inspiration from this parallelism to suggest – as a mere possibility – that the Greek use of metallurgic imagery in eschatological contexts (apparently not predating Plutarch's *De sera num.*) might have developed from the religious aesthetics of the Judaic and Egyptian traditions, perhaps in the syncretistic climate of Alexandria.

As is probably already clear, my approach to the interpretation of Plutarch's fictional myth is thoroughly anti-literalist. Despite the presence in the dialogue of

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25. Boulogne, 1994; Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, pp. 301 and 305-306.
26. Dufault, 2019, pp. 109-110.

a single indication, possibly tongue-in-cheek, that the *mūthos* should be taken as a necessary complement to the "demonstration" (ἀπόδειξις) hitherto conducted by means of *lógos* (22, 563b),[27] the correspondence between Plutarch's explicit hesitation to tell the myth as something possibly incompatible with "likelihood" (τὸ εἰκός, 18, 561b) and the formulas used by the narrators of the eschatological myths in *De genio Socr.* and *De facie* to frame them – interpreted by Pierluigi Donini as compositional devices to invite the reader to careful interpretation –[28] is arguably a sign that the myth of Thespesius should not be taken at face value.[29] This, therefore, should not be understood as a revelatory depiction of the afterlife teaching dogmatically about the sphere of the divine and its relationship to human beings,[30] but most probably as an "enigmatic" tale, *i.e.* as an oblique discourse "alluding" to some truthful discernments on the divine – and possibly on other subjects – rather than merely stating them,[31] coherently with the symbolic approach to the exegesis of mythology and religion exhibited by Plutarch in *De Is. et Os.* and *De E.*[32] In this approach, the interpretation of the myth in *De sera num.* can only be developed along two lines: on the one hand, all the possible connections between the scenes in the mythic tale and the argumentative part of the dialogue must be investigated in the search for unitary interpretations, to be surely preferred on the central themes;[33] on the other hand, a fine-grained literary analysis of the individual images in the myth cannot be prescinded.[34] In fact, a correct collocation of the mythic scenes into the macrotexts of their dialogues must necessar-

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27. This indication is taken seriously by Görgemanns, 2009 (2003), pp. 325-327, and given central relevance in his account of the myth.

28. On *De facie* 30, 945d, see Donini, 2011b, n. 439. On *De genio Socr.* 21, 589f, see Donini, 2017, p. 13 with n. 9 at p. 68 (in which he claims to agree with Deuse, 2010, pp. 169-197), and pp. 40-41.

29. See Deuse, 2010, pp. 169-173 and 197.

30. For such literal readings cf. Méautis, 1935a; Cumont, 1942, pp. 195-200; Soury, 1942, pp. 211-228 (but he considers the possibility of a symbolic interpretation, on a single detail, at p. 222; another opening to a non-literalist interpretation might be found at p. 159); especially Torraca, 1991, pp. 104-106; Helmig, 2005, p. 324.

31. Cf. Vernière, 1977, pp. 311-314; Dörrie, 1981, pp. 103-104; Frazier, 2019b, pp. 319-327.

32. On which see Hardie, 1992, pp. 4744-4745, 4746-4761, 4781-4783 (who however does not comment on Plutarch's fictional myths).

33. This approach was firstly advocated for by Donini, 1996 (1988) for the analysis of the myth in *De facie* (he coherently maintained it in Donini, 2011b), and was endorsed as a general method by Hirsch-Luipold, 2002, pp. 139, 142-143; 2014, pp. 171-175. It was applied to *De sera num.* by Frazier, 2019c (2010b), who reiterated it programmatically in Frazier, 2019b, pp. 325-326.

34. This is the main approach of, *e.g.*, Taufer, 2010, and is criticized for its partiality by Frazier, 2019b, pp. 324-326; her analyses of the myth in Frazier, 2019a and 2019c (2010b) are arguably guilty of the opposite excess. Both approaches are well-represented in Gagné, 2015, but I disagree with his conclusions centred on intertextuality.

ily be coupled with an appropriate understanding of their microtextual meanings and implications, such as cultural connotations and intertextual allusions, and it is the bottom-up analysis of these that may allow us to reach the best, and optimally comprehensive, interpretations. This is the approach on which I have focused in my analysis of the image in chapter 30 – whose connection with the argumentative part of the dialogue is quite faint – led by the assumption that an effort to understand the meaning of small details cannot be overruled by broader interpretations calibrated on larger details: when an image seems superfluous or unrelated to the central meanings of the myth, it might always carry secondary meanings or connotations, which should not be ignored.

A corollary of this anti-literalist stance is that not only does it forbid taking at face value the "religious" content of the myth, but its "philosophical" implications too: if we must not consider a dogmatic truth that souls are, *e.g.*, punished by being tortured in a pit,[35] we will surely not infer from the descriptions of their qualities and alterations that Plutarch genuinely regarded disembodied souls to be "concrete", which would probably be in contradiction with his Platonist assumptions.[36] Indeed, multiple scholars have pointed out how much Plutarch exaggerates the souls' corporeality in the myth of Thespesius,[37] especially in the presentation of their punishments, so materially grotesque as to easily suggest comparisons with those in Dante's *Comedia*.[38] This concreteness, probably, should never have been taken seriously, but

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35. As in *De sera num.* 30, 566e-567a, discussed below, sec. 3,1. Plutarch explains in *De aud. poet.* 2, 16e-f and 17b-c that the traditional depictions, in poetry, of the underworld as a frightening place are fictional (none of the poets have ever believed in them), and in 17d-f invites the reader to remember that even philosophers (including Socrates in Plato, *Phd.* 69d) are in extreme difficulty about these matters, which entails that poets certainly have no knowledge of them. On this "Sceptic pose", related to Plutarch's pious εὐλάβεια ("caution") on religious matter, see Hardie, 1992, p. 4754; see also p. 4775-4777 on Plutarch's disposition towards traditional accounts of the afterworld. Cf. also *Amatorius* 17, 762a; *De prim. frig.* 9, 948f, and the ending eschatology in *De lat. viv.* 6-7, 1129f-1130e, on which see Hilton, 2019; unconvincingly, he interprets it as a rhetorical move modelled on the Epicurean rationalization of traditional myth (see spec. pp. 134-138). Note that his article lacks references to important Plutarchan texts such as *De aud. poet.*

36. In *De an. procr.*, coherently with Plato's *Timaeus* (41d), Plutarch presents the individual souls to be composed out of the same constituents of the cosmic soul (26-27, 1205c-1026d). This is unambiguously immaterial, albeit eternally associated with the body of the world. On this subject, I mostly agree with Deuse, 2010, pp. 188-189 (but see below), and disagree with, *e.g.*, Alt, 2005, p. 38, who infers a materialist psychology from *De sera num.* 26, 565c.

37. See Latzarus, 1920, pp. 132-133; Soury, 1942, p. 223; Taufer, 2010, p. 17.

38. For comparisons with Dante – and his probable lack of knowledge of Plutarch's works – see Méautis, 1935b, pp. 58 and 69; Soury, 1942, p. 227; Ziegler, 1951, sec. III,7,g, col. 850; Torraca, 1991, pp. 109-112; Taufer 2010, pp. 17-18, n. 15.

Werner Deuse's claim that Plutarch "simply delights in graphically displaying punishment after death and thus permitting his imagination to present the doctrine (established by argument) of the chastisement and purification of immortal souls as a vivid tale"[39] appears to be somewhat reductive and dismissive. Rather, we should consider the souls' corporeality to be firstly coherent with, and subordinated to, Plutarch's choices of symbols, because once he had found a "decodable" image to insert in his myth (be it more or less "concrete"), he could not do otherwise than accept the necessary assumptions which made it intelligible to the reader. Of course, there might have also been aesthetic or rhetorical purposes influencing Plutarch's choices: scary as his chastisements are, it is not far-fetched to suppose he may have also intended them to trigger in his audience some emotional response[40]. Two further "compositional" preoccupations – possibly able to restrain the choice of some of Plutarch's imagery – were to make sure that the narration sufficiently paralleled and improved on its models, *i.e.,* centrally, Plato's eschatological myths, and the intention to visualize as mythic scenes the religious truths touched upon in the argumentative section of the dialogue which were deemed to be indemonstrable by simple reasoning.[41] This latter intention does not seem to concern the details of the punishments in chapters 30-31: these are indeed visualizations of the claim that souls are punished after death, and their variety a visualization of the specificity of the chastisements, but all their minute details, with respect to these "truths", do appear to be gratuitous.

Now, since none of the images in a cohesive myth such as Thespesius's can be interpreted in isolation from their contexts, it is necessary, before coming to the analysis of the scene of the three lakes, to have a clear idea of its narrative setting and of the relevant information which surrounds it. For this reason, it is important to first look at the beginning of the myth.

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39. Deuse, 2010, p. 188. Cf. Frazier, 2019a, p. 216: "*dans ces visions saisissantes,* […] *il n'y a pas qu'imagination poétique: l'image du mythe* manifeste *le rapport étroit qui unit attitude sur terre et rétribution céleste et donne à voir ce qui échappe à notre sensibilité terrestre*" (her emphasis).

40. See Boulet, 2010, pp. 61-64. For other comments on the "emotional" or "irrational" functions of the myth, cf. Vernière, 1977, pp. 304-305, 326; Taufer, 2010, pp. 14-18 (anticipated in Taufer, 1999, p. 316).

41. On Plutarch's εὐλάβεια on religious matters see above, n. 35. In elaborating these "truths" in mythic form he was of course inspired by Plato's approach to the philosophical myth as an εἰκώς ("likely" and "representative") exposition (see his citation of the master in *Glor. Ath.* 4, 348a-b). The link has been most recently discussed in De Simone, 2016, pp. 63-66.

1.2. THESPESIUS'S APPARENT DEATH AND THE COLOURED STAINS OF VICE

When Plutarch begins narrating his myth (*De sera num.* 22, 563b-e), he introduces its protagonist as a man from Soli and friend of Plutarch's own acquaintance Protogenes, who is implied to have reported the tale along with other "equally worthy friends".[42] This man, named Aridaeus (see 24, 564c), is presented as a degenerate who, spending his early life in excessive "licentiousness" (ἀκολασία), quickly lost most of his "property" (οὐσία), thereby turning into a "wicked" (πονηρός) person. In fact, his regret made him pursue his vanished "riches" (πλοῦτος) in such a way that he would not refrain from any "shameful" (αἰσχρός) action serving a "fruition" (ἀπόλαυσις) or a "gain" (κέρδος); this behaviour, in addition to procuring him a "not abundant property", brought him a much greater fame of "wickedness". The moral profile of this character, clearly a hedonist and unscrupulous lover of money, may be understood as a prefiguration of the souls' vicissitudes later described in the myth, most of which are somehow connected with his vices; most importantly, it might explain Plutarch's noticeable insistence in the myth on the harsh consequences of greed and unrestraint in pleasures, on whose depiction he focuses much more than on the penalties for, *e.g.*, violence and rage. The focus on the greed of Aridaeus may also be taken to represent the claim in chapter 19 that vices are sometimes inherited by people from their parents, generally in a latent form (561c-562a), because Aridaeus's attachment to money, as will be clear below, was clearly passed over to him from his father (30, 566f).[43] Comforted by this connection with the argumentative part of *De sera num.*, we may already assume that the myth should be taken as a symbolic tale on moral turpitude – mainly on that concerned with earthly pleasures and possessions –,[44] and

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42. On Plutarch's usual "corroboration" of the truthfulness of his myths, applied to his fictional informants, see Deuse, 2010, pp. 172-173.

43. See the reason why he poisoned his guests, below, sec. 3,1. On the hereditariness of this vice cf. *De cup. div.* 7, 526d.

44. Cf. Muñoz Gallarte, 2019, p. 188: "On the one hand, the Quaeronean [*sic*] sketches a framework that, if it cannot be considered historical, at least seems logical in the context of the tractate. On the other hand, the story is used to offer a practical example of Plutarch's ethical or moral rules of conduct". In the debate on whether the myth of Thespesius should be taken as a faithful report of a Near-Death Experience (NDE) or as a literary fiction, Muñoz Gallarte, like me, opts for the latter option: "[…] the [ancient] authors [of accounts of Near-Death Experiences] consider these stories as myths and not testimonies with evident moral purposes to the reader […]" (p. 192). To his bibliography add Hani 1975, who anticipated the more recent debate by interpreting both the myth of Thespesius and the myth of Timarchus (in *Gen. Socr.*) as reports of shamanic ecstasies, and Culianu 1980, who revised this position in the framework of the phenomenology of religion, rejecting the hypothesis of a historical dependency (spec. p. 171).

therefore expect its messages to go beyond a simple declaration of the existence of afterlife torments (more specifically, of the wicked whose chastisement has continued onto their descendants, as teased by Plutarch in 18, 561b); perhaps, it may also contain some insight on the nature of greed and of the other vices.

As Plutarch continues (22, 563d-e), Aridaeus, worried for the remainder of his life, received a response from the oracle of Amphilocus informing him that he "would do better" (and "feel better", πράξει βέλτιον) only after dying. This, "in a certain way", is what happened to him not long after the response: he fell from a height and "died" right away due to a blow to the neck, and when he "resurged" on the third day he changed completely.[45] He became the most "rightful" person his contemporary Cilicians had ever known with respect to contracts and engagements, but also the most "pious" towards the divinity, the most "painful" to enemies, and the most "constant" with friends. What caused this thorough transformation is the vision he received during his "death", which made him experience how souls are treated after their departure from the body. In this journey through the afterworld, he was guided by the soul of a kinsman, who, explaining to him the meaning and reasons behind most of the sights, concentrated his visit on the process of each soul's purification from the stains of earthly vice, carried out by means of painful punishments.

The idea that souls retain visible traces of their faults, which in their nakedness they cannot hide as was possible during their life (26, 565a-b), is clearly modelled on the myth in Plato's *Gorgias* and on Socrates's reflections on its content,[46] but Plutarch is original in presenting the souls' visible turpitude as a crucial part of their chastisement: in his myth, in fact, the wicked cannot avoid being observed in all their baseness by their parents and ancestors, both good and bad, and this entails that the former are made to see how unworthy their descendants proved to be of their name, and the latter watch their punishments while they are themselves being punished, with obvious effects of shame and remorse.[47] The distinction between latent, deliberately hidden and exposed vices, as will be clear below, is a prominent theme in Plutarch's

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45. Thespesius was not completely dead: his "thinking [part]" (τὸ φρονοῦν) had ejected from the body (23, 563e) while "the rest of the soul" (ἡ ἄλλη ψυχή) remained in it "like an anchor" (24, 564c). The context of this vision is similar to that of Timarchus's in *De genio Socr.* 21, 590a-b: on the correspondences see Taufer, 2010, pp. 19-21 and 42-48 (with discussion of the earlier literature).

46. See Plato, *Gorgias* 523d-e and 524c-525a. The connection was already made by Latzarus, 1920, pp. 130-131. Following De Lacy & Einarson, 1959, n. e to *De sera num.* 565b, cf. also Arrian, *Epict.* II 18,11. Vernière, in Klaerr & Vernière, 1974, n. 2 to 565b, also points to Plato, *Crat.* 403b; Taufer, 1999, p. 307, n. 11 also references Plato, *Resp.* IX, 577b.

47. See Taufer, 2010, n. to 565b.

gallery of punishments in chapters 30-31 (566e-567e), and was already anticipated by his own character in chapter 20, in the argumentative part of the dialogue (562b-d). This argumentative passage, in addition, already included a metaphorical reference to the "stain of badness" (κηλίς τῆς κακίας) and to its "erasing" (see ἐξαλεῖψαι), which may be interpreted to prefigure the second of Plutarch's innovations on the Platonic model, *i.e.* the presentation of the souls' chastisement in terms of a "smoothing away" (see ἐκλεανθέντων, but also ἐκτέτριπται, used for the vice of "incontinence") which can only end when the souls have reconquered their pristine "luminous and mono-chrome" condition (26, 565b-d).[48] Plutarch's distinctly optical visualization of the souls' wickedness and purity (introduced in 24, 565d) is closely related to his third, and most original, development of his model: the idea that the moral stains manifest their relationship with the vice that caused them by each providing a different colour to the souls' continuous beaming (26, 565b-d).[49] Of these colours he lists four, which are associated with the vices of "miserliness and greed" (ἀνελευθερία and πλεονεξία), of "cruelty and bitter viciousness" (ὠμότης and πικρία), of "some incontinence in pleasures" (ἀκρασία τις περὶ ἡδονάς), and of "ill-will […] with envy" (κακόνοια… μετὰ φθόνου). The list of stains, whose varying translations reflect the high degree of ambiguity in its terminology, has been the object of variegated scholarly discussions, only partly represented in the 2010 commentary to the myth written by Taufer.[50] In my interpretation – which, as I have anticipated, I will defend in a future article –,[51] the colours of the stains should be identified as the following: the "dusky and filthy" (ὄρφνιος and ῥυπαρός) of avariciousness as dark red or brown; the "bloodshot

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48. Wyttenbach, 1772, "*Animadversiones* […]", p. 112 pointed for comparison to Virgil, *Aen.* VI 735-751.

49. On the absolute originality of this image – "*per quanto ne sappiamo*" – see Taufer, 2010, p. 30, with n. 47 (or Taufer, 1999, p. 313, with n. 28). Frazier, 2019c (2010b), p. 357 interprets it as a development of Plato's "*éventail des vices*" in *Phd.* 81e-82a.

50. Taufer, 2010, pp. 151-161.

51. Where I will also tackle all the existing scholarly treatments of the list of stains, including Muñoz Gallarte, 2012. I thank both the anonymous reviewers of the present article for recommending me to cite this work, but the reader should be aware that Muñoz Gallarte – albeit providing a helpful concise bibliography on the ancient symbolic meanings of the colours red, blue, green, and brown (for which he thanks Delfim F. Leão) – does not acknowledge any of the previous works specifically addressing Plutarch's chromatic choices (see p. 240, n. 25). Furthermore, as I plan to show in the follow-up article, the parallelism he proposes between Plutarch's image of the coloured stains and the pictorial metaphor used in the apocryphal *Acts of John* (28,6-29,12) is unwarranted: since Plutarch never makes mention of paintings or painters in *Vind.* 20, 24 and 26, it is certainly a stretch to claim that "both texts similarly conceive of the soul like a canvas on which its owner paints colors derived either from virtues or from passions" (p. 241).

and incandescent" (αἱματωπὸς and διάπυρος) of frenzy as bright red; the *glaúkinon* (related to γλαυκός, "glaucous") of hedonism as light blue or gray; and the "rusty and suppurated" (ἰῶδες καὶ ὕπουλον) of vengeful spitefulness, assimilated with cuttlefish ink (ὥσπερ αἱ σηπίαι τὸ μέλαν), as dark verdigris.

My analysis of the list led me to the conclusion that the symbolism of the four colours cannot be decoded by reference to a single interpretative key: it is likely that there is no structure of meaning justifying their presentation in succession, and that each colour has been chosen – quite artfully – for its own peculiar connotations. We may finally begin, then, with Plutarch's description of the afterlife of greedy souls, starting with some considerations on their "dusky" stain.

2. The Stain of Miserliness and greed

The list in chapter 26 (565b-d), as we have seen, is opened by ἀνελευθερία ("miser-liness", the condition of not acting as would be appropriate to an ἐλεύθερος, *i.e.* a "free" citizen; the adjective's meaning overlaps with that of our "illiberality")[52] and πλεονεξία ("greed", the relentless desire to have πλέον, *i.e.* "more"). This vice is clearly related to people's misuse of money and inappropriate attachment to it – *i.e.* φιλοπλουτία, φιλοχρηματία or φιλαργυρία, the specific subject of Plutarch's *De cupiditate divitiarum* – both in the sense of economic greed and in the sense of stingi-ness, and may also encompass, perhaps, the unchecked strife for power, honours and fame – *i.e.* φιλοτιμία – which may in turn be correlated with a tendency to accumu-late and exhibit riches.[53] As I will show, it is likely that this second nuance participates in the symbolic outline of the chastisement for πλεονεξία in chapter 30 (567c-d), where the term is coupled with ἀπληστία ("insatiability").

Concerning the stain, while the adjective ῥυπαρός ("filthy"), as noted by Taufer, does not refer to a colour, but complements its description with a "negative trait",[54] the term ὄρφνι(ν)ος is unambiguously chromatic. It may be translated as "dusky" as it is a derivative of the noun ὄρφνη ("darkness", "night"),[55] but it does not simply refer to a low level of brightness like its cognates ὀρφναῖος, ὀρφνός and ὀρφνήεις ("dark"), but to a specific colour whose genesis is also accounted for in Plato's *Timaeus*: "and then red (ἐρυθρόν), mixed with black (μέλαν) and white, [becomes] purple (ἁλουργόν);

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52. See also below, n. 98.

53. Cf., *e.g.*, *De se ipsum laud.* 13, 544b-c. See also my comment on *Mar.* 34,6 below, sec. 3,2.

54. Taufer, 2010, n. to 565c.

55. The term ὄρφνη is used by Plutarch, with this meaning, in *De prim. frig.* 17, 953a and *De fort. Rom.* 12, 325e.

but [becomes] ὄρφνινον in the case more black, after these have been mixed and burned, becomes mixed in" (68b-c). It is clear that the colour should be identified with a particularly dark hue of red or brown (perhaps, originally, that of a dusky sky, namely in the horizontal strip above the horizon), which entails that renditions of the word that only convey its "dark" semantic core should be considered reductive and misleading.[56]

This point, already, can undermine the unitary "alchemical" interpretations offered by Boulogne and Pérez-Jiménez, as they both assume the adjective ὄρφνιος to allude, coherently with their reading of chapter 30 (567c-d), to the colour of lead, evoked as a base metal which the alchemist would want to transmute into a nobler. Boulogne presents the greedy souls as the ones "*auxquelles l' hypertrophie du désir pour les plaisirs les plus matériels a donné la couleur du plomb*",[57] but this metal, which we would rather claim, intuitively, have a gray or black colour without any shade of red,[58] is specifically described by an almost-contemporary of Plutarch, namely Galen, as φαιός ("gray"),[59] and in none of the extant Greek texts as ὄρφνι(ν)ος. According to Boulogne, these altered souls need a *changement d'aspect* (see τὰ εἴδη μετέβαλλον in 30, 567d) to reconquer their pristine moonshine (see ὥσπερ ἡ καθαρωτάτη πανσέληνος in 24, 565d), and because the superficial "blot" can be removed only

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56. This was already stressed by Taufer, 2010, n. to 565c. According to one of the anonymous reviewers of the present article, the identification of ὄρφνιος as a dark shade of red or brown is less likely than the grey, especially considering the testimony in Pseudo-Aristotle, *Col.* 2, 792a27, where we read ἐλάττονος δὲ τοῦ φωτὸς προσβάλλοντος ζοφερόν, ὃ καλοῦσιν ὄρφνιον. However, the context of the quoted sentence (which is quite reminiscent of Plato, *Tim.* 68b-c) concerns different degrees of lighting, heating and burning of black-coloured objects, presented to consistently acquire different shades of red as a result (starting from 792a10, see the terms φοινικοῦν, ἁλουργές, πορφυροειδής); after the example of the sea appearing purple when its waves are hit by the light at a certain angle, Pseudo-Aristotle mentions the case of bird plumage, "for when exposed to the light it has a purple tint (ἁλουργές). When less light strikes it (ἐλάττονος δὲ τοῦ φωτὸς προσβάλλοντος), it is of that dark tint (ζοφερόν) which men call grey-brown (ὃ καλοῦσιν ὄρφνιον); when however the light is strong and mixed with primary black it becomes red (φοινικοῦν). But when it is light and shining as well it changes to flame colour (φλογοειδές)" (792a25-29, transl. Hett, 1936). It is hard to suppose that such a garish red plumage would be thought to manifest as purely grey when dimly lit. Pseudo-Aristotle also mentions the colour ὄρφνιος in 4, 794a32-794b10, while discussing the "chemical" optics of wool pre-dyed in black: τὸ καλούμενον ὄρφνιον εὐανθέστερον γίνεται τῶν μελάνων ἢ τῶν λευκῶν· οὕτω γὰρ ἀκρατέστερον αὐτῶν φαίνεται τὸ ἄνθος, κεραννύμενον ταῖς τοῦ μέλανος αὐγαῖς. I will comment further on this passage in my follow-up article, also considering the testimony in Xenophon, *Cyr.* VIII 3,3 (where ὄρφνιοι garments are mentioned as part of a succession only including red-dyed textiles, *i.e.* πορφυρίδες, φοινικίδες, and καρύκιναι).

57. Boulogne, 1994, parr. 16-19 (digital edition).

58. Cf. Görgemanns, 2009 (2003), who translates the ὄρφνιος in our passage as "*Grau*".

59. See *Loc. aff.* V 8, VIII 356 Kuhn.

by scraping (the reference is to the verb ἐκτρίβεσθαι, used for the stain of "incontinence" in 26, 565b-d, and not to the general ἐκλεαίνειν), the chromatic transformation is obtained by means of a peculiar "*technique de décapage*". This is illustrated by Plutarch in chapter 30 and "*consiste à provoquer le craquèlement <periklân> de la couche adventice, qui enrobe les âmes, puis à frotter ces dernières les unes contre les autres <suntribein>, afin de décoller les écailles qui se sont formées*".[60] In this frame, the change in the moral quality of the souls runs parallel to a chromatic change induced by metallurgic means, and Boulogne can therefore note, in explaining Plutarch's choice of the "alchemical" imagery, that "*l'idée de ce genre de solidarité entre la couleur et la substance constitue un des postulats de l'alchimie*". Thus, once Plutarch has assimilated souls to rays of light, he "*est conduit à attribuer au chromatisme une signification essentielle, ce qui, par contrecoup, l'amène à imaginer une partie du châtiment infernal des impurs sur le modèle de la transmutation des métaux*". Boulogne's explanation, although fascinating, has several issues, which add to his questionable connection of the colour ὄρφνιος with lead. For instance, he shows a certain disregard for chronology, not referring anywhere to specific texts of the alchemical *corpus*, but only substantiating his claims on "*l'alchimie*" – treated as a single and homogenous doctrine – by referring to classic scholarly expositions of the subject. The greatest problem, however, is that this interpretation might only apply to the stain of greed, leaving the three others unexplained: if the alchemical imagery results from Plutarch's attribution of a "*signification essentielle*" to the souls' chromatism, one may wonder why he has not imagined the colours of the other stains – *i.e.* the ones that are not "leaden" – so that they may have a role in in the same metallurgic procedure; after all, they all have to be "smoothed away" (26, 565c) from their associated souls in the same way, in order for these latter to reconquer their original, "smooth and continuous" moonshine (24, 565d).

Pérez-Jiménez, in fact, tackles the question in another way, and prefers to ask – reversely – why is it that the only souls subjected to metallic bathing are the ones of the "*ambiziosi*" and "*incontinenti*".[61] In answering the question, he notes that these sinners are precisely the ones whose colour had been described in chapter 26 to be the "*scuro*" (ὄρφνιος), and that the first lake in which they are immersed in chapter 30, appropriately, is that of lead. The latter detail appears to be a mistake (as we will see, the souls are plunged into the leaden lake only after having been immersed in

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60. On such unlikely interpretation of the verbs see below, sec. 3,2.
61. Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, pp. 305-306.

the golden),[62] and the former translation simplistic, but the alchemical interpretation then proposed is not without merits, as it is grounded in almost-contemporary works of alchemy: Plutarch might have used the term λίμνη ("lake") in the "mystic" sense given to it by the alchemists (now unknown to us),[63] and the first "leaden" step might have been linked somehow to the operation of μελάνωσις ("blackening"), already considered by early Greco-Roman alchemists as a preliminary phase for trans-mutation into noble metals.[64] Pérez-Jiménez, in any case, also suggests alternative interpretations, equally hypothetical and therefore just partly developed.[65]

The two "alchemical" interpretations have their evident shortcomings, which make them hardly viable to account for Plutarch's choice of the couple "dusky and filthy" as a qualifier of the stain of greed. My tentative suggestion, which I will better substantiate in the follow-up article, is that its colour may allude to a patch of iron rust.[66] In this connection I was inspired by Ovid's use of the term *ater* ("sable" or "lus-treless-black", as opposed to *niger*, *i.e.* "glossy black") to refer to the colour of *ferrugo*, *i.e.* "iron rust", in *Met.* (XV 789, in a metaphorical context). This adjective, together with *pullus*, appears to be the closest Latin equivalent one can find of the Greek ὄρφνι(ν)ος, and this comparative evidence, especially if Plutarch's partial knowledge

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62. In a personal communication, Aurelio Pérez-Jiménez defended his subversion of the lakes' succession with a sophisticated and seductive textual argument: according to him, the scene opens with the souls already inside the golden lake (ἐν μὲν γὰρ τῷ χρυσῷ διαπύρους καὶ διαφανεῖς ὑπὸ τοῦ φλέγεσθαι γενομένας, 30, 567c), and it is only with the leaden that they begin to be explicitly, actively "immersed" by the demons (ἐνέβαλλον εἰς τὴν τοῦ μολίβδου βάπτοντες, my emphasis); after this, the souls continue to be cyclically plunged into the iron, gold, and again into the lead. In this scheme, the initial submersion in gold represents the souls' condition preceding the chastisement (*i.e.*, their earthly possession of external riches, power, prestige, etc.), while the following immersion in lead, first step of the punishment, overturns this splendour by plunging the souls into obscurity (and is metaphorically linked to the alchemical operation of μελάνωσις, see below). I still prefer to interpret the golden lake as the first in the cyclical immersions: since it is unbearably hot – burning the souls to the point of making them διάπυροι καὶ διαφανεῖς –, it surely is an integral part of the chastisement, rather than being merely used to represent the souls' earthly splendour. In any case, Pérez-Jiménez's current interpretation of the passage fully recognizes the chastisement as a form of *contrapasso*, also including visual representations of the souls' conditions (prestige, obscurity). This is perfectly in line with the position I defend below, sec. 3.

63. See Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, p. 306, n. 49 for the references.

64. See Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, pp. 306-307, n. 51 for the references.

65. Namely, an astrological and a physiognomic interpretation, both unconvincing: see Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, pp. 307-308. He also considers an ethical interpretation inspired by a Plutarchan *locus* (*Non posse* 14, 1096c): see below, n. 144.

66. Note that I interpret the ἰῶδες ("rusty") of the stain of envy to allude to *verdigris*, *i.e.* copper rust, as in Theophrastus, *Lap.* 37 with Richards & Caley, 1956, n. *ad loc.*

of Latin and many relationships with Roman contemporaries are kept in mind,[67] may be safely considered not irrelevant. Plutarch's character had already introduced an analogy with iron in chapter 11: the "hardness of badness" (τὸ σκληρὸν ἐν κακίᾳ) was there likened to "bad iron" (φαῦλος σίδηρος) as they are both "defective" (σαθρός) and their "impact resistance easily broken" (τὸ ἀντίτυπον εὔθραστον), because the evildoers are often taken over by regret and unsettlement about their acts – it is probably their confidence to be imagined to "break" – and those who are never found out may live the rest of their lives in constant fear and superstition (555f-556d). Although a certain "economical" focus can be noticed in the terminology of this passage (see ὀνησίφορος, ἀνελεύθερος, ἀχάριστος), as well as in its reference to Simonides – named as a paradigm of old-age φιλαργυρία in a very similar passage in *An seni* (5, 786b) –, it does not concern "greed for riches" (χρημάτων πλεονεξία) specifically, as Plutarch mentions this vice together with other possible drives towards an evil deed (*e.g.* ἡδονή τις συνουσίας). In fact, the imagery of *De sera num.* 11 might be linked with his general decision to visualize all the souls as metallic bodies in chapter 26, which may underlie the reference to the "smoothing away" (ἐκλεαίνειν) of encrustations resulting in a purer luminosity. After all, in Plutarch's prose, as was already pointed out by F. Fuhrmann, souls and characters occur very frequently in analogies with metallurgic treatments and with properties of iron[68] – perhaps under the influence of the Stoic metaphor of *stómōsis* ("steel quenching") for the formation of the soul from *pneûma*, well present to Plutarch's mind–[69], and in this intuitive frame of reference, arguably, not a great leap of imagination would have been required to conceive the very first stain of the list as a sombre spot of rust.

This identification proves to be especially appropriate if a passage in *Praec. ger. reip.* 26 is considered, in which φιλοπλουτία and φιλοχρηματία figure in an analogy with a piece of "iron full of rust (σίδηρος μεστὸς ἰοῦ) and a disease of the soul (καὶ νόσημα τῆς ψυχῆς)" (819e). Perhaps, in our passage, Plutarch used this symbol to allude to the baseness of stingy and greedy souls, whose degraded value he wanted to contrast implicitly with that of the metals they felt jealously attached to. In this sense, the economic and aesthetic value of ἀνελευθερία and πλεονεξία appears to be diametrically opposite to that of their shiny objects of desire, and their stain is probably meant to represent the ignobility, "lack of freedom", and low social status of the greedy.

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67. On Plutarch's knowledge of Latin see Ziegler, 1951, sec. V, coll. 926-928; Brenk, 1977, p. 32, n. 5.
68. Fuhrmann, 1964, pp. 86-88, n. 1. Among the many, see the ones quoted below, nn. 113 and 140.
69. See *De prim. frig.* 2, 946c; *De Stoic. rep.* 41, 1052f-1053d; *De comm. not.* 46, 1084d-e.

3. QUENCH DEBASEMENT AS A *CONTRAPASSO* AND EXHIBITION

3.1. THE DESIGN OF THE CHASTISEMENTS AND THE THREE METALLIC LAKES

During his journey, Thespesius is made to witness a variety of spectacles, until his attention, following the "Pythian" insertion of chapters 28-29, is finally turned to the souls' chastisements.[70] While he witnesses in shock the tortures that his wicked friends and relatives have to endure, he is suddenly left alone by his "gentle and familiar guide" (30, 566e-567a); instinctively, he tries to run away from the sight of his father's suffering soul, but is stopped in his attempt by "frightening" beings and forced to go through an entire gallery of grotesque, atrocious punishments, on whose depiction Plutarch's pen lingers in merciless detail (30-31, 566e-567e).[71] The rationale behind the choices of punishments appears to oscillate between the idea of the souls' actual self being brought to view in all of its unmitigated wickedness and the ironic enforcement of a *contrapasso*.[72] The punishment inflicted on Thespesius's father, who became "defiled" (μιαρὸς) for poisoning his guests for gold, seems to be rather uncharacteristic, in comparison with those that follow: he is presented as "emerging from a pit (βάραθρον), covered with brands (στίγματα) and scars (οὐλαί), […] and not allowed by those in charge of the punishments to keep silent, but compelled to confess"[73] his vice to the guests he killed, as he had managed to evade detection during his life; his enforced confession already fits the model of the public exhibition of wickedness, but the form of torture is still quite tame, and is in fact specified to be only a part of the full punishment: "convicted here, he has already suffered some [of the penalties], and he is [now] brought to suffer the others" (566e-567a).

In his forced tour, Thespesius witnesses that people whose badness had already become well-known in life receive a weaker torment – it was explained in chapters 25-26 that they are under *Poinḗ*'s jurisdiction, not as harsh a punisher as *Díkē*

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70. For speculation on the celestial region where the punishments may be implied to take place see Pérez-Jiménez, 2001, pp. 207-208; Deuse, 2010, pp. 177-181.

71. Latzarus, 1920, pp. 131-133 manifested disdain at Plutarch's "*veritable galerie d'horreurs*", which he connected with the cultural decadence of the Imperial Age, when "*la fièvre orientale avait fini par tourner toutes les têtes*". Taufer, 2010, n. to 567b correctly remarked against Latzarus (as already done in Taufer, 1999, p. 315, n. 34), that Plato's depiction of the punishment of Ardiaeus in *Resp.* X, 615e-616a was already impressive in its violence.

72. On the rationale of public "exhibition", albeit unclearly, appears to insist Frazier, 2019c (2010b), pp. 355-358 and 2019a, pp. 214-216 (quoted above, n. 39 and below in this section, with n. 93); she also suggests, implicitly, a partial interpretation in terms of *contrapasso*. On this latter model see below.

73. Transl. De Lacy & Einarson, 1959. On the connotations of στίγματα, in this and in other passages, see Harker, 2020, pp. 556-562.

(564e-565b) –, since their vice only affects their "irrational and passional part" (30, 567a). In this, they differ greatly from those who managed to keep their wickedness hidden during life, "cloaked with (περιβαλόμενοι) a screen (πρόσχημα) and repute of virtue".[74] Since their depravity concerns their "reasoning and authoritative part", some must endure the terrible pain of having their inward parts turned outwards "as the sea-scolopendras turn themselves inside out (ἐκτρέπουσιν ἑαυτάς) when they have swallowed the hook"[75] – an image whose original source appears to be Aristotelian[76] –, and others of being skinned and unfolded until their insides are revealed to the public to be "suppurated (or treacherous, ὕπουλοι) and dappled (ποικίλοι)" (30, 567b). This punishment adheres explicitly to the model of the exposition of the actual self, and already includes a shade of *contrapasso* for the way it forces the souls to get the reverse of what they sinfully obtained during their life (*i.e.*, their vices being now fully exhibited rather than hidden).[77] The zoological imagery, in this setting firstly appearing in the analogy with sea-scolopendras,[78] continues in the description of the following punishment. This is reserved to souls who have harmed someone else, and who may correspond, arguably, to both the "cruel and vicious" and the "ill-disposed and envious" mentioned in the list of stains: "he told of seeing other souls coiled like vipers (ἔχιδναι) around each other in twos and threes and yet greater number, devouring one another in resentment (μνησικακία) and malevolence (κακοθυμία) for what they had endured or done in life" (567b).[79] The transfiguration into frenzied vipers manifests the vicious and spiteful essence of these evildoers, and their close proximity allows for the occurrence of a *contrapasso*: as in life they "bit" other people in their vengeful and treacherous acts (which always followed some resentment), they are now "bitten" by rancorous souls sharing with them their bitter spite.

For the next *tableau*, Plutarch leaves aside the animal symbolism and presents us with the elaborate description of the metallurgic process we are interested in, which is forced onto the souls of the "insatiable and greedy" (30, 567c-d). This punishment, in my interpretation, is the last in the succession of penalties to adhere

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74. This important theme is introduced in *De sera num.* 20, 562b-d (already commented on above, sec. 1,2), along with metaphors of "sheathing". Cf. Fr. 120 Sandbach.

75. Transl. De Lacy & Einarson, 1959.

76. See Aristotle, *HA* IX 37, 621a6-9.

77. Cf. Santaniello, 2000, p. 410, who after using the word "*contrapasso*" states that the punishment is part of a "*schema di rovesciamento del mondo dei vivi coerentemente perseguito in tutta la descrizione dell'Ade*". This interpretation appears to be quite forced for the myth of Thespesius and is better suited to the myth in *De genio Socr.* (*i.e.*, the main object of Santaniello's paper).

78. The first zoological analogy in the myth (with birds) appears in 27, 565e.

79. Transl. based on De Lacy & Einarson, 1959, modified.

to the model of the exhibition of the actual self and imposition of a *contrapasso*, which is arguably the only model that can make it understandable in a coherent way with its preceding siblings. After this description, in fact, Thespesius moves to the treatment of the souls "whose punishment had passed over to descendants or children" (31, 567d-e):[80] if these "thought that they were already released from their sentence" it is probably because they had already received chastisements akin to the forementioned, and through these subjected to both public exposition and *contrapasso*. Their further punishment follows another model: since they have caused suffering in their offspring, it is not sufficient to purge them of their vice, but they must also endure the "most piteous" penalties of all: being tormented by their rancorous descendants angrily rebuking them for what they have made them suffer, thus coming face to face with the effects of their behaviour, without being allowed to run away (the zoological imagery returns here in the description of great progenies, clinging to their guilty ancestor "like veritable swarms of bees or bats"). When the greedy souls receive their metallurgic treatment, it is clear, they are still being punished for their individual vices, just like the spiteful "vipers" devouring each other; for them, as for these latter, an earlier part of the chastisement may have implied a generic torture and confession in a pit for criminals – as for Thespesius's father, surely not long dead – and a later part, following specific transfigurations and *contrapasso*, their exposition to sinful descendants (if applicable). We may now examine the metallurgic process in full detail (30, 567c-d):

εἶναι δὲ καὶ λίμνας παρ' ἀλλήλας, τὴν μὲν χρυσοῦ περιζέουσαν[81] τὴν δὲ μολίβδου ψυχροτάτην ἄλλην δὲ τραχεῖαν σιδήρου· καί τινας ἐφεστάναι δαίμονας ὥσπερ οἱ χαλκεῖς ὀργάνοις ἀναλαμβάνοντας καὶ καθιέντας ἐν μέρει τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν δι' ἀπληστίαν καὶ πλεονεξίαν πονηρῶν. ἐν μὲν γὰρ τῷ χρυσῷ διαπύρους καὶ διαφανεῖς ὑπὸ τοῦ φλέγεσθαι γενομένας ἐνέβαλλον εἰς τὴν τοῦ μολίβδου βάπτοντες· ἐκπαγείσας δ' αὐτόθι καὶ γενομένας σκληρὰς ὥσπερ αἱ χάλαζαι, πάλιν εἰς τὴν τοῦ σιδήρου μεθίστασαν· ἐνταῦθα δὲ μέλαιναί τε δεινῶς ἐγίνοντο, καὶ περικλώμεναι διὰ σκληρότητα καὶ συντριβόμεναι τὰ εἴδη μετέβαλλον· εἶθ' οὕτω πάλιν εἰς τὸν χρυσὸν ἐκομίζοντο, δεινάς, ὡς ἔλεγεν, ἐν ταῖς μεταβολαῖς ἀλγηδόνας ὑπομένουσαι.

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80. Transl. De Lacy & Einarson, 1959, as for the one which follows. A description of the specific suffering of these souls had been teased by Plutarch's character in 18, 561b, presented as the subject of the myth.

81. Like all the recent editors, including Ingenkamp & Bernardakis, 2010, I accept Johan J. Reiske's emendation of the manuscripts' περιζέοντος (referred to χρυσοῦ) with περιζέουσαν, more coherent with the syntax of the following ψυχροτάτην and τραχεῖαν.

"And [he said] there were lakes (or ponds) lying side by side: one seething all around, of gold, another extremely cold, of lead, and the other rough in iron; and some demons stood in charge [of them], like blacksmiths raising and sinking partially, with instruments, the souls of those who were bad due to insatiability and greed. Indeed, after [these] became incandescent and shiny in the gold as a result of the burning, they threw them into the [lake] of lead, quenching them; there congealed, and become hard as hailstone, they transferred them again to the [lake] of iron; and there not only they became terribly black, but also, breaking and shattering due to hardness, they changed their shapes: thus they were again taken into the gold, enduring, as he said, terrible agonies in their transformations".

As in the myth in Plato's *Phaedo*, in which the evildoers are punished by being repeatedly plunged back (see αὖθις, πάλιν)[82] into Tartarus and then into either the river Cocytus or Pyriphlegethon, until their pleas, shouted from the Acherusian lake (λίμνη!), finally meet the grace of their own victims (114a-b), Plutarch probably implies his immersions of the greedy to go on cyclically until the punishment is deemed complete. If we are correct in identifying the "dusky and filthy" blot of ἀνελευθερία and πλεονεξία in chapter 26 (565c) as a patch of iron rust, it should be only coherent that souls affected by ἀπληστία and πλεονεξία, in their chastisement, are treated like metal objects. Their "partial" (ἐν μέρει) immersions in lakes of different qualities, with the associated alterations and the explicit simile with "blacksmiths", certainly evoke the image of a process of iron quenching or tempering.[83]

These operations, when associated with iron steeling in the notion of *stómōsis*, were probably understood by Plutarch – like Aristotle – to be related to a removal of non-ferrous impurities or rust,[84] and this scene has indeed been read as a further visualization of the souls' purification from their moral stains – adding on the earlier concrete image of the "smoothing" (in ἐκλεανθέντων) of chapter 26 (565c-d) –, giving us the details of a more elaborate cleansing procedure. We have already seen that Boulogne referred to it as a "*technique de décapage*", but Yvonne Vernière already in 1977 implied an interpretation of the described treatment as a cleansing process, by comparing it with the fire purification mentioned by Virgil in *Aen.* VI (739-742,

82. The correspondence was already pointed out by Taufer, 2010, n. to 567d, who also referred to Pseudo-Plato, *Ax.* 371e-372a.

83. On these techniques see especially Congdon, 1971; on quenching I return below, sec. 3,2.

84. See *De gar.* 17, 510f with the parallel in Diodorus Siculus, *BH* V 33,4; Aristotle, *Meteor.* IV 6, 383a29-b5. This may be important in the analogy with quenching in *De facie* 28, 943d-e, referred to the souls' "strengthening" when they finally manage to reach the moon.

"*Plutarque remplace les flammes purificatrices par trois étangs de metal en fusion*"),[85] and by presenting as a possible parallel the Zoroastrian belief in an ordeal at the end of time, requiring all souls to wade in a river formed by the melting of all metals on earth.[86] Boulogne, discarding the hypothesis of an Eastern influence, preferred to see in this "*châtiment purificatoire*" his alchemical dynamic beginning with the souls' "*degeneration*" through "*décoloration*", "*marquée par l'apparition de la couleur noir*", and ending with their full "*regeneration*" in a fourth golden bath, in which they reacquire the lost "*diaphanéité*".[87] Pérez-Jiménez too, who in 1996 merely pointed out the curious correspondences between the image of the lakes and the alchemical procedures,[88] succinctly referred to these same lakes in 2001 as places in which "*los démones castigan las almas de los malvados y las purifican y transforman*",[89] unambiguously implying an interpretation of them as instruments of cleansing.[90]

Such interpretations, on closer inspection, are undermined by a crucial problem: namely, that the punishment for the greedy, if interpreted as a purification process, would be unjustifiably incoherent with all the others witnessed by Thespesius. If neither his father's pit and forced confessions, nor the turning inside-out and skinning of the undetected wicked, nor the grouping together of rancorous evildoers, nor the exposition of evil patriarchs to their offspring's reprimands can be "materially" functional to purifying the souls, one may wonder why Plutarch would choose to visualize only the penalty for greed as a concrete purification. Unless one posits a specific link with iron rust, and that the souls' cyclical immersions serve the end of expelling it

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85. Vernière, 1977, pp. 202-203; see also above, n. 48.

86. Vernière, 1977, p. 203; this eschatology is described in the late texts *Bundahišn* 30,17 and *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 31,10, but was already alluded to in Yasna 30,7, 32,7 and 51,9. Vernière's connection has been rightfully criticized by Culianu, 1980, p. 170 and by Sfameni Gasparro, 2014, n. 5 (see also Taufer, 2010, pp. 51-54 for his analysis of the inconclusive parallels between Plutarch's myth and the otherworldly journey in *Ardā Wīrāz*, which he develops in response to another of Vernière's suggestions, in Klaerr & Vernière, 1974, p. 110); it should be also noted that an ordeal is not identical with a purification. A comparison between the two images, stressing their difference ("between Greek wit and Persian seriousness"), was also drawn by Brenk, 1977, pp. 129-130, as part of a sequence of considerations on the influence of Zoroastrianism upon Plutarch ("very small indeed"). On Plutarch's knowledge of this religion – clear from his remarks in *De Is. et Os.* 46, 369d-370c – see also Hirsch-Luipold, 2021, p. 20. Note that Plutarch refers to Persian culture in *De sera num.* 25, 565a, in an analogy with their customs in punishing (a passage reminiscent of *De aud. poet.* 13, 35e): see Taufer, 2010, n. to 565a.

87. Boulogne, 1994, parr. 19-22 (digital edition). His interpretation clearly requires the fourth bath to be the last, and the chastisement to not go on cyclically: see below, sec. 3,3.

88. See Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, pp. 305-306.

89. See Pérez-Jiménez, 2001, p. 209.

90. However, see above, n. 62 for his most recent clarifications on his position.

completely (which is unlikely), it is more probable that this punishment is modelled in the same way as the ones preceding it. At least three scholars, in fact, have already shown how to interpret the chastisement as a form of *contrapasso*. The first appears to have been David A. Wyttenbach in 1772, who in his note to the passage followed his tentative explanation of the image – on which I will return below – with the intuitive remark that "*commode ceteroquin avaros in metalla immergi iisque cruciari fingit, quia horum ipsis in vita inexplebile fuit desiderium*".[91] This acknowledgement, unfortunately, can apply only to gold, which is also what limits the interpretation in terms of *contrapasso* proposed in 2014 by Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, as part of an article on the symbolism of gold in eschatological contexts.[92] In addition to underlining that gold, acquiring the "negative valence" of an object of "*bramosia e avidità*", is used in the myth as an instrument for the punishment of these specific vices, she correctly remarked that it is also presented in connection with "*i caratteri del calore e della luminosità, in opposizione all'oscurità e al freddo del ferro e del piombo*", a detail of which she did not provide an interpretation. On the opposition between these metals, although only in the form of passing comments, much greater emphasis was put by Frazier in her 2010 and 2019 analyses of the myth.[93] Despite never using the specific expression *contrapasso*, she surely implied a reference to the model; in fact, in both texts, just after mentioning the "*plomb glacé*" (*sic*!) of the souls' second immersion, she asked in a parenthesis: "[*est-ce*] *le total opposé du métal pour lequel ils brûlaient du désir?*", citing in a footnote some poetic instances of the antithesis between the two, unfortunately all external to Plutarch's *corpus*. This opposition does not seem to extend to iron, since after mentioning that the souls are "*enfin trempés* (sic!) *dans un étang de fer*", in her 2010 analysis she asked: "[*est-ce*] *pour pouvoir être 'travaillés'?*", without clarifying the underlying metallurgical rationale; there are reasons to believe that she wrongly understood this treatment to be connected with the souls' reshaping in chapter 32 (567e-568a). Independently of these earlier interpretations,[94] we may ourselves verify whether the metallurgic treatment can be also interpreted, like the preceding punishments, to achieve the exposition of the greedy souls' actual self, and in this specific sense transform them visibly and concretely into "*ce qu'elles étaient*".[95]

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91. Wyttenbach, 1772, "*Animadversiones* […]", p. 124.

92. See Sfameni Gasparro, 2014, pp. 199-200.

93. Frazier, 2019c (2010b), pp. 357-358; 2019a, pp. 215-216.

94. It is unclear whether the reference to "Greek wit" in Brenk, 1977, p. 130 n. 22 (quoted above, n. 86) implied an understanding of the punishment of the "avaricious" as a *contrapasso* or not. This does not seem to be true for his more recent remarks in Brenk, 1996, pp. 255, 257.

95. An unclear remark in Frazier, 2019c (2010b), p. 358.

3.2. The Chemistry of the Souls' Immersions

That the punishment is modeled as a *contrapasso* is already clear, but the opposition in value between precious gold and lead and iron is best demonstrated by referring to Plutarchan *loci*. On lead, we may consider the verse from Simonides quoted in *De ad. et am.* 24 (65b-c) to describe the difference between flatterers and a true friend, feared by the former for they are evidently inferior: "against pure, refined (ἐφθός) gold, not even having lead" (Fr. 592 Page); a metaphor which immediately follows an analogy with counterfeit metals, reinforcing its semantic link with riches and commerce: "whenever, then, the flatterer, who is but a light and deceptive plated-ware (ἐπίτηκτος), is examined and closely compared (ἀντεξετάζηται) with heavy and solid-wrought (σφυρήλατος) friendship, he does not stand the test, but, being exposed […]".[96] Plutarch had already introduced this metaphorical frame a few lines above (*De ad. et am.* 23, 64e) to describe the flatterer's indisposition towards demanding favours, differing from the readiness of true friends: "flattery, on the contrary, in arduous and dangerous ministrations fails you, and if you test it by sounding, it rings a defective (σαθρόν) and ignoble (ἀγεννές) tone due to some excuse";[97] it is in this acoustic specification that we may see a hint of the material constitution of the fake, "plated-ware" metal imagined by Plutarch, "ignoble" (compare with the ἀνελευθερία of the list of stains)[98] and even less worthy than lead. In fact, not only is the adjective σαθρός referred to "bad iron" in *De sera num.* 11 (555f-556d), as we have seen earlier in the comparison with the "hardness of badness",[99] but it is also never coupled with any other metal in the extant Plutarchan *corpus*, and used by Plutarch's character himself in *Quaest. conv.* VIII 3 to describe the texture of iron during a discussion on acoustic matters: "but if we must judge by appearances, it is rather iron that seems to have something defective (σαθρόν), porous (πολύκενον) and honeycomb-like (τενθρηνῶδες); and it is very cacophonous (κακόφωνος) and the least vocal (κωφότατος) of metals" (3, 721e-f).[100] When writing of counterfeit metals, then,

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96. Transl. Babbitt, 1927, slightly modified. Cf. *Adv. Col.* 32, 1126d. A similar image was already in Plato, *Resp.* VI, 503a, which itself echoed earlier poetic *loci*.

97. Transl. based on Babbitt, 1927, modified.

98. Cf. *De lat. viv.* 4, 1129d, where bronze is εὐγενής ("well-born", thus "noble") in a quotation from Sophocles (Fr. 864 Radt), which also appears in *An seni* 8, 788b and 15, 792a with the variant εὐπρεπής ("well-suited", thus "decent"). Note that the Greek antonym for εὐγενής is ἀγεννής, which is used in pair with ἀνελεύθερος in *An seni* 5, 786b and *Alc.* 2,5, and already in Plato, *Gorg.* 465b.

99. See above, sec. 2.

100. Transl. based on Minar in Minar *et al.*, 1961, modified. In this context, iron is opposed to copper. Cf. *Quaest. Plat.* 7, 1005d.

it is not unlikely that Plutarch tended to visualize them as having an iron core, and he could compare the distance in value between this core and the exteriorly faked material to that between the gold and lead in the Simonidean quotation.[101] Iron is somewhat contrasted with gold in *Praec. ger. reip.* 26 (819e), in Plutarch's mention of the interdiction of bringing gold into some sanctuaries and of introducing iron in all,[102] but it is likely that this opposition, rather than concerning value, only depended on a metonymic association of gold with material riches and of iron with violence, as in Camillus's undiplomatic answer to Brennus's ambassadors in *Cam.* 29 (2).[103] It is here more appropriate to refer to Plutarch's repeated accounts of Lycurgus's monetary reform in archaic Sparta, which to eliminate all inequality and luxury in the Laconian population, among the other decisions, imposed a definitive substitution of gold and silver coins with iron money – of much inferior value – even treated with vinegar (allegedly) so that it would be useless for reforging (*Lyc.* 9);[104] an avid lover of riches, we may note, would not get many opportunities to accumulate them in Lycurgus's Sparta, only being allowed to exchange worthless iron on the legal market. An opposition between iron and nobler metals is also found in *Tim.* 29 (1), where the iron and bronze available in some spoils of war is made comparably worthless by the associated copiousness of silver and gold. After looking at these passages, we can finally claim with some foundation that Plutarch thought of lead and iron as metals of lowest value in a specifically economic sense; it is for this reason that he may have chosen them to inflict *contrapasso* on the "insatiable and greedy": by being initially immersed in the boiling lake of gold – culturally, the most valuable metal of all –[105] these are firstly given, ironically, what they have always strived to accumulate during their lives, and then, by being plunged into the leaden and iron lakes, they are surrounded in worthless possessions, diametrically opposite to their earthly object of desire; the process is repeated until the punishment is deemed complete.

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101. The metal which is faked is most probably implied to be gold: cf. *De ad. et am.* 2, 50a and *Cons. ad Apoll.* 4, 102f. For lead, cf. also *Ad princ. iner.* 2, 779f-780a, where the material is mentioned with earth and stone as a ballast for the stabilization of colossi and implicitly contrasted with the colossi's "heroic and godlike" looks.

102. This *exemplum* is used by Plutarch to introduce the metaphor of φιλοπλουτία and φιλοχρηματία as a piece of "iron full of rust", quoted above, sec. 2.

103. Cf. also *Arist.* 21,4.

104. See also 19,2; *Lys.* 17,2-5; *Comp. Arist. et Ca. Ma.* 3,1.

105. Among the passages proving that gold is associated with the highest value, abundant in Plutarch's *corpus*, one may refer to its paradigmatic use in the hyperbolic comparisons in *De cap. ex inim.* 11, 92e and *Adv. Col.* 30, 1124e, quoting Plato, *Leges* V, 728a.

Similarly, because the souls are described to "transform" during the process, we may also suppose that the alterations are meant to correspond to different phases of a revealing of the souls' actual self, especially considering that the final bath, of the three, is that of iron, and that the baseness of ἀνελευθερία and πλεονεξία – if my interpretation is correct – has already been symbolized by Plutarch as iron rust. This supposition can be sustainable only if the souls, in a certain way, are described to become akin to the metals they are plunged in, always finishing the cycle with the properties of (bad) iron, representing their ignobility: we will verify this by analyzing closely the 'chemical' details in the scene.[106] Before doing this, we may briefly note that the souls' "transformations" are also described to be excruciatingly painful, which of course is necessary for the treatment to function as a punishment. It is easy to imagine how an immersion into a hot lake, "seething all around" (περιζέουσα), can induce pain – this is key to understanding the ironic use of gold as *contrapasso* – and it is equally easy to imagine it for an "extremely cold" (ψυχροτάτη) bath; Plutarch does report similar forms of thermic chastisement to have been inflicted on debtors in Asian cities before the liberation brought by Lucullus in *Luc.* 20 (2). These hot and cold immersions can achieve a further level of pain by being effected in quick succession, exploiting the sudden transition from one extreme temperature to the opposite, and there are signs in Plutarch's *corpus* that the subject of temperature swings was among his preoccupations in contexts of medical reflection, and analogically associated with iron quenching: "not weaker than anything in [causing] transformation (μεταβολή) and in producing the birth of new diseases", claims Plutarch's character in *Quaest. conv.* VIII 9, "is the multiplicity of affections (πολυπάθεια) of the flesh [occurring] in the baths, like iron softened (μαλασσομένη) and made to flow (ῥεούση) through fire, and then receiving quench hardening (βαφή) and steeling (*stómōsis*) through cold; – here flow in Acheron and Pyriphlegethon! This, I believe, is what a member of the generation just before ours would say, if he could look into the door of our bath-chamber" (3, 734a-b).[107] The common mention of the Pyriphlegethon in this passage – in close connection with an analogy between disruptive physiological alterations and iron quenching – and in Plato's presentation of afterlife torments in *Phaedo* (114a-b) is noteworthy: given this further correspondence, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Plato's passage might

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106. On the centrality of chemical details to the interpretation of metallurgic symbols cf. the dubious Fr. *29 Sandbach.

107. In the final part of the quotation, transl. Minar in Minar *et al.*, 1961. The sentence in quotes is altered from Homer, *Od.* X 513. The reference in this passage is rather to πολυπάθεια, but in the following lines the focus is switched to excessive heat. Cf. *De tuenda* 17, 131b-c and 25, 136a-b (with a parallel analogy with quenching).

have indeed inspired the minimal structure of Plutarch's punishment,[108] which he might have developed as a metallurgic process following the lines of the same chain of associations as the one behind the passage in *Quaest. conv.* VIII 9. After the first two baths, the temperature of the medium – namely, that of the iron lake – does not seem to be relevant anymore, but the souls suffer in an equally intuitive way, as a result of their "breaking and shattering" (περικλώμεναι… καὶ συντριβόμεναι).

What might be unintuitive is the reason why the "hardened" souls (see διὰ σκληρότητα) should start to break only when they are immersed into the lake of iron. In fact, if hardness is interpreted to be the immediate cause of their fracturing, the effect should at least manifest at the same moment they acquire the property in the leaden lake, in which case their fractured shards could correspond to the films of iron oxides normally flaking off the surface of an incandescent piece of iron when quenched.[109] Boulogne circumvents this difficulty by interpreting the relevant verbs in a peculiar way, explaining, as we have seen, that the "scraping" technique requires the souls' superficial layers to "crackle" (περικλᾶν) before the souls can be usefully "smashed together" (συντρίβειν) for those layers to come off. If the flaking-off of the exterior films is mechanically induced by such "smashing together", the image might have been inspired by the blacksmiths' use of hammering a piece of iron after heating it, which in addition to always thrusting away the superficial oxide films could be also instrumental to removing "slag" incursions (*i.e.* internal impurities) in the production of "wrought iron".[110] Boulogne's translation, however, is hardly defensible if Plutarch's use of the two verbs is verified in other passages, because in these, as it seems, περικλᾶν never refers to a superficial crackling, nor συντρίβειν to a reciprocated (συν-) pounding (τρίβειν), but both, when used in their concrete sense, always refer to deep fractures, collapses, and comprehensive or centripetal (συν-) fragmentations.[111] If we discard this possibility, then, but assume that the increase in the souls' hardness in the leaden lake should be directly responsible for the fracturing (rather

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108. Brenk, 1996, p. 255 also mentions the Christian parallels in *Apoc.* 21,8 (with its λίμνη of burning fire and sulfur) and in the *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul* (2nd cent. CE), namely in 31,3 (with fire pits and rivers) and 38,2 (with a place of ice and snow).

109. See, *e.g.*, Congdon, 1971, p. 23, with n. 39. I could personally observe this phenomenon by heating and quenching an iron bar repeatedly, as part of an experiment for which I thank especially Marianna Marchini, Lucia Maini, and Ivan Aliprandi. Each immersion was indeed associated with a detachment of black oxidized flakes, which sank to the bottom of the container.

110. See Craddock, 1995, pp. 241-250.

111. See, *e.g., De comm. not.* 40, 1081b (συντριβῆναι), *De Al. Magn. fort.* 13, 343f (κλάσασα καὶ συντρίψασα), *Tim.* 7,1 (κατέκλασε καὶ συνέτριψεν, metaphorical), *De prim. frig.* 18, 953c (συντρίβεσθαι, quoted below).

than any of the associated circumstances), a problem will yet remain, as we can find no Plutarchan passages associating iron quenching with this specific risk, but one connecting an excessive fall of temperature with the somewhat opposite result of undesired bending.[112] There is no way, therefore, to interpret the souls' hardness to be the immediate cause of the fracturing: it can only be the condition allowing for the effect to occur during the immersion in the iron lake; the direct cause remains this way indeterminate. Since it is true that quenching a piece of iron, in addition to making it harder, can dramatically increase its brittleness,[113] we may suppose that the leaden bath has made the souls more prone to fracturing on possible impact with solid objects; such objects, then, might perhaps be identified as shards of iron filling up, floating on, or constituting the third "lake" in the sequence, whose described "roughness" (see τραχεῖα) – a possible yet unusual attribute for a fluid – might allude at its complete or partial solidity.[114] In this regard, it might be not a coincidence that cast iron tends to actually form a thin grey scale of silicon dioxide (SiO_2) on its surface when it is molten at high temperatures,[115] and it is not impossible to suppose

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112. *De prim. frig.* 13, 950c.

113. See below in this section, with nn. 139 and 140.

114. Cf. the paraphrases by Latzarus, 1920, p. 131 ("*fer rigid* [?]"), Torraca, 1991, p. 119 ("*il terzo, di ferro acuminato e lacerante*"), and Boulogne, 1994, par. 22 (digital edition) ("*au sein d'un milieu dur* [?] *et raboteux*"). The "roughness" of iron appears to be paradigmatic: see *Quaest. conv.* VIII 3, 721e-f (already quoted above) and *Quaest. Plat.* 7, 1005d, with ἀνωμαλία ("irregularity") used to describe its surface; in *De comm. not.* 38, 1078f-1079a, the property of τραχύτης is defined as "irregularity with hardness" (ἀνωμαλία μετὰ σκληρότητος [!]). Note that in *Quaest. conv.* VI 9,2, 696a the surface of milk – as opposed to that of oil – is implied to have something τραχύ and said to contain a great share of "earthy" matter (reappearing after one sentence in the couple τὰ σκληρὰ [!] καὶ γεώδη μέρη), which is the reason why milk is the only liquid that does not reflect images. Similar optics are presented in *De facie* 17, 930c-d, with the ἀνωμαλία and τραχύτης of the moon mentioned in a quasi-synonymous pair (re-used in 23, 937a); cf. *Quaest. nat.* 12, 915a-b, in which the air mixed in the surface of the sea is supposed to become obscure when ἀνώμαλος and to return transparent when "smoothened". See also 20, 917a, where Plutarch describes boar blood as "rough and black" (τραχὺ καὶ μέλαν[!]) and opposes it to deer blood, which is "thin and watery". Given all this evidence, we can assume that Plutarch could indeed visualize the lake of iron in a molten state, but that he would probably understand the τραχύτης of its surface to depend on the presence inside it of some solid parts, possibly "earthy", "hard", and "black". See the following footnote.

115. When a piece of iron contains around 2-5% of carbon molecules in solid solution, it is technically referred to as "cast iron": this has a much lower melting point than that of wrought iron (1150-1200 °C against over 1500 °C) but is too brittle to endure hammering or shaping – see Craddock, 2003. According to Campbell, 2015, pp. 277-279, when cast iron is heated at high temperature "in a furnace or ladle lined with a traditional refractory material" its surface is "continuously punctuated by the […] arrival of bright circular patches"; these are "droplets of liquid refractory, melted from the walls and bottom of the vessel". In the frame of this phenomenon, and due to the interaction between the suspended droplets

that Plutarch had in mind such scale; however, there are strong uncertainties on whether cast iron was actually employed in Greek and Roman metallurgy – it seems that it was only considered a scrap product in the Imperial Age –[116] which lowers the chances that Plutarch or any of his acquaintances were ever able to witness its chemical behaviour in person. Whatever the details of the iron lake's solidity, multiple interpreters, comparably, seem to have imagined the leaden lake to be frozen and thus solid,[117] probably to justify its "extremely cold" property, assumed to be incompatible with the metal's molten state. Now, since Plutarch, in other works, refers two times to the strange phenomenon of "lead whetstones" (ἀκόναι μολίβδου) allegedly liquefying in extreme cold, proving that "cooling not only condenses bodies, but liquefies them too" (*Quaest. conv.* VI 8,6, 695d),[118] I argue that it is not necessary to posit that the leaden lake is solid: this can as well be liquid and function exactly like a quenching bath. In contrast, the ultimate effect of the "lake" of iron, whose temperature is functionally unnecessary,[119] seems to require it to be partly solid: only in

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and the underlying molten metal, "below approximately 1400 °C […] SiO_2 appears on the surface as a dry, solid film, rather grey in colour. This film cannot be removed by wiping the surface because it constantly reforms". Campbell connects these considerations with "his observations in an iron foundry where he once worked": "for a common grade of grey iron, the surface of the iron was seen to be clear at 1420 °C. As the temperature fell, patches of solid grey film were first observed at about 1390 °C. These grew to cover the surface completely at 1350 °C. The grey film remained in place until about 1230 °C, at which temperature it started to break up by melting [cf. περικλώμεναι… καὶ συντριβόμεναι!], finally becoming completely liquid at 1150 °C. As shown by Craddock, 2003, cast iron was certainly used in the West in the late Middle Ages for the procedure of "fining", *i.e.* conversion into quenchable steel or wrought iron by controlled lowering of the iron's carbon content (see below, n. 140), which was obtained by stirring the cast iron in a molten state in an open vessel or hearth. Craddock claims that in this procedure "[…] some of the iron oxides would have reacted with the silica in the clays of the crucible or hearth lining to produce a slag. In postmedieval Europe, it was common practice to encourage this by sprinkling clean sand onto the iron to remove the iron oxide scale as a liquid slag […], some of which became incorporated in the pasty iron during the working" (p. 236).

116. See Craddock, 2003.

117. See Vernière in Klaerr & Vernière, 1974 ("*un autre de plomb, tout glacé*"); Torraca, 1991, p. 119 ("*il secondo, di piombo ghiacciato*"); Frazier, 2019c (2010b), p. 358 ("*plomb glacé*"); Gagné, 2015, p. 319 ("*des lacs bouillants et glacés*"). The translation by Taufer, 2010 is ambiguous ("*gelido*"), but in his n. to 567b, p. 203, n. 485, he refers to the constitution of the lake as an argument against the alleged realism of the myth ("*se il piombo è gelido, come vi possono affondare anime ben poco eteree come queste?*").

118. The other passage is *De prim. frig.* 11, 949b-c; see also *Quaest. conv.* VI 5, 690f-691b. I have analyzed these passages and their sources in Morrone, 2020. Normally, molten lead is of course assumed to be hot: this is explicit in *De Is. et Os.* 13, 356c.

119. If the iron is molten, it should be implied to be extremely hot: that its melting point (over 1500 °C or 1150-1200 °C; see above, n. 115) is much higher than that of gold (1064 °C) and lead (327,5 °C) was of course well known in the ancient world: cf. Aristotle, *Meteor.* IV 6, 383a27-33.

this way can it oppose the souls' "immersion" by making them get stuck on its jagged parts, then fracturing and crashing them for the unrelenting pressure exercised by the demonic blacksmiths; if it were not for the souls' acquired hardness, maybe, they would rather deform and bend against the iron obstacles, and thus remain intact.[120]

In any case, whatever the kind of obstacle the souls find in the third lake, their fracturing can be in a way mechanically understandable, while their becoming "terribly black" (μέλαιναί […] δεινῶς), arguably, cannot. This point may be used to support the hypothesis that the chastisement consists in part in a revealing of the souls' actual self. Black, in fact, is a colour traditionally associated with iron, as is shown in the Pindaric lines "from adamant / or iron was your black heart forged" (*Enc.* 123, 5-6 Snell) which Plutarch quotes in no less than three of his philosophical works, including the very same *De sera num.* (13, 558a).[121] Since the souls acquire this colour only when they are immersed in iron, their blackening can perhaps be understood as a sort of 'contagious' transferal of property: when the souls come into contact with the lake, they become black just like iron, and thus, at least in their colour, similar to it. The fact that the transferal is not chemically grounded may be itself a sign of the factitious character of the alteration, as this would only be justified by Plutarch's intention of making the souls becoming iron-black at the end of the process. To me, this seems to be the only way to explain it. Naturally, the final "dark" colour, as pointed out by Sfameni Gasperro, is also opposite to the "luminosity" associated with the golden lake, so that, even if the assimilation between the souls and iron were not true, they would still begin the process in connection with a certain "splendour", and end it with its complete removal and substitution with "obscurity": this may be interpreted both as a regression from preciousness to baseness – exhibiting the true nature of the greedy souls[122] – and as a fall from fame and prideful grandiosity to a shrunken state of regret and dissatisfaction. The latter hypothesis is especially suited to the more general interpretation of the terms ἀπληστία and πλεονεξία, as referred to the insatiable desire for power, honours and fame (φιλοτιμία). Since optical met-

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120. In *Quaest. conv.* VII 8,3, 712b-c, Menander's maxims are described to "bend" (κάμπτουσι) the drinkers' "characters" as they "soften" (μαλάττουσι) their σκληρότης by the help of wine, likened to fire. For an analogical "bending" of a soul – characterized as "supple and soft" – see *Cons. ad ux.* 10, 611f. Cf. however *Cam.* 41,5, where weak swords break against strong armours due to being "soft" and "forged thin".

121. In the quotation in *De sera num.*, the fragment is abridged and its reference to iron removed, but it is quoted fully in *De cap. ex inim.* 9, 90f and *Stoic. absurd. poet.* 1, 1057d. The attribute μέλας ("black") was already used for iron by Hesiod, *Op.* 151. For "brighter" presentations of iron, *i.e.* steel, cf. below, n. 148.

122. Cf. *De Pyth. or.* 15, 401d.

aphors of "luminosity" (λαμπρότης) are very common in Greek and in Plutarch's prose to refer to fame and notability,[123] and even acquire central relevance in the eschatological conclusion of *De lat. viv.* 6-7 (1129f-1130e),[124] it may seem an especially appropriate *contrapasso* for the souls of the ambitious to become, painfully, as splendid as they wanted to be – and likely had been – and then be plunged into "black" oblivion and disgrace.[125] For what regards their true self, in golden splendour they exhibit the celebrity one can obtain by earthly deeds and riches,[126] but they are then shown, in blackness and beyond external appearances, to be base, insatiable, and sad. Plutarch, indeed, had already stated clearly in *De sera num.* 7 (554b-c) that it is childish to infer the happiness of a person from the magnificence of their garments – a motif which he also develops in *Gryllus* 6 (989d-e) –,[127] and a prominent theme in his biography of Marius is the latter's constant dissatisfaction with his fortune, whose prestige and riches growing to exorbitant proportions would never be enough to fulfil his πλεονεξία and φιλοδοξία (*Mar.* 34, 6), until he ended his life lamenting his ill-luck (45,11-46, 5, with Plato mentioned as counter-example).[128]

Naturally, this interpretation is more defensible if the couple διαπύρους καὶ διαφανεῖς, describing the first properties acquired by the souls in the golden "flaming" bath (see ὑπὸ τοῦ φλέγεσθαι), is translated as "incandescent and shiny". The translation of διαφανής as "shiny" is not trivial, as the term is often rather used for "transparency", and various interpreters have in fact assigned to it this meaning.[129] However, considering that the adjective is used by Plutarch, differently from διαυγής,[130]

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123. See, *e.g.*, *Arist.* 1,5 (in connection with both φιλοτιμία and πλεονεξία); *Ca. Ma.* 3,3; *Pomp.* 24,3; *Ca. Mi.* 25,3 (quoted below).

124. The idea of a chastisement by enforced oblivion, in this work, is a development of the Epicureans' choice of "living unnoticed": see Hilton, 2019, pp. 139-140, 148-157 (whom I have already criticized above, n. 35) and compare with the punishment by *Erinýs* in *De sera num.* 25, 564f.

125. Cf. *TG et CG* 33,8. Also note that Plutarch concludes *De cup. div.* with considerations on the need of the wealthy to exhibit their riches to other people, without which they do not feel joy (10, 527f-528b).

126. Plutarch shows disregard towards such external possessions in, *e.g.*, *Pel.* 34,1 and *Praec. ger. reip.* 27, 820a-f. In the latter – where we find gold associated with φιλοτιμία – Plutarch proposes an "enigmatic" (see αἰνιττόμενος) interpretation of Plato's metaphor of gold (and silver) in *Resp.* III, 416e-417a; at the end of the chapter, he also warns about the very short life of excessive "honours" (τιμαί).

127. On the specific sorrows of the greedy see *De cup. div.* 5, 525b-c and Fr. 150 Sandbach; on the sadness of the rich Fr. 170 Sandbach.

128. Cf. also *Aem.* 12,12.

129. *E.g.*, Vernière in Klaerr & Vernière, 1974 and Görgemanns, 2009 (2003). Cf. Boulogne, 1994 (quoted below, sec. 3,3) and Taufer, 2010: "*diafane*".

130. Cf. however *Quaest. conv.* VI 7,2, 692f (διαυγῆ καὶ λαμπρόν) with *Lys.* 28,4. See also *De facie* 28, 943e, where διαυγής is used for souls. It is also used in the mythic section of *De genio Socr.* (22, 590b in

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also with the meanings of "shining through" (of something visible through an obsta-cle),[131] of "translucent" (*i.e.* receiving light inside or being internally visible),[132] and of "thoroughly shiny" (*i.e.* completely polished and clean),[133] it is not unreasonable to understand it in this last sense, which better fits the context. In fact, while the acquisition of transparency could neither be explained as a chemical consequence of burning nor as a transferal of a property of gold, a diffused brilliancy – as given by the polish – could instead be both assimilated to incandescence and, most surely, with the look of a bright metal such as gold.[134] It may not be a coincidence, then, that we can also find one Plutarchan passage in which διαφανής is used as a metaphor for "illustriousness" in the same way as λαμπρός, perhaps due to a stylistic need for *variatio*: "among the many lovers and admirers of Cato there were some who were more conspicuous (ἔκδηλοι) and illustrious (lit. shining-through, διαφανεῖς) than others. One of these was Quintus Hortensius, a man of splendid reputation (ἀξιώματός… λαμπροῦ) and excellent character" (*Ca. Mi.* 25,3).[135]

We may thus conclude that in the first lake the insatiable souls are made διαφανεῖς like both the gold they wanted to possess and the celebrated people they wanted to be; in becoming so, they are also made incandescent by the lake's extreme heat, so that their texture, just like that of a piece of iron – as Plutarch would explain – is softened and dilated in preparation for the cold immersion, which will harden it by contracting it again.[136] Here, we might also advance as a hypothesis that the first dilation of the souls, surely not explicit but implied by the chemistry behind the metallurgic treatment, is meant to represent the futile pride exhibited by the rich and

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couple with καθαρός, *i.e.* "pure"), for the air with which Timarchus's soul is said to mingle.

131. See *Amatorius* 21, 766e-f.

132. See, *e.g.*, *De prim. frig.* 13, 950b and 17, 953b (in both, the property is made to depend on the internal presence of air), *De Is. et Os.* 75, 381b. It is probably in this sense that souls are presented as διαφανεῖς ἐντός in *De sera num.* 24, 564d.

133. In this sense it is used in *De def. or.* 43, 434b for asbestos textiles, which become λαμπρά (!) and διαφανή when cleansed by "flames" (φλογά, detail already present in Strabo, *Geogr.* X 1,6, without use of διαφανής) – cf. the φλέγεσθαι in our passage.

134. Cf. *LSJ, s.v.* "διαφανής", I,2 ("red-hot"). Gold "sparkles through" the earth which covers it in *De am. prol.* 5, 497e. For possible associations of gold with fire see *Aqua an ignis* 1, 955d (ὁ δὲ χρυσὸς αἰθόμενον πῦρ, quoted from Pindar, *O.* 1,1); *De Pyth. or.* 16, 402a-b (with ἡλίου φάος, quoted from Scythinus, = Fr. 1 West); *Amatorius* 25, 711b (χρυσοειδῆ καὶ πυρράν). Cf. *Syll.* 16,4, where fire is associated with bronze and steel (λάμποντι πυροειδῆ).

135. Transl. Perrin, 1919.

136. On Plutarch's understanding of quench hardening – among the other details – as a contraction following a distension see *Quaest. conv.* VIII 9,3, 734a-b (partly quoted above); *De tuenda* 25, 136b; *De ad. et am.* 36, 73d; and *De def. or.* 47, 436c.

illustrious, since a common Greek metaphor for haughty behaviours, also used by Plutarch, was that of "swelling" or "puffing up" (φυσᾶσθαι).[137] A similar idea, indeed, appears in *Alc.* 6 (5) in connection with an analogy with iron quenching, to describe Socrates's timely philosophical interventions on Alcibiades whenever he found him "full of delicacy (θρύψις, lit. softness by internal fragmentation) and vanity (χαυνότης, lit. sponginess)",[138] likened to the iron's softening in fire and re-condensation caused by cold. In the scene of the three lakes, however, Plutarch seems to attribute no relevance to the implied changes in density.

In contrast, the implied softness of the incandescent souls, just like their heat, is surely overturned in the leaden bath, which confers to them an extreme level of hardness. This is the expected effect of quenching, *i.e.* of quickly immersing an incandescent piece of iron – after its temperature has been brought above the "eutectoid" point – into a much cooler medium (generally water at room temperature or oil).[139] The more the metal is hardened by the immersion, the lower its tensile strength becomes – resulting in higher brittleness –, and today we know that the intensity of these changes, as induced by the cooling, is directly proportional to the iron's carbon content; in fact, when this is too low the quenching is ineffective, and when this is too high the iron becomes too brittle.[140] Since, as we have seen, the souls are described to shatter "due to hardness" during their third immersion, we may be justified in supposing that their carbon content was too high for their quenching to produce a beneficial result: perhaps, they were "bad" iron to begin with, and since their fracturing brings to light their σαθρός state, the treatment in the lakes may turn out, in this way, to have the same effect of an assaying procedure (to be compared with the acoustic test of *De ad. et am.* 23, 64e, quoted above).[141]

Such low quality, however, is not pointed out in the presentation of the scene, and the souls' extraordinary hardness, rather than being linked with their material constitution, seems to depend solely on the lake's extreme coldness. Plutarch does closely associate hardness with low temperatures in *De prim. frig.* 18, which shows that for him they would suffice to make an object too hard and brittle: "cold,

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137. See, *e.g.*, *De ad. et am.* 28, 68f; *Comp. Dem. et Cic.* 2; Pseudo-Plato, *Alc.* 2, 145e.

138. Cf. *Sert.* 17,10-11 for a literal use of χαύνωμα (*hapax*), shortly followed by the verb θρύπτεσθαι.

139. See Congdon, 1971, pp. 19-23.

140. See, *e.g.*, Jernberg, 1918, p. 94, who considers 0.90-1.20% to be the best range of carbon content for a successful quenching, and claims that the increase in brittleness only starts to occur above 0.90% (while that in hardness is also noticeable below this point).

141. See also above, n. 101. Cf. Plato, *Soph.* 267e for the metaphor of assaying iron to check whether it is ὑγιής ("sound", the opposite of σαθρός) or having a διπλόη, *i.e.* a "seam" or "fold".

indeed, is perceptibly one of the hardest of things and it makes things hard and unyielding", after which he mentions Theophrastus's report of frozen fish "breaking" (κατάγνυσθαι) and "shattering" (συντρίβεσθαι!) when dropped "in the same way as glass or earthenware bodies", and a case of mantles becoming "so hard and woody, due to the freezing cold, that when they were opened out they broke (θραύεσθαι) and split apart (ῥήγνυσθαι)" (953c-d = Fr. 184 Wimmer).[142] The fact that the souls become this hard, therefore, is probably only implied to depend on the excessive coldness of the quenching medium, and the link between hardening and freezing is made explicit in our scene by the occurrence of the verb ἐκπαγῆναι (both "become congealed" and "freeze") in combination with the analogy with "hailstone". Now, if lead can achieve this effect it is because, as Plutarch's character explains in *Quaest. conv.* VI 5, it is "among the naturally cold [substances]", so much that this metal, "when rubbed with vinegar, sends forth the most cooling (ψυκτικώτατον) of deadly poisons: the *psimúthion*" (691b); this excellence, which is also recalled in *De facie* 5 by Lamprias, who speaks of "cold lead" (922c), is solidly reflected in contemporary medical literature.[143] Since coldness, as an intuitive attribute, is never associated by Plutarch with any other metal, lead should have seemed to him especially appropriate for the aim of an immoderate, destructive quenching. Considering all of this, his focusing, in the scene, on the souls' "freezing" may finally acquire a deeper meaning: when the souls are quenched in lead, inasmuch as they become extremely cold, they become similar to this paradigmatically cold metal: if the golden bath, in part, is meant to assimilate the souls to gold by making them shiny and fiery, in the lake of lead they may be assimilated to this latter by acquisition of its cold property.[144] The analogy with "hailstone" in σκληρὰς ὥσπερ

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142. Transl. based on Helmbold in Cherniss & Helmbold, 1957, modified. See also *Quaest. nat.* 13, 915b-c.

143. See Dioscorides, *MM* V 81,3 and Galen, *Simpl. med.* IX 23, XII 230-233 Kühn. The latter is also referenced by Boulogne, 1994, n. 85, who seems to ignore the Plutarchan *loci*. Lead was already regarded as cold in Theophrastus, *Od.* 41.

144. A more intuitive attribute would have been heaviness: see *Ad princ. iner.* 2, 779f-780a (mentioned above, n. 101), and *De prof. in virt.* 1, 75b with *Non posse* 14, 1096c (both using the image of the "leaden-sink", μολυβδίς). In the latter passage, echoing Plato, *Resp.* VII 519a-b, bodily pleasures are assimilated to a leaden-sink drawing down the intellectual faculty of the soul and weakening it: despite this image being completely unrelated to greed or even metallurgy, this is the only Plutarchan parallel mentioned by Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, p. 306, n. 50 for the scene of the three lakes. His connection has been strangely endorsed by Taufer, 2010, n. to 567b-c, but the passage may be better linked with the image in *De sera num.* 27, 566a.

αἱ χάλαζαι, which for "hardness" is both unprecedented[145] and not appearing in other Plutarchan *loci*,[146] may perhaps be best explained, in this context, exactly as a way to stress the symbolic relevancy of coldness to this phase of the treatment; if the reader did not grasp it (which is indeed possible, considering the ambiguity of ἐκπαγείσας), the assimilation with "cold lead" would not be evoked.

The "golden", splendid souls of the "insatiable and greedy" are this way forced to reveal their cold, "leaden" self. This manifest debasement is consolidated when their extreme hardness – used by Plutarch, elsewhere, in analogies with iron softening to describe a miser losing his rigidity of character[147] – is tested in the lake of iron; here, they become "iron" inasmuch as black, and the adverb "terribly" (δεινῶς) removes any possible doubt on the distance between this final shade and the souls' initial, "gleaming" incandescence. This black iron can hardly be compared with the shining steel which in the *Vitae*, sometimes, characterizes the equipment of glorious armies and commanders;[148] nothing in these souls can be considered glorious, so much that in the end they are swathed in obscurity. In shattering, which obviously changes their shape (see τὰ εἴδη μετέβαλλον),[149] they may become smaller and smaller and so reduce their visible grandeur, or, if there is any coherence with the metaphor in *De sera num.* 11 (555f-556d), they may be revealed to be at the mercy of incontrollable

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145. Except in *Septuaginta*, *Is.* 28,2, where the focus is rather on the strong impact of hailstone against the objects it falls on; cf. 30,3.

146. But hailstone is curiously mentioned in *De prim. frig.* 13, 950c-d just after a remark on iron quenching, without direct relationship with it. In this passage, hailstone, ice and snow are presented to be "brightest" (λαμπρότατα) and "coldest" (ψυχρότατα). The stress on these two trivial and observable qualities is strictly functional to the refutation of the idea that the darkest element is the coldest (949f-950a). Arguably, this passage cannot be used as proof that Plutarch would conceive hailstone as a paradigmatically "bright" substance, and thus mention it in the scene of the three lakes to evoke such property: the three substances are selected by Plutarch in reason of their trivial coldness (the theme), while their brightness is pointed out (as rheme) to clarify their pertinence to the refutation; in this example, therefore, the property of coldness is the one figuring as paradigmatic – not brightness (albeit this being evident and trivial in the same degree). Also, the immersion in the second lake does not seem to be associated with any optical or chromatic change.

147. See *Quaest. conv.* I 5,1, 622d and *Amatorius* 17, 762c.

148. See, *e.g.*, *Syll.* 16,4 (quoted above, n. 134); *Aem.* 18,8 and 32,5 (in both mentioned with bronze); and *Alex.* 32,9, for a steel helmet that "glittered like pure silver". See also Hesiod's formulaic αἴθωνι σιδήρῳ (*Op.* 743), quoted by Plutarch in *De Is. et Os.* 4, 352e.

149. Cf. Boulogne, 1994, par. 16 (digital edition), whose "chromatic" interpretation of the term εἴδη, quoted above, sec. 2, cannot be ruled out on merely semantic grounds (for an alchemical use of εἶδος in his sense coupled with μεταβάλλεσθαι, albeit later, see Synesius, *pròs Dióskoron eis tèn bíblon Dēmokrítou*, 12, 197 Martelli = *CAAG* II 64,14). The "mechanical" interpretation is more likely because the change of εἶδος is caused by the souls' περικλᾶν and συνβτρίβεσθαι.

regret.[150] Whatever the significance of their change of shape towards the revealing of their actual self, their fracturing provides in any case an efficient *contrapasso*, as the "hardness" of their behaviour is finally used to make them suffer. After this, they are brought back to the first lake for a new cycle of the metallurgic torments.

3.3. The Earlier Interpretations

Looking back at the results of this discussion, we may claim to have found some possible explanations for the image, all cumulative, but each with a different degree of likelihood. The safest interpretation is that the "greedy" souls are inflicted *contrapasso* by being first sunk in precious gold and then in worthless lead and iron; the *contrapasso* is also applicable to the "ambitious", as they are made to regress from golden splendour to iron-black obscurity. In the subsequent immersions, the souls undergo some chemical alterations, modelled on iron quenching: these, in addition to causing suffering and physiological disruption, may be meant to symbolize different phases of a revealing of the souls' main vice. There are details suggesting that in each immersion the souls become assimilated to the metals receiving them: if this is true, the character of the greedy is progressively revealed to be not precious as their golden riches, but base as lead and as bad iron (which may also be the meaning behind the "dusky and filthy" stain). Regardless of these assimilations, the souls' acquisition – in lead – of extreme hardness might hint at the penuriousness of a certain kind of greedy people, too rigid in their behaviours to be able to enjoy their riches; their breaking and fracturing – in iron – might hint at their character's fragility, when it is finally taken over by regret and sadness; and their implied dilating – in burning gold – might hint at the swelling pride induced by their initial gain and growing celebrity. The last two hypotheses are the least likely, but the preceding appear to be sufficiently corroborated by parallel passages, and most fit with the other chastisements presented in chapter 30.

This interpretation, in its whole, is evidently incompatible with those assuming that the metallurgic treatment is identifiable with a cleansing procedure. Vernière's references to Virgil's "*flammes purificatrices*" and to the Zoroastrian image of an ordeal by molten metals are hardly relevant,[151] if the transformations induced by the three lakes, rather than promoting cleanlier and brighter looks (or discriminating the pure souls from the impure), always begin with extreme brilliancy to overturn it into δεινός black. Surely, the purer state is symbolically associated with the immersion

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150. See above, sec. 2.
151. See above, sec. 3,1 with n. 86.

in the golden lake, and it cannot be a coincidence that Boulogne, in order to make his interpretation stand, had to posit that the treatment ends exactly when the souls are "again taken into the gold", rather than continuing cyclically.[152] In Boulogne's account, the chemical reason of the fourth immersion, different from the first as not anymore functional to the "*jaunissement* [?] *de la chrysopée*" (ξάνθωσις), is arguably unclear. He claims, from what it seems, that the souls' regeneration "*qui commence par un blanchiment*" (λεύκωσις) should happen in the lake of iron, thanks to their "*craquage*", and that this, in turn, follows "*la dégénération, marquée par l'apparition de la couleur noire*" (μελάνωσις), obtained (apparently) in the same lake before the souls are smashed together; if the souls, after this, are plunged a second and last time into the boiling gold, it is just "*afin que la calcination de l'incandescence lui restitue définitivement sa diaphanéité*". The obvious problem with this interpretation is that the souls, according to Plutarch's description, already become διαφανεῖς in their first bath, while the reference to the fourth is not associated with chemical details, nor explicitly distinguished from the first. This problem, in combination with Boulogne's questionable translations and with his disregard for textual parallels, makes his interpretation particularly unlikely. I have shown that in Pérez-Jiménez's proposal, in contrast, we do find supportive references to *loci* in early alchemical literature, but relevant Plutarchan parallels, unfortunately, are lacking there in the same way as in all the other treatments of the image.[153]

In fact, the attitude of searching for explanations outside of Plutarch's corpus without first ruling out all of the internal possibilities was already evident in Wyttenbach's 1772 commentary, which, in addition to suggesting, very soberly, the earliest explanation in terms of *contrapasso*, also provided the first interpretation of a rather 'exotic' or 'occult' character.[154] Wyttenbach, careful in presenting his proposal as a mere hypothesis, writes that either Plutarch chose exactly those three metals "*pro lubitu*", *i.e.*, freely and without specific meaning, or he let his imagination be somewhat inspired by the Persian magi. The reference is to an image, proper to the Mithraic mysteries, described by Celsus in a quotation reported in Origen's *Contra Celsum* (VI 22), of a ladder that the souls of the initiated must ascend, going through seven doors each of a different metal associated with a different planet, including lead (the first, symbolizing the slowness of Saturn), iron (the fourth, symbolizing

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152. See Boulogne, 1994, par. 22 (digital edition); above, sec. 2 and 3.1.
153. See Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, pp. 305-306; above, sec. 2 with nn. 60 and 61.
154. Wyttenbach, 1772, "*Animadversiones* […]", p. 124, partly quoted above, sec. 3,1.

the steadfast laboriousness towards gain of Mercury),[155] and gold (the seventh, sharing the colour of the Sun).[156] Wyttenbach supposes that Plutarch, in composing his scene, might have drawn some colour ("*colorem*") from this image or from a similar one ("*ex hoc aut simili figmento*"); in concluding his note, however, after his remark on the appropriateness of the *contrapasso*, he decides to end with a skeptical invitation to avoid over-interpreting the passage: "*sed praestat in his non plura argutari*". These last statements have been quoted by the "anti-exotic" Taufer as "*il giudizio più equilibrato sul nostro passo*",[157] but others have dedicated more attention to the first, Mithraic part of the note. Vernière, in particular, reported Wyttenbach's proposal with caution in 1974, explicitly taking distance from it ("*le rapprochement est-il possible?*"),[158] but then abandoned the caution in 1977, when she used this association, together with her mention of the ordeal by molten metals, to substantiate her claim that "*Plutarque sait donc à l'occasion se démarquer de ses sources grecques et enrichir sa pensée mythique par un appel discret à l'Orient*".[159] For this, Vernière was sharply criticized in 1980 by Ioan P. Culianu, who rejected the Mithraic parallelism without offering any counter-argument ("*la 'scala mitriaca' di Celso non ha niente a che fare con la visione di Tespesio!*"), and, avoiding to provide personal comments on the chastisements, simply referred to Albrecht Dieterich's 1893 monograph *Nekyia* as an antidote against "Orientalizing" explanations.[160]

Now, in Dieterich's treatment of the image, in addition to some unsubstantiated conclusions on its Orphic-Pythagorean origin,[161] we find a perfect representation of another recurrent problem in the literature concerning the three lakes: the tendency to mistranslate or misinterpret the most important phrases in Plutarch's passage. It is unclear whether this problem also involves Pérez-Jiménez's subversion of the order

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155. The term for "laborious" is πολύκμητος, lit. "wrought with much toil", a Homeric epithet of iron, *e.g.*, in *Il.* VI 48.

156. Notice that two steps separate lead from iron and iron from gold: the succession, if cyclical, would indeed broadly correspond to Plutarch's (except for the fact that there would not be two steps separating gold and lead).

157. Taufer, 2010, n. to 567b-c.

158. In Klaerr & Vernière, 1974, n. 1 to 567d. On Plutarch's scant references to Mithraism see Campos Méndez, 2013 (appropriately, with no mention of this *locus* in *De sera num.*).

159. Vernière, 1977, p. 203.

160. See Culianu, 1980, p. 170, with nn. 92 and 94. His interpretation was severely misrepresented by Pérez-Jiménez, 1996, p. 301.

161. See Dieterich, 1893, pp. 146-147; he rules out the possibility of a Xenocritean or Stoic origin of the idea and assumes as self-explanatory that Plutarch could not conceive it on his own.

of the lakes, according to which the leaden was the first,[162] but Dieterich's error is such that in his account the lake of iron ("rough in iron", τραχεῖαν σιδήρου) becomes a lake of silver ("harten Silbers"); a mistake repeated in 2004 by Claudia Wiener, in an article specifically dedicated to the myth of Thespesius ("*Thespesius sieht auch die Seelenschmiede am Gold-, Silber- und Bleisee*", also notice the subverted order).[163] The presence of a misinterpretation might also be supposed for Georges Méautis's short remark, in his 1935 introduction to the text, that Plutarch "*décrit les lacs d'or, de plomb ed de fer où sont plongés les coupables*",[164] in which the specific category of the "insatiable and greedy" – probably crucial to an adequate understanding of the symbolism – disappears in the broader, generic class of the "*coupables*"; whether Méautis actually misunderstood the passage or not (it is true that in his translation the syntagm "*par la cupidité et l'ambition*" does appear for δι' ἀπληστίαν καὶ πλεονεξίαν), Culianu, who probably depended on his introduction, clearly did ("*i colpevoli di crimini non specificati, ma senz'altro gravi* […]").[165] Finally, as it seems likely that Frazier considered the souls' reshaping described in chapter 32 (567e-568a) to be connected with the three-lakes treatment of chapter 30,[166] we can claim with confidence that this also applies to the deforming synthesis given by Rainer Hirsch-Luipold in 2014 of the sequence of punishments: "souls that are reworked, filed, hammered, and bent, thrown into fire [?] and finally into tempering water [?]".

3.4. The Parallel with Zosimus

I have shown that this "metallurgic" scene in Thespesius's vision, rather, seems to be adequately explained in the frame of an eschatology of *contrapasso*, as the souls are ironically transformed by the demons into what they really are, while also provided with the object of their main earthly desire and then its opposite. It is now useful to finally take into account the latest of the "alchemical" perspectives on the three immersions of chapter 30. Olivier Dufault, in 2019, examining the dreams narrated and commented on by Zosimus of Panopolis in his three allegorical *Práxeis* ("Lessons", *MA* X, XI, XII Mertens = *CAAG* II 107-113, 115-117, 117-118), offered a novel interpretation of their meaning, centred on Christian soteriology rather than

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162. See above, sec. 2 with n. 62.
163. Wiener, 2004, p. 53.
164. Méautis, 1935b, p. 69.
165. Culianu, 1980, p. 170.
166. See above, sec. 3,1.

on technical procedures.[167] In these highly visionary accounts, we see men of various metallic constitutions undergoing painful treatments such as burnings, dismemberments, and embalmings in a temple-like environment partly evoking the image of an alchemist's apparatus, *e.g.* in the presence of a "bowl-altar" containing bubbling water (φιαλοβωμός; *MA* X 2, 26; 3, 44-45; 4, 89-90). Since these processes are repeatedly referred to, by the speaking characters of the visions, as "punishments" (κολάσεις, firstly appearing in *MA* X 3, 63; see also τιμωρουμένων in 3, 73 and διεκδικήσασα in 6, 130), Dufault seems to be justified in drawing a comparison between these and some of the chastisements described mythically by Plutarch, who appears this way to have somewhat anticipated Zosimus by a couple of centuries, in using "alchemical" imagery for the aims of eschatological symbolism. Dufault points out that our passage in *De sera num.* 30 shares striking similarities with Zosimus's accounts, even on a terminological level, as they both depict "color-changes and metallurgical processes (immersion or 'tinctures' –*baphai* [see βάπτοντες in 567c]) representing punishments (one consisting in a 'reversion/transformation' – *ekstrephei, ektrepousin* [see ἐκτρέπουσιν in 567b]) and taking place in an imaginary space". It may be fruitful to investigate further into their parallels, to verify whether we can conclude or not that there is a significative cultural or literary affinity between the two; given the limited space of this article, I will only comment on the correspondences with the image of the three lakes.

The inspirations behind Zosimus's imagery, partly analyzed in the authoritative 1995 commentary by Michèle Mertens "*par le recours à des parallèles littéraires*",[168] have been most recently investigated by Marina Escolano-Poveda with reference to the necessary complement of Egyptian iconography,[169] suggesting convincingly that Zosimus's fictional dreams may have had a rather religious and cultic inspiration. Notwithstanding the centrality of such Egyptian influences, Zosimus's writing, being that of a Greek author, was surely also informed by existing Greek literary models, perhaps with the inclusion of Hermetic and Gnostic apocalypses,[170] and even of Platonic philosophical myths.[171] Dufault, in fact, connects the dreams' alchemical imag-

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167. See Dufault, 2019, pp. 104-117. Idem, in this issue.

168. Mertens, 1995, pp. 210-211.

169. See Escolano-Poveda, in this issue.

170. See Mertens, 1995, p. 208.

171. Zosimus, in addition to mentioning Plato in *MA* I 8, 76 Mertens (= *CAAG* II 230,18-19) with the epithet τρισμέγας ("thrice-great"), presents gold in *MA* X 8, 144-148 as τὸ μονόειδον τὸ ἐκ πολλῶν εἰδῶν ("the [substance] of a single species, that [brought about] from multiple species", *i.e.* transmuted from multiple materials), probably echoing the syntagm μονοειδὲς γένος ("genus of a single species", *i.e.*

ery with the Christian-inspired anthropogony illustrated by Zosimus in the treatise *Perì toũ ō stoikheíou* ("On the letter Omega", *MA* I Mertens = *CAAG* II 228-234) and with the moral teachings addressed to Theosebeia in the *Teleutaía apokhḗ* ("Final count", *CH* I 363-365 Festugière = *CAAG* II 239-246): if the *Práxeis* were indeed symbolic soteriological narrations, not only would they have certainly received some influence from earlier and contemporary apocalyptic literature,[172] but they would also belong to a very similar genre to that of Thespesius's vision in *De sera num*. If this were the case, it would be possible to suggest that somehow, during the Imperial period, Plato's literary invention of the symbolic eschatological vision – as best exemplified in the myth of Er – started to incorporate metallurgic themes: these, which for the first time in the extant Graeco-Latin literature were featured prominently in Plutarch's *De sera num*., came to acquire absolute centrality in Zosimus's accounts.

Before we offer a hypothesis on the cause of this development, it is appropriate to first return to the correspondences between Zosimus's visions and Plutarch's myth in *De sera num*., which seem to be limited to their imagery (as there appears to be no significant similarity between the main tenets of Plutarch's and Zosimus's eschatology). Limiting our discussion to the chastisement in the three lakes, it is indeed impressive to read in *De sera num*. of souls enduring metallic alterations, both in constitution and in colour, in a progression – although not paralleled in Zosimus's texts – which surely associates gold with the highest value while contrasting it with that of lead: we can indeed find correspondences of this idea in Zosimus's visions, in which both metals are personified in the characters of a "man of gold" (χρυσάνθρωπον; *MA* X 5, 117-118) representing the final stage of a progress towards perfection (see also the τέλειος χρυσός in 7, 139-140, and 8, 146-148), and of a "man of lead" (μολυβδάνθρωπος) claiming to be the object of an "unendurable violence" (ἀφόρητος βία; *MA* XI 2, 43-49, cf. *MA* X 2, 28-29 – compare with the ἀλγηδόνες δειναί in *De sera num*. 30, 567d). However, the differences are at least as important as the similarities, and the iron lake, which is prominent in Plutarch's *tableau* as the place of culmination into the souls' shattering and change of εἶδος, has no correspondence in any mention of iron in Zosimus's dreams; in fact, while boilings and burnings, in these, are certainly represented (see, *e.g.*, *MA* X 3, 49-51), heat treatments aimed at hardening or softening a metal, which I have shown to be at the core

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purely watery and not associated with the other elements) in Plato's *Timaeus* (59b); see Viano, 2005b, pp. 100-101. Zosimus allegedly composed a biography of Plato, as attested in the Lexicon *Sud.*, Z 168 Adler; on this voice see Mertens, 1995, pp. XCVII-CI.

   172. See Dufault, 2019, pp. 110-111 for some specific parallels.

of Plutarch's scene, make no appearance (also notice that the verb βάπτειν, in *De sera num.* 30, is used for the only immersion that is not followed by a change of colour; its unambiguous denotation of an act of "quenching" makes it impossible to connect it semantically with the chromatic changes described by Zosimus, who does not even use the term βαφή in the *Práxeis*). Furthermore, although it is true that Zosimus personifies both lead and gold, he assigns much more "stage time" to another metallic actor: the "man of copper" (ἄνθρωπος χαλκοῦς or χαλκάνθρωπος; *MA* X 3, 61; 3, 70; 4, 81; 5, 113-117; XI 1, 19-24), who is the one who ends up transformed into the "man of gold" through an intermediary phase as "man of silver" (*MA* X 5, 113-117). Neither copper nor silver play any role in Plutarch's myth, and this can be also said for tin, which Zosimus mentions as part of his list of the "four transformations of metals" – *i.e.* the ones "of lead, of copper, of silver, of tin" – from which the τέλειος χρυσός can be obtained (*MA* X 7, 137-140); it seems that the low prominence of lead, in Zosimus's visions (see also *MA* X 4, 61-65; 10, 138; XII 2, 22-24), is not really comparable with that assigned to it by Plutarch in the scene of the three lakes.

Of all the correspondences noted by Dufault, the one that might appear as the most solid is the one involving Plutarch's analogy with sea-scolopendras "turning themselves inside out" (567b),[173] since Zosimus's first *Prāxis* contains a repeated image of self-regurgitation (see *MA* X 2, 36-38 with XI 2, 41-42, and X 3, 69-71), but this parallel too is likely to be only coincidental: while Plutarch's image comes from the domain of bizarre zoology, and is only used by Plutarch to visualize a thorough "unveiling of the hidden", Zosimus's symbol, which ends in a transformation (see X 2, 33-35 and 39, and 3, 55-57), is rather probably evocative, in the context of the dreamt "shrine" (*e.g.* 5, 104-108), of a mummification (see the ταριχεία, *i.e.* "embalming", in 3, 54-55). If the new suggestions by Marina Escolano-Poveda are correct, the allusion might have been to the ritual embalming of Osiris performed as part of the mysteries at Dendera, an environment to which it is also possible to trace back the images of the "man of gold" and those of other metallic constitutions.[174] Since all the clues appear to draw Zosimus away from Plutarch's original inspirations and deep into the ritual symbolism of Egyptian cults, it seems highly unlikely that the images used by the two authors share any concrete affinity.

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173. See above, sec. 3,1.
174. See Escolano-Poveda, in this issue, section 4.

4. Plutarch's Originality and the Alexandrian *Milieu*

Still, the metallurgic theme of the two texts remains impressive: although it is hardly surprising to find it in Zosimus's *Práxeis* – either considered as symbolic figurations of alchemical procedures or as texts of soteriology sprung from the imagination of an alchemist –, it is true that we cannot detect any Greek author, prior to Plutarch, who represented afterlife vicissitudes in metallurgic terms. It is always possible to suppose that this development in imagery was due to Plutarch's independent creativity,[175] perhaps inspired by the already existing metaphors of "softened" characters and emotions, and thus of souls, or more specifically by the Stoic *stómōsis* of souls from *pneûma;*[176] by developing these images repeatedly into full-fledged rhetorical analogies, Plutarch's imagination might have become accustomed, in the act of ornate writing, to visualizing souls as metallic bodies subject to physical alterations: in this intuitive metaphorical matrix, built over years of literary activity,[177] he might have found a partial basis for his new eschatological symbolism.

This seems to be a safe conclusion, but after our close look at Zosimus's imagery and at its inspirations, we may be justified in suggesting another, cumulative hypothesis. Since we have been able, with Escolano-Poveda, to connect his main symbols with the religious setting of Egyptian temples, and it is likely that the rituals and representations that inspired him had already existed for quite some time before he learned about them (or witnessed them),[178] we may suggest the possibility that Plutarch's eschatological imagination was partly influenced by the aesthetics of Egyptian religion.[179] This hypothesis is not far-fetched, if we consider that Plutarch's most developed considerations on theological and mythological hermeneutics are framed in *De Iside et Osiride*, a relatively long treatise devoted entirely to Egyptian religious discourse and practice, and addressed to none other than a priestess of Osiris (Klea, on whom see 1, 351c and 35, 364d-e). It seems unreasonable to suppose that after Plutarch's thinking focussed with such interpretative care on abundant Egyptian material his imagination came out of it unchanged: in some areas,

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175. This is the opinion of Sfameni Gasparro, 2014, p. 200.

176. See above, sec. 2 with n. 69.

177. Note that *De sera num.* is supposed to be a late dialogue: see above, n. 10.

178. See Escolano-Poveda, in this issue, section 7.

179. Brenk, 1992, pp. 40-41, 53-54 suggests that there might be a much deeper Egyptian influence, even inspiring the philosophical concept of *epopteía* ("highest grade of initiation") among "Alexandrian" Middle Platonists up to Plutarch (see *De Is. et Os.* 77, 382c-d); see also below, n. 187. In Brenk, 1999, pp. 234-235, he stresses Plutarch's "Egyptomania" as the sentiment which drove him to Platonize Egyptian religion in *De Is. et Os.*, which is arguably a stretch.

it must have been inspired by the Egyptian imagery at least to a minimal degree. Unfortunately, we are not allowed to assume this for the scene of the three lakes, as *De Is. et Os.* contains no metallurgic symbols which could corroborate our claim.[180] However, if Zosimus's alchemical imagery was truly dependent on Egyptian material, it is likely that such material already existed in Plutarch's time and had had its influence on Egyptian culture and literature: for this reason, it is not impossible that Plutarch came into contact with such imagery, and that this inspired his eschatological use of metallurgic themes. This hypothesis will have to be suspended until specific literary or iconographical evidence is adduced, but some parallels reported by Dufault may provide some help, while also adding a layer of complexity. After examining Zosimus's soteriology, he writes that the alchemist was not original "in using gold transmutation to discuss eschatological self-transformation";[181] in fact, it is possible to find "much older images representing or equating ethical and metallic purification", referred to corrupt peoples, in Biblical texts such as *Ieremias* (6,27-30), *Iezechiel* (22,16-22), *Zacharias* (13,9), and *Malachias* (3,3). In all these passages, except the last, metal smelting is associated with images of counterfeits and assaying procedures,[182] either assimilated to an ordeal (*Ier.*, *Zach.*), or underlying a divine punishment by ways of melting (*Iez.*).[183] Now, although Plutarch did mention Jews in his writings and showed curiosity about their puzzling religious views and practices,[184] we have no reason to suppose he had any first-hand knowledge of the *Septuaginta*.[185] This is not a problem, because we know from *Quaest. conv.* V 5 (1, 678c) that he visited the Egyptian centre which at the time had the most influential and intellectually active Jewish community of the Hellenized world: Alexandria, the city itself in which

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180. Plutarch's report citing Manetho (Fr. 77 Müller) that the Egyptians call the lodestone "bone of Horus" and iron "[bone] of Typhon" (*De Is. et Os.* 62, 376b-c), along with its symbolic interpretation, can hardly count as such.

181. Dufault, 2019, pp. 115-116, with n. 89.

182. In the *Septuaginta* version of all three, we find multiple occurrences of the adjective δόκιμος and of its derivative δοκιμάζειν. Cf. my references to assaying procedures above, sec. 3,2.

183. To these passages we may add *Septuaginta*, *Prov.* 27,21, in which we read that "assay (δοκίμιον) to silver and gold is burning, but man is assayed (δοκιμάζεται) through the mouth of those who praise him". I thank Gerasimos Merianos for this reference. Compare with the Zoroastrian ordeal by molten metals mentioned above, n. 86.

184. See especially *Quaest. conv.* IV 5, 669e-671c and 6, 671c-672c. For other passages and a minimal bibliography on the subject see Hirsch-Luipold, 2021, p. 21. For an extensive presentation of all the references to Jews in both the *Vitae* and the *Moralia*, see Muñoz Gallarte, 2008.

185. So Hirsch-Luipold, 2021, p. 21. See his n. 51 for an introduction to the debate on Plutarch's source(s) on Judaism, and below, n. 187.

the *Septuaginta* were translated,[186] and in which Judaism and (Middle) Platonism were first married in the thought of Philo, the first Greek biblical allegorist.[187] From the cultural *milieu* of this city – both directly and indirectly – Plutarch must have brought to Chaeronea some aesthetic suggestions of an originally Egyptian or Jewish character, and perhaps already syncretized.[188] It is such an intellectual context that favoured in the same period the birth and spread of Hermeticism and Gnosticism,[189] and Israel Muñoz Gallarte has recently suggested, based on a comparison in soteri-ological imagery similar to mine (but centred on the idea of souls "marrying" with the divine), that Gnostic texts and Plutarch's works had to be connected in some "cultural intertextuality".[190] Hermetic and Gnostic apocalypses, in turn, are likely to have influenced the *Práxeis* written by Zosimus,[191] who, uncoincidentally, is thought to have lived in Alexandria.[192] If we really want to connect the metallurgic products of

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186. See Fraser, 1972, pp. 689-690.

187. Hirsch-Luipold, 2021, p. 21, after remarking that "Plutarch obviously lacks first-hand-information" on Judaism, supposes that he was taught about it "by Egyptian priests while spending some time in Alexandria". On Plutarch's relationship with Judaism, in addition to Muñoz Gallarte, 2008, see Brenk, 1996, with specific considerations on *De sera num.* and comparisons between the myth of Thespesius and Imperial-Age Jewish apocalypses. Some scholars have suggested that the (alleged) Pythagorean character of Plutarch's Platonism might have depended on the philosophical profile of his master Ammonius, who is supposed to have brought Neopythagoreanism to Athens from Alexandria [see Brenk, 2017b (1987), pp. 18-19], but the connection of Ammonius with Alexandria is merely inferred from the similarities between his philosophy (what we can reconstruct of it) and that of thinkers such as Eudorus and Philo of Alexandria, who are assumed to have influenced the philosophical climate of the city. For a complete overview see Opsomer, 2009.

188. The syncretism is acknowledged by Plutarch himself: see *De Is. et Os.* 31, 363d.

189. On Hermeticism and Alexandria see Fowden, 1993, pp. 161-165; on the incorporation of Jewish ideas pp. 36-37. According to Scopello, 2008, p. 1773, the widespread notion that Alexandria was the main "lieu de composition des écrits gnostiques" is not grounded in factual evidence (p. 1773), but this does not disprove that Gnosticism arose from the interaction of Graeco-Egyptian paganism with Judaism and Christianity, nor that important parts of their systems were modeled on (Middle) Platonist tenets; Alexandria was a perfect *milieu* for these encounters.

190. See Muñoz Gallarte, 2021, pp. 163-171, with bibliography on the cultural relationship between Plutarch and the Gnostics. For further references see Roig Lanzillotta 2021, who, in comparing Plutarch's take on how to reach Platonic ὁμοίωσις θεῷ with the Gnostics' views on the same matter found in the *Nag Hammadi* writings, proposes that they tapped into a common "philosophical-religious continuum", without positing any direct historical derivation. Plutarch's theology was already compared with the Gnostics' by Dörrie, 1981, who, after discussing some similarities, rejected the conclusion of a dependency in favour of "*Affinität*". For comparisons between the myth in *De sera num.* and Christian apocalypses see Brenk, 1996, pp. 251-252, 255-256 (and for a Gnostic parallel see above, n. 108).

191. See above, n. 170.

192. See Mertens, 1995, pp. XIII-XIV.

Plutarch's eschatological creativity with an external source of influence, it seems that the best candidate, based on the available evidence, is neither the "esoteric" Mithraism nor the "Eastern" Zoroastrianism, but the syncretistic, and already Platonizing, religious environment of Alexandria.

In any case, this connection might be destined to remain speculative, and it is after all unnecessary. As I have observed, Plutarch might have well been inspired by metaphorical associations embedded in his use of the Greek language, and the inspiration might have also come from any image, of whatever origin, which had left a mark on him: we have indeed seen that he modelled one of his chastisements on the (originally) Aristotelian report of sea-scolopendras turning their insides out, which we have no reason to imagine having any religious significance prior to Plutarch's mythical use. It is true, however, that while the vipers and sea-scolopendras of *De sera num.* 30 (567b) are only mentioned in analogies, the immersions in the three lakes (567c-d), as well as the "smoothing away" of stains (26, 565c-d) and even the forceful reshaping of chapter 32 (567e-f), are presented in literal terms. This might be a signal that Plutarch regarded these images to be sufficiently visualizable and understandable with direct reference to the souls – *i.e.* without additional analogical specification – and therefore that his readers could intuitively imagine souls as metals. This expectation might have relied both on commonplace Greek metaphors and on existing tendencies in the Egyptian or Jewish religious symbolism: with further textual and iconographical parallels we may be able to better substantiate this hypothesis; until then, supposing polygenesis appears to be the safer choice.

5. CONCLUSION

As a concluding remark, we may reaffirm that neither the "dusky" colour of the stain of "miserliness and greed" in chapter 26 (565b-d) nor the specific punishment for "insatiability and greed" in chapter 30 (567c-d) – on close inspection – can be taken to symbolize any of the central preoccupations of the theology of *De sera num.*, centred on the benevolent care of the god for the moral perfectioning of human souls. Rather, they must probably be interpreted as clever representations of their corresponding vice, of its nature, and of the character, worth, and unhappiness of those who are affected by it in life. That Plutarch had a specific interest in such ethical teaching is evident from his *De cupiditate divitiarum* and by the surviving fragments of his treatise *Perì* or *Katà ploútou* ("On" or "Against wealth", Frr. 149-152 Sandbach). In the myth of Thespesius, he probably seized the opportunity given by the subject of afterlife torments also to suggest some lesser "truths" concerning greed and the other vices, which the reader could decode by aptly interpreting the punishments as forms

of *contrapasso*. After all, a symbolic interpretation of myth along the lines of minor ethics, contrasted with Stoicising physical allegoreses, was explicitly endorsed by Plutarch in *De aud. poet.* 4 (19f) for the Homeric presentation of the enchanted girdle of Aphrodite in *Ilias* XIV (214-223): as we read in this passage, Homer's symbol "teaches those who will pay attention that vulgar music, coarse songs, and stories treating of vile themes, create licentious characters, unmanly lives, and men that love luxury, soft living, intimacy with women […]".[193] Similar explanations, perhaps, should be also given for some of the smaller details in Plutarch's eschatological myths.

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