# 5 Syriac Translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius

## A Gnomic Format for an Instructional Purpose?

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A selection of texts by Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius were translated into Syriac during Late Antiquity. Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira*[1] and *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*,[2] Ps.-Plutarch's *De exercitatione*,[3] Lucian's *De calumnia*[4] and Themistius' *De amicitia*[5] and *De virtute*[6] are literary works by pagan authors that were translated between the fifth and the sixth centuries. They survive today in Syriac manuscripts that were written between the seventh and the ninth centuries.[7] Given the absence of prefaces, colophons or any information external to the texts, there is no explicit indication about the identity of the translators or about the origin of the translations. The only viable path to understand why Syrian scholars were interested in Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius is a close analysis of what the texts themselves (and their manuscripts) say.

Luckily, translations are a special kind of literature. The editing and abridgement strategy that the translators adopted allows us to catch a glimpse of their aims as well as of the audiences that they foresaw. I have argued elsewhere that the omission of most references to pagan religion and mythology as well as the practice of anonymising and glossing proper names of figures of the historical past reveals that the translators intended to make use of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius as instructional texts suitable for Christians.[8] The present chapter focuses on the translators' aims by analysing the form in which the texts were reshaped and presented to the target audience. It will be shown that the translators paid special attention to the form of the text, and it will be argued that the gnomic sequences that they introduced display important similarities with wisdom literature. A close textual analysis of the Syriac translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius can thus help remove them from the scholarly isolation to which they have been so far relegated, and can open new paths to a more organic understanding of the translations within established literary traditions and, beyond that, within the cultural life of Late Antiquity.

## Editing the Texts

The process of editing that the Syriac Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius underwent reveals that the translations were meant to be used as instructional texts suitable for a Christian readership. The first concern for the translators was the

references to pagan religion that they found in the Greek originals. The translators systematically omitted mentions of pagan deities; or, whenever possible, they rendered them with the word 'God'. Secondly, the translators went about carefully in their rendering of the anecdotes based on mythological figures, such as Achilles, Agamemnon and Athena, which were for the most part omitted in translation. While the *exempla* based on historical personalities were mostly translated, the *exempla* based on mythological figures were mostly omitted.[9] A third noticeable change that the translators applied to the texts relates to the rendering of proper names. On many occasions the proper names of characters appearing in anecdotes are omitted and replaced with generic and anonymous designations, such as 'a king', 'a wise man' and 'a philosopher'. To give a few examples, 'Xerxes' became, in Syriac, 'a Persian king', 'Pindar' became 'a wise man' and the Pontifex Maximus 'Spurius Minucius' became 'the judge'. It is difficult to imagine that somebody able to read Plutarch in Greek would not be aware of the identity of Xerxes or Pindar, and such changes should instead be understood as indicative of the translators' instructional aims. It is especially remarkable that some of such descriptions correctly identify even lesser-known figures when such information was not immediately available in the text: such as 'Porus', who was described as 'the king of the Indians'; 'Arcesilaus', who was termed 'a philosopher'; and 'Pylades', who was called 'Orestes' friend'.[10]

The present analysis focuses on another notable feature that likewise betrays the aims that guided the Syriac translators of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius. Among the changes that they applied to the Syriac texts, a number of textual additions and re-phrasings reveal the translators' familiarity with gnomic compositions that are commonly used in wisdom literature. Often the translators rewrote the original text following patterns such as programmatic admonitions, aphorisms and *inclusiones* that reveal a concern to break down the text into independent and reproducible units with edifying content. The practice of expanding on the original texts was not uncommon in early Syriac translations, yet the expansions of the Syriac Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius display the introduction of gnomic formats.[11]

In the following passage, the translator paraphrased a quotation from Hippocrates, and he broke down Plutarch's argumentation so as to obtain an independent gnomic unit. Also, the explicit reference to Hippocrates was omitted in Syriac, and one finds, instead, two additions (in *italics*):[12]

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| Καὶ πρῶτον μέν, ἦ φησιν Ἱπποκράτης χαλεπωτάτην εἶναι νόσον ἐν ἦ τοῦ νοσοῦντος ἀνομοιότατον αὐτῷ γίνεται τὸ πρόσωπον, οὕτως ὁρῶ ὑπ' ὀργῆς ἐξισταμένους μάλιστα καὶ μεταβάλλοντας ὄψιν, χρόαν, βάδισμα, φωνήν [. . .] | ܡܠܘܢ ܗܟܢܐ ܀ ܘܕܐܢܫܐ ܡܚܒܝܐ ܐܝܟ ܗܘ ܀ ܐܒܕܐ ܗܟܢܐ ܐܝܟ ܡܨܥܐ ܘ ܠܚܒܪܬܗ ܀ ܟܡ ܡܢ ܗܟ ܐܠܘ ܐܝܟ ܐܝܟ ܗܘ ܐܘ ܐܝܟ ܕܐܝܟ [189.5] |

*(189.5)*

First of all, as Hippocrates says that the most dangerous disease is that in which the countenance of the patient becomes most unlike how it was, so firstly I saw that those who are moved by anger are also changed in (their) countenance, skin, gait and voice [. . .]

First of all, we notice that as in the sick to see their faces different from usual is a sign of death, *so also in the irascible the ugliness of their appearance is a sign of their defeat.* Indeed, not only the colour of their faces is changed, but also their voice (189.5), their movements and their sight, *and their outside is the image of what is in the inside.*

The first addition is explicative, and it relates the *general* example about the sick with the *specific* example about the irascible man. The second addition repeats the concept expressed above by playing on the correlation between the inner condition of the angry person and his appearance. As a result, the translator used the Greek text to produce a self-standing gnomic sequence that could be easily extrapolated from the original Plutarchan text.

Similarly, the Syriac additions to another passage break down the course of the argumentation in order to create an independent textual unit:[13]

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|---|---|
| Καὶ τῶν πραγμάτων ἄφιλα πολλὰ καὶ ἀπεχθῆ καὶ ἀντίπαλα τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσιν, ἀλλ' ὁρᾷς ὅτι καὶ νόσοις ἔνιοι σώματος εἰς ἀπραγμοσύνην ἐχρήσαντο [. . .] | ܘܩܢܘܡܐ ܡܢ ܣܓܝܐܬܐ ܐܝܬ ܕܐܟܣܢܝܢ ܕܐܝܟ ܣܩܘܒܠܐ ܗܘܝܢ ܠܢ ܘ ܣܩܘܒܠܐ ܟܡܐ ܡܢ ܟ ܗܟ ܐܝܠܝܢ ܡܪܥܝܢ ܐܝܟ ܘܗܘ ܟܪܝܗܝܢ ܡ ܐܝܟ ܡܢ ܒܝܫܐ [3.10] |

Many situations are unkind, hostile and adversary to those who meet them; but you see that some have used the sickness of the body to live a quiet life [. . .]

It is possible to see that many things, although adverse and harmful to *us, in other respects benefit us.* How many have fallen sick in the body, and this (3.10) sickness of theirs *refrained and hindered them from evil.*

The first addition results in the creation of an aphorism, while the second addition interrupts the original text and it closes the gnomic composition by repeating the message already provided in the opening aphorism.

On other occasions, the Syriac translators elaborated on the gnomic structures already contained in the original text. In the following passage, while the expansions simply add to the already binary structure of the Greek text, the introduction and repetition of the words ܓܒܐ [*gabō*] 'side' and ܙܟܘܬܐ [*zōkūtō*] 'victory' betray an interest for the gnomic format of the text:[14]

Φιλονεικίαν γε μὴν καὶ τὸ δύσερι καὶ πᾶσαν <***> ἐκποδὼν μεταστατέον, οἶον σπέρματα ἔχθρας εὐλαβουμένους. Οὐ γὰρ ἐν ἀνταγωνισταῖς, ἀλλ'ἐν συναγωνισταῖς ἡ φιλία.

[Syriac text]
[60.10]

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Competitiveness, contention and all <rivalry> should be put aside, (and we should) beware of them as seeds of enmity. For there is no friendship among enemies, but (there is) among fellow-combatants.

*Contention and division must be taken away, for (60.10) enmity sprouts from them. Indeed, it is not as if we fight our enemy so that we may take the victory from one side to the other side, but we compete with those who are from our side about who shall be the first and take the victory.*

The same observation can be made regarding another passage in which the Syriac translator elaborated a gnomic sequence already attested in the Greek original. The passage is composed of an admonition (the opening sentence) followed by a course of argumentation. The Syriac expansions (in *italics*) do not add anything to the contents, but they elaborate the text by expanding on the structure of the Greek sentence. The opening admonition is expressed in greater length by the Syriac, and the Syriac text then provides the same course of argumentation as the Greek:[15]

Οὐκ ἄρα οὐδὲ ἐν φιλίᾳ τὸ σφόδρα. Ἑκατέρα γὰρ ταῖν <ὁδοῖν> ἄλλοσέ ποι ἐκφέρει ἢ ὅποι δεῖ καταλῦσαι. Ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἐπὶ κολακείαν ἄγει, τῆς δὲ ἐπ'ἔχθραν ἡ τελευτή.

[Syriac text]
[63.1]

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Then, (there should be) no excess in friendship. Either <way> leads to a different place than to where one should end up: the one leads to adulation, while the end of the other to enmity.

*Neither do I praise the friend who is too benevolent nor (the one) who is too harsh. For both things are separate as a road (leading) hither and thither, rather than the path that brings us to the lodging where we intended to go. Indeed, excessive benevolence ends up in adulation, and excessive harshness too fosters enmity.*

At the same time, however, the Syriac adaptor added and repeated the words with the same roots 'benevolent-benevolence' and 'harsh-harshness' both at the beginning and at the end of the passage. The repetition of the same words or

formulas both at the beginning and at the end of a gnomic unit constitutes a textual device known as *inclusio*.[16]

Another instance of *inclusio* may be detected in the following passage from *De cohibenda ira*. Although the passage is problematic since the translator misunderstood what the Greek text expresses about the role of time in quenching anger, it is nonetheless clear that the translator repeated the specific example about anger in the close of the passage, despite the fact that it had been already expressed in the opening:[17]

Αὕτη μὲν οὖν ἴσως οὐκ ὀργῆς ἰατρεία φανεῖται, διάκρουσις δὲ καὶ φυλακὴ τῶν ἐν ὀργῇ τινος ἁμαρτημάτων. Καίτοι καὶ σπληνὸς οἴδημα σύμπτωμα μέν ἐστι πυρετοῦ, πραυνόμενον δὲ κουφίζει τὸν πυρετόν, ὥς φησιν Ἱερώνυμος.

[Syriac text]
[193.15]

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Perhaps this [i.e. gaining a delay] will not seem a cure for anger, but rather a respite and a guard for the mistakes of the irascible. Certainly the swelling of the spleen is a symptom of the fever, and once it has been calmed it assuages the fever, as Hieronymus says.

*Hastiness is not therapeutic for anger, but it assuages it for a moment, as if it were a guard to it. Behold, the swelling of the spleen is due to fever, and the care of it brings the trouble to an end; and the hastiness that comes from anger, it is the care of it that puts anger to an end.*

In the close, the translator substituted the reference to Hieronymus of Rhodes with the specific example about anger, where he repeated the word 'hastiness' [Syriac] [*rhībūtō*] used above, possibly aiming at the composition of an *inclusio*.

The use of *inclusiones*, repetitions of the same words or same moral recommendations both at the beginning and at the close of a gnomic sequence, is a strategy that the translators used on a number of occasions. As a result, the Syriac text appears broken down into smaller and independent units that could be easily reproduced out of their contexts. Two other instances of *inclusiones* affected passages of the Greek text that are too long to be reported in full here. In the *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*, Plutarch reported an anecdote about the cytharedes, who play better when they are in competition than when they train by themselves in solitude. Accordingly, Plutarch explained that we should take our enemies as competitors for fame, and that we should regulate our deeds and customs as if we were always in competition with our enemies. At the close of the anecdote, the Syriac adaptor added a reference to the specific example of the cytharedes mentioned only a few lines above.[18] Another instance of *inclusio* is attested in the *De amicitia*, where, following a comparison between the practice of reproaching friends and that of healing the sick, the Syriac adaptor added a closing sentence that reiterates the similarity between the deeds of a friend and those of a physician.[19]

## Adding Advice

Another set of additions to the texts brings the translations closer to wisdom literature. Such additions contain instructional remarks of an edifying nature, and they can likewise be taken as indicative of the didactic aim that guided the translators. In the following passage, the translator broke down the argumentative sequence of the text by inserting an instructional addition (in *italics*):[20]

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| Ἐφεδρεύει σου τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐγρηγορὼς ὁ ἐχθρὸς ἀεὶ καὶ λαβὴν ζητῶν πανταχόθεν περιοδεύει τὸν βίον [. . .] | *(Syriac text)* |

| | |
|---|---|
| The enemy, always awake, lies in wait of your deeds and patrols (your) life on every side seeking a grip [. . .] | (The enemy) tracks your customs, he does not rest from inquiring into your ways, and he strives to find a cause against you, while he roams hither and thither. *Well then, his watchfulness does not harm you, but it recalls you to beneficial customs.* |

Not unlike the passages reported above, the addition creates an independent gnomic unit; but, in this case, its content consists of moral advice that is in accordance with the edifying message of the *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*.

Other additions with moral contents do not radically alter the format of the Greek text. The following passage from Themistius' *De amicitia* describes the attitude that a person should adopt in his relations with friends. In addition to the Greek, the Syriac recommended that:[21]

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| ἀπὸ τῶν σμικρῶν καὶ φαυλοτάτων ὡς ἂν δόξειεν ἀρχομένους, οἷον τοῦ προσορᾶν εὐμενῶς καὶ διαλέγεσθαι ἐπιδεξίως καὶ συμπαρακαθέζεσθαι καὶ συμβαδίζειν, καὶ δῆλον γενέσθαι ὅτι ἥδοιτο ὁρωμένῳ. | *(Syriac text)* [56.10] |

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|---|---|
| We should begin with what might seem to be small and very insignificant steps, such as casting kind glances (at our friend), conversing with him tactfully, sitting and walking with him, and making it clear that we are happy to see him. | Let us begin from the very small things. First of all, let us look at them with (56.10) benevolence, and let us sit next to them with a pleasant talk; let us stick to their steps and let us show that we rejoice at their sight; *and let us implant in ourselves the customs that they have.* |

A few chapters below, the Syriac translator invited to give advice to friends 'without being detached from the (friend's) issues, but rather bearing with the friend part of their burden, even if the issues are impure':[22]

| | |
|---|---|
| [. . .] πρὸς ἑκάστην χρείαν τοῦ φίλου τὸ πρόσωπον οἰκεῖον μεταλαμβάνειν, ἐν ἀρρωστίᾳ μὲν ἰατροῦ, ἐν δίκαις δὲ συνηγόρου, συμβούλου δὲ ἁπανταχοῦ καὶ συνεργοῦ ἐπὶ τῇ γνώμῃ. | [59.10] *(Syriac text)* |

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|---|---|
| [. . .] you shall keep changing the role you play according to the need (of the friend). When he is sick, (play the role) of a physician; when he is in trials, (play the role) of a lawyer; play (the role) of an adviser on every occasion, and of a helper when he is taking a decision. | But you yourself shall promptly (59.10) participate in his grief, being like a doctor when he is sick, like a defender in the issues that are disputed; and you shall give him advice *without being detached from the issues, but rather bearing with him part of their burden, even if the issues are impure.* |

Another moralising addition seems to directly reveal the instructional aims of the translators. After a negative *exemplum*, the addition 'we shall instead emulate excellent men' opens a section of the text in which Plutarch reported *exempla* of philosophers who were imperturbable in conditions that would have easily made ordinary men angry:[23]

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|---|---|
| Καὶ δεινὸν οὐδὲν ἀρξαμένους ἀπὸ τῆς τροφῆς σιωπῇ χρήσασθαι τοῖς παρατυγχάνουσι, καὶ μὴ πολλὰ χολουμένους καὶ δυσκολαίνοντας ἀπερπέστατον ὄψον ἐμβαλεῖν ἑαυτοῖς καὶ φίλοις τὴν ὀργήν. | *(Syriac text)* |

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|---|---|
| To start with food, it is nothing unpleasant to stay quiet with guests, and not, by being angry and peevish about many things, to throw to ourselves and to (our) friends the most unpleasing food, anger. | By not being angry during the time of the meal – and (otherwise) instead of delicious dishes we (would) put in front of us and in front of (our) friends the bitterness of anger – *we shall instead emulate excellent men.* |

These passages show, then, that the translators' interest lay in the morally edifying anecdotes that make up most of the texts by Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius.[24] Thanks to the process of editing, the translations appear structured as

collections of anecdotes and pieces of moral advice that could be extrapolated and reused outside the original context. The phenomenon is especially evident in Plutarch's *De cohibenda ira*, whose Greek text opens as a dialogue between two characters, but whose translation omits the dialogic sections and adopts the format of a treatise that is mostly made up by maxims and moralising anecdotes.

The translators have thus rendered the Syriac Plutarch, Lucian, and Themistius closer to wisdom literature. The editing process ultimately betrays a didactic strategy based on the use of moralising texts arranged in gnomic formats such as *exempla*, aphorisms and *inclusiones* that could be potentially reproduced in different instructional settings. Instances of wisdom literature, especially in the form of *gnomologiai* or collections of sentences and anecdotes, are fairly common in early Syriac manuscripts; and, in particular, Greek traditions had a major impact on the composition of wisdom literature in Syriac. The *Advice of Theano, Sayings of Menander, Sayings of Pythagoras, Sayings of the philosophers on the soul, Definitions of Plato, Advice of Plato to his disciple* and the *Instructions of Anton, Plato's physician* are just some of the Syriac collections of wisdom literature that reveal the impact of Greek literary traditions.[25]

## Contexts and Use

The composition of Syriac wisdom and instructional literature provides a possible cultural environment within which to understand the Syriac translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius. Although still in need of systematic scholarly attention both at a microscopic (editions, translations, textual criticism) and at a macroscopic level (what they can say about the cultural life of the time), Syriac wisdom literature displays a thrust towards literate instruction that finds major parallels in early Christian literature in different languages. A remarkable example is represented by the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the edifying anecdotes which could be used independently and reproduced in a variety of instructional settings.[26] The Evagrian ascetic *corpus*, which is mostly structured as a series of sentences and anecdotes, is another Christian collection of instructional literature. The transmission of gnomic literature to ascetic settings via translation is represented by Rufinus' Latin translations of the *Sentences of Sextus* and of the Evagrian ascetic *corpus*.[27]

It is especially remarkable that a Syriac author whose life was roughly contemporary with the Syriac translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius confronts the modern reader with a very similar didactic strategy based on the use of anonymised anecdotes and maxims as instructional texts: John of Apamea, a prolific Syriac writer of the fifth century and who is also known as John the 'Solitary', ܝܚܝܕܝܐ [*iḥīdōyō*].[28] Within the works transmitted under his name, two dialogues are especially relevant to the present analysis because they depict a Syriac setting in which anecdotes and maxims were used as instructional texts. The two dialogues, which betray some familiarity with the dialogic genre of the Greek literary tradition, feature John the Solitary conversing with less

experienced ascetics, all of whom bear Greek names; and their conversations are set in a monastic setting, namely John's own ܩܘܪܚܐ [*kūrḥō*], 'cell' or 'hut', for the *Four dialogues*.[29] The references to the daily prayers at the beginning of most dialogues are reminders of the communal life pattern of the speakers of the dialogues. The *Six dialogues with Thomas* deal with philosophical and theological issues concerning the soul and its relation to virtues and passions, and with the spiritual and ascetic life.[30] The *Four dialogues with Eusebius and Eutropius on the soul* deal with the nature of the soul and the incorporeal, with the body, with the creation and with divine economy.[31]

The literary nature of the fictitious setting of the dialogues is a feature to bear in mind, and one should avoid accepting John the Solitary's picture as a faithful description of early Syrian monasticism or as indicative of a standardised sort of monastic education. At the same time, however, John's dialogues betray an instructional strategy that has much in common with the efforts of the Syriac translators of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius. If anything, the unfolding of the dialogues has a prominently didactic character, and the most suitable way to qualify the exchanges between John the Solitary and the other speakers is that of a teacher–pupil relationship. The speakers' attitude towards John is well represented by their profound admiration for the solitary, which itself led the young monks to John's hut, and thus provided the occasion for the encounter.[32]

The occasions of the encounters of John the Solitary with his interlocutors in the two dialogues are similar. Thomas on the one hand, and Eusebius and Eutropius on the other, have all spent some time as hermits – Thomas after gaining the 'excellent education of the Greeks' (ܝܘܠܦܢܐ ܕܝܘܢܝܐ ܡܝܬܪܐ)[33] – when they got to know John through literary pieces that John himself had written. Thomas came across a book of hymns composed by John, while Eusebius and Eutropius received a letter from John, presumably dealing with Christian ascetic life. Positively impressed by the reading, the young ascetics decided to meet John in person, and approached him with a number of questions on the soul, on the body and on divine economy. Also, Thomas confessed that his doubts derived from the variance that he found among the opinions of pagan poets.[34]

The instructional relationship among the speakers of John's dialogues is striking in the *Four dialogues*. Here John routinely draws anecdotes from a straightforward imagery, such as the coxswain, animals and musical instruments.[35] But something unexpected happens towards the end of the second of the four dialogues, when John decides to leave aside the dialogic format that he had employed so far, and instead recounts to his audience a series of fourteen morally edifying anecdotes about generic wise men and solitaries. John declares that he intends to narrate such stories 'so that the narration of them may be profitable for you' (ܕܬܗܘܐ ܠܟܘܢ ܠܝܘܬܪܢܐ ܡܫܬܥܝܢܘܬܗܘܢ).[36]

The anecdotes are very similar to those that one can find in the Syriac translations of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius, not least because they are anonymised

and they often close with moral remarks. To give an example, the first anecdote is about:

> a *certain wise man*. In order not to be hindered from study, he ceased to live in the city, and he built for himself a hut outside the wall. He had next to his dwelling place a piece of land that was cultivated with wheat, and he was always passing by its side. When somebody from his town asked him if its seed had sprouted, he replied: 'I do not even know if it has been seeded!' Look how useful to the soul the love of study is! For, once the soul is accustomed to studying, it is not possible for the mind to wander outside it.[37]

It is regrettable that neither the editor nor the modern translator of the dialogue systematically traced back the origin of the anecdotes that John recounted. One of the anecdotes, which deals with anger, does not have a Christian origin and is found in Epictetus' *Encheiridion*,[38] but it is referred to a monk in John's version. Another anecdote, instead, is found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.[39]

In the structure of the *Four dialogues*, the switch from the dialogic format to the narration of *exempla* to describe the ascetic lifestyle is a considerable discontinuity. In spite of wishing to convince by the use of arguments, the *exempla* reiterate models of worthy conduct and they are underpinned by a different strategy of persuasion, as John explains. Indeed, after pronouncing the fourteenth and last *exemplum*, John gives the reason why he narrated such stories:

> because of the simplicity of those brothers who were present (at the discussion) but have not completely understood what has been previously said, lest they withhold their good will, *I wanted to help their minds through the narration of stories*.[40]

In the setting of the *Four dialogues*, it is the expected background of the audience that prompted John to report such anecdotes. It is John's assumption that a part of the audience would be happy to hear *exempla* of worthy conduct by generic wise men, philosophers and hermits. At the same time, however, the audience included also individuals like John himself, Eusebius and Eutropius, who must have experienced some sort of philosophical training as shown in the arguments that they used. In the case of Thomas, it may be that he was educated in Greek, perhaps even in the city of Alexandria.[41]

While about half of the *Four dialogues* adopts a dialogic format, the same work also contains gnomic material that reveals a different sort of didactic strategy. This strategy appears again and even more strikingly in the fourth and last book of the *Four dialogues*. Here, Eusebius puts forward a surprisingly elementary request. He asks John for the definitions of a series of more than sixty words with meanings related to virtue, such as 'sufferance', 'poverty', 'mercy', 'charity' and so forth:

> in order that we may discern clearly the words that are said about virtue, we would like to learn the meaning of each of them, both physically and spiritually, for, with the understanding of their difference, our mind will be even more enlightened about the many varieties of virtue.[42]

John agrees to provide the definitions of such terminology, and, as a result, the fourth dialogue consists entirely of a collection of moral sentences. Again, as opposed to the dialectic arguments previously adduced in the *Four dialogues* – which, incidentally, required familiarity with philosophical concepts such as 'element' (στοιχεῖον 1.14) and 'substance' (οὐσία 2.1) – the definitions offered in the fourth dialogue reveal a different strategy of persuasion: they respond to a concern for straightforwardness, and they could be easily understood and memorised without previous experience in philosophy.

## Conclusion

John the Solitary's choice to reproduce anonymous *exempla* and gnomic sentences, then, betrays the same didactic strategy implemented by the Syriac translators of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius; and the anonymised anecdotes of the *Four dialogues* share the textual format of several passages in the *corpus* of Syriac translations that have been considered here. The analysis of the translators' editing and abridgement strategy suggests a path that can help put the Syriac Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius into context, and relate them to more familiar strands in Syriac literature. Wisdom literature in particular is abundantly attested in early Syriac manuscripts, and its overall significance for the study of Early Christianity awaits full appreciation.[43]

Through a close analysis of the texts, it has been argued in this chapter that textual formats employed by the Syriac translators of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius can shed light on the enterprise of transmission of Greek secular literature into Syriac. The introduction of gnomic formats such as aphorisms, *exampla* and *inclusiones*, and the addition of moral expansions, reveal the same didactic strategy used in the dialogues by John the Solitary. Also, these textual formats ultimately suggest a link to wisdom and instructional literature, and they show a didactic thrust within which to understand the transmission into Syriac of Plutarch, Lucian and Themistius.

### Notes

1 MS *Sin. Syr.* 16 (seventh century) and MS *BL Add.* 17209 (ninth century); De Lagarde 1858, 186–95, only from MS *BL Add.* 17209.
2 MS *Sin. Syr.* 16; edition and English translation in Nestle 1894.
3 MS *BL Add.* 17209 and *Sin. Syr.* 16; edition De Lagarde 1858, 177–86, only from MS *BL Add.* 17209 (the beginning is missing), and Rohlfs 1968, only from MS *Sin. Syr.* 16 (only the beginning); English translation in Rigolio, forthcoming.

4   MS *Sin Syr.* 16 and MS *BL Add.* 17209; edition Sachau 1870, 48–65, only from MS *BL Add.* 17209.
5   MS *BL Add.* 17209; Sachau 1870, 48–65.

6   MS *BL Add.* 17209 and MS *Sin. Syr.* 14 (excerpts; tenth century); Sachau 1870, 17–47, only from *BL Add.* 17209; German translation from Sachau 1870 in Gildemeister/Bücheler 1872b; Latin translation from Sachau 1870 in Downey/Norman 1971, III 8–71; Italian translation in Conterno 2014.

7   The editions of the Greek texts used here are Pohlenz et al. 1929, Bompaire 1998 and Downey/Norman 1971 respectively; the translations from Greek and from Syriac are my own.

8   Rigolio 2013.

9   Rigolio 2013.

10  The same strategy of reproducing moralising anecdotes from Plutarch's *Moralia* in an anonymous way is attested in Greek Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, in the *Paedagogus*, and Basil of Caesarea, in the *Ad adulescentes*.

11  Brock 1980.

12  Plutarch, *De cohibenda ira* 455E: Syr 189.1–5.

13  Plutarch, *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* 87A: Syr 3.6–10.

14  Themistius, *De amicitia* 275CD: Syr 60.8–13.

15  Themistius, *De amicitia* 277C: Syr 62.23–63.5. Lucian, *De calumnia* 30 : Syr 15.21–3 is another passage that reveals an elaboration on the Greek text possibly aimed at obtaining a parallel structure: 'for it would be ridiculous to set doorkeepers for our house but to leave our ears and mind open' (καὶ γὰρ ἂν εἴη γελοῖον τῆς μὲν οἰκίας θυρωροὺς καθιστάναι, τὰ ὦτα δὲ καὶ τὴν διάνοιαν ἀνεῳγμένα ἐᾶν) was translated as 'for it is very foolish that we put *doors* and guardians to our houses, but we leave our ears and our thoughts open' (ܐܠܐ ܣܟܠ ܗܘ ܕܠܚܕ ܐܢܫ ܬܪܥܐ ܘܢܛܘܪܐ ܢܣܝܡ ܠܒܝܬܢ ܘܠܐܕܢܝܢ ܕܝܢ ܘܠܬܪܥܝܬܢ ܢܫܒܘܩ ܟܕ ܦܬܝܚܝܢ), in which the addition of 'doors' provides a counterpart to 'ears'.

16  Kirk 1998, 149–51.

17  Plutarch, *De cohibenda ira* 460C: Syr 193.14–18.

18  Plutarch, *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* 87F–88A: Syr 5.24–6.9.

19  Themistius, *De amicitia* 277BC: Syr 62.6–20.

20  Plutarch, *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* 87BC: Syr 4.6–9.

21  Themistius, *De amicitia* 272AB: Syr 56.9–12.

22  Themistius, *De amicitia* 274D: Syr 59.9–14.

23  Plutarch, *De cohibenda ira* 461C: Syr 194.16–18.

24  There is the possibility that the change in the title of Lucian, *De calumnia*, likewise emphasises the instructional message of the text: 'On not believing lightly in slander' (περὶ τοῦ μὴ ῥᾳδίως πιστεύειν διαβολῇ) was translated as 'On that one should not believe in slander against friends' (ܥܠ ܗܝ ܕܠܐ ܙܕܩ ܕܢܗܝܡܢ ܐܢܫ ܥܠ ܪܚܡܘܗܝ).

25  Zeegers-Vander Vorst 1978; Possekel 1998; Brock 2005; Brock 2012; Arzhanov 2013. The afterlife of Syriac wisdom literature and its use in the composition of Arabic wisdom literature are promising lines of research in need of systematic scholarly attention. Recent work on the Greco-Arabic tradition is accessible at www.ancientwisdoms.ac.uk.

26  See the chapters by Lillian Larsen and Yannis Papadogiannakis in the present volume.

27  Pevarello 2013. A systematic treatment of the benefits of the use of the example and the enthymeme (maxims being included in the latter) in rhetoric is provided by Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20–21; and classical authors who made large use of *gnomai* in their work include Isocrates, *Ad Nicoclem*, Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* and *Cynegeticus*, and Plutarch, *Apophthegmata*.

28  De Halleux 1983; Brock 1982, 31–2; Lavenant 1984, 15–19; Hausherr 1939, 91–2.

29  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 1.6.

30  Edition and German translation in Strothmann 1972; French translation in Lavenant 1984, 47–119.

31  Edition in Dedering 1936; French translation in Hausherr 1939.

32  For instance, John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 80.3–6: ܣܓܝ ܛܒܬܐ ܟܒܫܬ ܠܢ ܒܢܦܫܢ ܒܝܕ ܚܘܒܐ ܕܩܢܝܢ ܠܘܬ ܡܝܬܪܘܬܟ ܘܡܫܒܚܝܢܢ ܠܗ ܘܡܩܠܣܝܢܢ ܠܗܘ ܕܝܗܒ ܠܟ ܗܕܐ ܡܘܗܒܬܐ 'you have laid a pile of good things in our soul through the acquaintance that we have (gained) with your virtue. We glorify and praise Him who gave you such a gift!'

33  John the Solitary, *Six dialogues* 1.5.

34  John the Solitary, *Six dialogues* 1–7; Thomas uses the word ܦܘܝܛܐ [*pūyiṭē*] 'poets' (1.21); see Lavenant 1984, 48 n. 1.

35  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 10, 26 and 49 respectively.

36  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 50.15.

37  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 50.16–23: ܡܕܡ ܐܝܟ ܡܪܐ ܥܠ ܠܗܘܢ ... ܕܩܕܡ ܡܠܠ ... ܘܡܠܠ ... ܐܡܪ ܠܗ ܗܘܐ ܕܥܒܕܬ ... ܐܢܐ ܡܕܡ ... ܐܡܪ ܠܗ ...

38  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 52.13–17: ... 'a solitary, when his disciple broke the vessel with which he used to drink and he believed that (the solitary) would be angry at him, for he did not own another vessel, he answered and told the disciple: "Do not be distressed for this, for nothing unbreakable has been broken!" He observed this on every occasion.' Epictetus, *Encheiridion* 26 (trans. Boter 1999, 304): 'For instance, when someone else's slave breaks a cup, our immediate reaction is: "It is just one of those things that happen." Realise, then, that when your own cup is broken, you must react in the same way as when someone else's cup was broken.' Contrast Plutarch, *De cohibenda ira* 461EF.

39  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 77.7–13; Hausherr 1939, 92; PG 65.376; Wallis Budge 1904, 572–3; Ward 1975, 200.

40  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 53.23–54.1: ...

41  Thomas mentions the library of Alexandria (55.538), but the passage does not necessarily imply familiarity with the place (Lavenant 1984, 96 n. 3).

42  John the Solitary, *Four dialogues* 80.7–11: ...

43  A systematic analysis of the advantages of the uses of wisdom literature (the example and the maxim in particular) in a rhetorical setting is provided by Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.20–21; but see also Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter* 51.5 about the use of γνῶμαι, παροιμίαι and ἀποφθέγματα in the composition of letters.