

DAMN WITH FAINT PRAISE:
A HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON PLUTARCH'S
ON THE FORTUNE OR VIRTUE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT 1

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ABSTRACT

Plutarch's *On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander the Great* is as much a revelation of Plutarch's philosophical thought as it is a display of his rhetorical skill. Writing during the Second Sophistic movement, Plutarch challenged basic conceptions of philosophy by asking whether it was theory or practice that made a philosopher. He used the life and reign of Alexander the Great as his general framework for analysis. Also, by casting Alexander as a philosopher, an artificial paradox, Plutarch took advantage of events in the king's life, about which his audience would have been well aware, to play on common perceptions of the king, thereby causing some modern scholars to suggest that the work has no historical value. It was through rhetorical exploitation that Plutarch denigrated the Macedonian king, revealing him to be a megalomaniac who cared little for his own men or newly conquered subjects, but more for his own glory. Through this paradox of Alexander as a philosopher, Plutarch concluded that philosophy is both a theoretical and practical pursuit, and that it should be practically applied to one's life.

This dissertation not only sheds light on Plutarch's rhetorical skill and view of Alexander, but also elevates the work's standing as a source for the life and reign of the king.