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PLUTARCH

Roman Lives

A selection of eight Roman Lives

Translated by
ROBIN WATERFIELD

With Introductions and Notes by
PHILIP A. STADTER

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For Henryk and Juanita

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

OF all the ancient writers, Plutarch is in many ways the most accessible. Readers as diverse as Beethoven, Rousseau, and Harry Truman have admired the vividness of his narrative and the immediacy of his anecdotes in the *Parallel Lives*. When he wrote in the first decades of the second century AD, the Roman empire was in its most prosperous and peaceful period. While the emperor Trajan drove back the barbarian tribes of eastern Europe and the Parthians in Asia, expanding the empire to its greatest extent, Plutarch and his friends in Athens, Corinth, and his home town of Chaeronea met, dined, discussed philosophy, and considered the lessons of history. Yet the edge of chaos was not far off. Plutarch was about 23 in 68, when insurrection and civil war ended the reign of Nero: three emperors whirled on and off stage in one year before Vespasian established himself upon the throne. Plutarch later toured the battlefield of Bedriacum in northern Italy with a Roman friend who had fought there, and was told of piles of corpses higher than the tops of the eagle standards: in civil wars no prisoners are taken (*Otho* 14). Some twenty years later, the emperor Domitian became afraid that philosophers teaching in Rome might encourage tyrannicides, and expelled them all from the city. Plutarch may well have been among their number. Domitian raged against senators, authors, and others who might oppose him, until he was assassinated in 96. The short reign of Nerva which followed prepared for the twenty-year rule of Trajan (98–118).

In this time of recently acquired and still insecure serenity Plutarch lived in Chaeronea and Athens (of which he was also a citizen), teaching philosophy to a small group of young men and writing an enormous volume of work, of which we possess perhaps half. His family wealth and education set him among the élite of Greece, and he regularly entertained powerful and cultured friends, both Greeks and Romans. Since his youth he had served on commissions to meet with the Roman governor, and he was on good terms with Romans of the highest rank. His culture and heritage was fully and proudly Greek, but he like other members of his class accepted the Roman imperial system and worked within it. The nearby sanctuary

of Apollo at Delphi, of which he was priest for many years, gave him another occasion to meet important visitors, as well as to investigate both historical and theological questions tied to this venerable site. His cosmopolitan interests did not stop him from serving even in small ways at Chaeronea: he mentions supervising stones and mortar being transported. Living in a small town, which lacked the books and learned discussion which could be found in a large city, he chose 'to cling to his town, lest it become smaller' (*Dem.* 2).

The Parallel Lives: Scope and Purpose

His major work, a series of parallel biographies which gradually grew to 48, of which we possess 46,¹ probably was begun early in the reign of Trajan, and continued until Plutarch's death c.120–5.² Prior to the biographies, and continuing alongside them, Plutarch wrote a large number of short essays and some larger collections, which we now subsume under the title of *Moralia*, or *Moral Essays*. The title is indeed appropriate to some, such as *Control of Anger*, *Quiet of Mind*, *Brotherly Love*, and *Talkativeness*, which present philosophical and ethical truths in a charming and thoughtful format.³ Others explore religious and theological topics dear to the author: several 'Pythian' dialogues on the sanctuary at Delphi and its oracles, and others on *Superstition*, *Isis and Osiris*, the *Face in the Moon*, and *Socrates' Sign*. A third category encompasses contemporary politics and the role of the philosopher in them. Most interesting of these is the *Advice on Public Life*, addressed to a young aristocrat of Sardis who wished to play a major role in the life of his city, and perhaps beyond. The nine books of *Table Talk* show the philosopher chatting with his friends at dinner, on topics ranging from the effect of old age on sight to the

¹ The first two Lives, *Scipio* and *Epaminondas*, have been lost. Four other extant Lives do not belong to the *Parallel Lives*: *Galba* and *Otho*, part of a series of Lives of the emperors, and *Aratus* and *Artaxerxes*, were written independently, as were other lost Lives.

² Cf. C. P. Jones, 'Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 56 (1966), 61–74, repr. in B. Scardigli (ed.), *Essays on Plutarch's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 95–123.

³ I use the English titles given by D. A. Russell in his listing of the *Moralia* in *Plutarch* (London: Duckworth, 1973), 164–72 and *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. xxiii–xxix. The titles vary slightly among translators. Russell's *Plutarch* provides an excellent general introduction to Plutarch.

proper time for sex, with special attention to the best customs for a dinner party. Such a list is only a sampling of the riches to be found in this marvellously varied collection, a delight and inspiration for Montaigne and Emerson.⁴

The *Parallel Lives* represent a new initiative, which nevertheless grows naturally out of the earlier essays. A major feature of the essays had been Plutarch's effort to encourage his readers to allow the effect of philosophy to penetrate their daily lives and their way of thinking about the world, whether in shaping their own character and behaviour, or in considering the workings of the gods and the afterlife. Over time, however, he seems to have become dissatisfied with this format, and decided to turn to biography. In the series of Lives of the Roman emperors from Augustus to Vitellius, written perhaps shortly after Domitian's death, of which only *Galba* and *Otho* survive, he seems to have tested his skill at writing historical narrative from a philosophical perspective.⁵ With the *Parallel Lives* he undertakes a grand project to explore, in the lives of famous statesmen and commanders, all major historical figures, the interplay of character and political action. In the proem to his Life of Nicias, whose defeat in Sicily had been the focus of some of the most memorable pages of Thucydides' history, Plutarch writes,

I have touched briefly on the essentials [from Thucydides and Philistus, another historian]—enough to avoid gaining a reputation for carelessness and indolence—while trying to collect the facts which may have been mentioned here and there by other writers or which can be found recorded on ancient votive offerings or in decrees, but are unnoticed by most people. My purpose was not to gather meaningless historical data, but to record data which promote the understanding of character and personality.

(*Nic.* 1)

In *Alexander*, in a frequently quoted passage, he asserts,

I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals

⁴ See the essays translated in the World's Classics by Russell, *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues* and by Robin Waterfield, *Plutarch: Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

⁵ Cf. A. Georgiadou, 'The Lives of the Caesars and Plutarch's Other Lives', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 13 (1988), 349–56.

character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, huge troop movements, and whole cities besieged . . . I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind and to use these to portray the life of each of my subjects.

(*Alex.* 1)

Exactly this focus on character sets the *Lives* apart from military and political histories and gives them their interest, charm, and usefulness.

Nevertheless, a tension exists between Plutarch's professed aim—to treat character—and the subjects he chose for his biographies, all of whom are statesmen, and most are generals who commanded large armies and won or lost great battles. Earlier authors interested in ethics had written the Lives of philosophers or lawgivers. By turning to Lives of statesmen, Plutarch changes the nature of the enquiry, which becomes not what is the best way to live, but how have real men of influence, acting in real situations, brought their lives to a successful conclusion, or failed to do so. Once it was believed that Plutarch regularly depended on earlier biographies for his *Lives*: now it has been established that his major sources for most if not all of the *Lives* were histories. Plutarch's project thus involved a massive rethinking of this historical material in terms of his philosophical understanding of character and moral behaviour.

The *Parallel Lives* set a Greek and a Roman biography side by side, each pair making a single unit. The modern practice of dividing the *Lives* into two series, one Greek and one Roman—followed also in the present collection—is based on our historical interests, a natural result of our distance from the ancient world. Since the *Lives* are such an important source for our knowledge of leaders and of events, it is useful, clearer, and more accessible to treat the course of Greek and Roman history separately. Plutarch, who presumed that his readers would be familiar with their own history and would have access to full histories of both countries, found several advantages in a parallel presentation. First of all, the comparison between Greek and Roman statesmen, at a time when Greece itself was under Roman rule, asserted the dignity and long tradition of Greece, and suggested the idea of a close collaboration in government based on that tradition. Second, Plutarch knew from his rhetorical training that comparison was a powerful means of analysis and instruction.

Comparison of the lives of two men would reveal the underlying qualities of each, and highlight their similarities and differences.⁶ One of the most important results of the scholarship of the last twenty-five years has been the recognition that Plutarch thought of each pair as a single work, developing a single overall impression, and linking the two lives not only in external features or accidents, but in many small ways regarding both events and traits of character. Thus, while the modern reader will usually approach each Life individually, it is useful to keep the other member of the pair constantly in mind, as an aid to recognizing the features which Plutarch finds significant in the life. For this reason, in the introductions to the individual Lives in this book, special attention is given to the relation of each to its pair.

The individual books of the *Parallel Lives* (i.e. each pair of biographies) follow a standard pattern. Most often there is a proem, which serves as introduction to the pair. This may discuss the reasons for coupling these two men, or Plutarch's sentiments behind writing these biographies, or other features of interest. Where a clearly defined proem is lacking, the function of the proem is served by the opening chapters of the first Life (e.g. in *Lycurgus* or *Solon*, where Plutarch's discussion of problems of chronology and sources leads into the pair).⁷ The two biographies follow, first the Greek, then the Roman, with three exceptions.⁸ Finally, most of the pairs add on a *synkrisis* or 'Comparison' which reviews certain major elements of the two lives in an overtly comparative form, often drawing conclusions or expressing opinions different from the narratives themselves.⁹ Since the two Lives form one book, there is often a development of thought and analysis not only within each Life, but

⁶ Cf. *Virtues in Women* 243b-d: 'There is no way of understanding the similarities and differences between virtue in women and virtue in men, other than by comparing life with life, action with action, as works of a great craft . . . Virtues do, of course, acquire differences—peculiar colours, as it were—because of the nature of the persons, and are assimilated to their underlying habits, physical temperaments, diet, and way of life. Achilles was brave in a different way from Ajax. Odysseus' wisdom was not like Nestor's. Cato and Agesilaus were not just in the same way.' (Trans. Russell, *Plutarch: Selected Essays and Dialogues*, 307.)

⁷ See in general P. A. Stadter, 'The Proems of Plutarch's Lives', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 13 (1988), 275–95; for a different approach, T. G. Rosenmeyer, 'Beginnings in Plutarch's Lives', *Yale Classical Studies*, 29 (1992), 205–30.

⁸ *Coriolanus-Alcibiades, Aemilius Paullus-Timoleon, Sertorius-Eumenes*. Some editions reverse these to make the Romans follow.

⁹ There are no comparisons for four pairs, *Themistocles-Camillus, Pyrrhus-Marius, Phocion-Cato Minor, and Alexander-Caesar*.

from one Life to another, so that the first Life regularly serves as a kind of introduction to the second.¹⁰ As a result, the Greek Lives sometimes present in a simpler fashion character traits which appear more complex or extreme in the Roman Lives, many of which are significantly longer than their Greek counterparts. In *Agesilaus*, for example, we see a leader both friendly and able to relate well with others, yet aggressive in pursuing his own honour and military success, to the extent that he creates enemies for Sparta and ultimately presides over its collapse as a major power. The corresponding Life, *Pompey*, is almost twice as long, and shows a man of similar characteristics, whose pursuit of his honour and susceptibility to his friends leads to civil war at Rome, and finally to his own death and the end of the Roman republic.

Plutarch expected both his readers and himself to benefit from the *Parallel Lives*. In the proem of *Aemilius*, he writes:

Although I originally took up the writing of Lives for others, I find that the task has grown on me and I continue with it for my own sake too, in the sense that I treat the narrative as a kind of mirror and try to find a way to arrange my life and assimilate it to the virtues of my subjects. The experience is like nothing so much as spending time in their company and living with them: I receive and welcome each of them in turn as my guest so to speak, observe 'his stature and his qualities', and choose from his achievements those which it is particularly important and valuable for me to know. 'And oh, what greater delight could one find than this?' And could one find a more effective means of moral improvement either?

(*Aem.* 1. 1–3)

It is worth exploring more exactly how Plutarch expected this 'moral improvement' to occur. Plutarch's readership most likely was that same circle of Greek and Roman friends to whom he dedicated his other works and whom we meet in the conversations of *Table Talk* and other dialogues. Comments in Plutarch's works and inscriptional and literary evidence allow us to identify many of these people as members of the ruling class in Greece and in the Roman empire.¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. C. Pelling, 'Syncretism in Plutarch's Lives', in F. Brenk and I. Gallo (eds.), *Miscellanea Plutarchea (Quaderni del giornale filologico ferrarese)*, 8; Ferrara, 1986), 83–96. This feature seems to explain why in certain pairs Plutarch has the Roman Life precede the Greek.

¹¹ See B. Puech, 'Prosopographie des amis de Plutarque', *ANRW* II.33.6 (1992), 4831–93, and C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 39–64.

The Greeks were among the wealthiest in the province, and held major offices in Athens, Sparta, and elsewhere. Among the Romans, no less than nine had held the consulship, a mark of special honour even at this time.

Sosius Senecio, the close friend to whom he dedicated the *Parallel Lives*, *Table Talk*, and *Progress in Virtue*, was a lead consul (*consul ordinarius*) in 99, the first full year of Trajan's reign, and again in 107, and held a high command during Trajan's wars in Dacia (modern Romania), for which he was awarded special honours and a public statue by Trajan. He clearly was a close associate of the emperor. Other friends held the important posts of proconsul in Asia or Africa. One friend, Antiochus Philopappus, grandson of the last king of Commagene, was consul in 109 (the first Athenian to become consul) as well as a fellow citizen of Athens: his grandiose monument stands opposite the Acropolis on the hill of the Muses. Plutarch's friends and readers, then, were not apolitical provincials, dabbling in philosophy or history to while away their time, but men with responsibilities and obligations, active in imperial and provincial politics, some of them in close contact with the emperor.

Plutarch's biography project needs to be seen in the context of this audience. The conversations which Plutarch reports show that these men were trained in basic philosophy and history. The *Moral Essays* of Plutarch were written to give them more specific guidance on particular points, often in response to a request of a friend. But the *Parallel Lives* reveal that Plutarch found these works unsatisfactory in responding to the ethical needs of men active in public life, and sought a different solution. A century and a half before, Cicero had complained that philosophers did not provide clear guidelines on making choices in business or political contexts. When the stakes were high, many respectable men chose something advantageous to themselves over a higher good. He cites as examples the actions of Pompey and Caesar, each fighting for his own honour rather than the good of Rome.¹² Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* are an attempt to fill that gap, and to provide the material which will allow men in power, statesmen and commanders themselves, to become aware of results of personal choices, and the moral decisions—and often ambiguities—inherent in political action.

¹² See Cicero, *On Duties*, book 3, esp. 3. 73–88.

In aiming at this audience of politically involved readers, Plutarch follows his own advice in such works as *Philosophers and Princes* and *Old Men in Politics*, that a philosopher should not hold back from attempting to influence public affairs. Throughout the *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch is fascinated by the figure of the wise adviser in politics, of which the model might be Solon, advising successively the Athenian people, Croesus and other foreign kings, and the tyrant Pisistratus. Legislators, such as Lycurgus and Numa, fit this role, and the very limited number of philosopher-statesmen who are protagonists of Lives: Dion, Phocion, Cato the Younger, Brutus. More often the adviser is an important influence on the protagonist: Anaxagoras for Pericles, Socrates for Alcibiades, Aristotle for Alexander. Romans tend to be influenced by Greek culture and philosophy in general, not a particular adviser, as in the case of Aemilius Paullus, Cicero, or Caesar. Plutarch undoubtedly saw himself in the role of adviser to his political friends and readers, helping them take a philosophical view of their situations and actions.¹³

In perusing one of Plutarch's *Lives*, the reader encounters a major statesman, one well known in history and admired for his achievements, seen not through a single witty anecdote, or a short speech in a history book, but through the whole course of his life. In the beginning the reader is introduced to the subject's family, major personality traits, and intellectual influences, as far as they are known. Then he or she is led through the statesman's life, with a focus on major turning points and crises, until his death. Along the way Plutarch offers comments, interpretations, and especially anecdotes which can suggest the character (*ēthos*) which underlies the statesman's actions.

Plutarch, although generally a Platonist, took his basic philosophy of ethics from Aristotle. He believed that it was possible by constant practice to progress step by step in virtue. In *Control of Anger*, he presents one of his friends, Minucius Fundanus, explaining how he learned to control his temper. Fundanus describes himself as actively taking command of his temper, first by making himself sensitive to

¹³ Cf. A. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (London: Elek, 1974), 211–20; S. Swain, 'Hellenic Culture and the Roman Heroes of Plutarch', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 110 (1990), 126–45 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 229–64); and C. Pelling, 'Plutarch: Roman Heroes and Greek Culture', in M. Griffin and J. Barnes (eds.), *Philosophia Togata: Essays on Philosophy and Roman Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 199–232.

its effects, then by conscious, well-prepared effort to subject it more and more to his rational control. Little is said about rules or precepts: rather the emphasis is on sensitizing oneself to the nature of anger, its effects, and the circumstances which produce it, then working carefully to strengthen oneself in these areas. Of major importance is the observation in others of the fault you are trying to correct, noting especially the effects of the fault on their friends, wives, and families, and the subsequent realization that the same thing is happening to you. Such observation, Fundanus affirms, is like having someone hold up a mirror to you during your moments of rage.¹⁴ Observation also allows us to understand the general nature of vice and virtue, and of the emotions and passions which lead to vice—knowledge learned only abstractly in philosophy lessons. The same is true of good qualities as of bad, of virtue as of vice. We can learn by observing in others not only given qualities, but the effects that they have on the men involved, their families, and their states.

When in *Aemilius* Plutarch speaks of meeting the men whose biographies he writes, of inviting them into his house, and considering them at close range, he describes exactly this process of observation. Like Fundanus, he compares such inspection to holding up a mirror before oneself. A mirror enables us to see ourselves as others see us, and to approve or correct our appearance as needed. Plutarch wished his *Parallel Lives* to serve this function, not in some abstract forum, but for men who wished and were able, like his statesmen and commanders, to have some effect in the larger affairs of Greece and of the Roman empire. The statesmen of the *Lives*, then, are not simply models to be imitated, or paradigms of virtue—many in fact are unsavoury types, or at the best unsatisfactory models—but case studies in political behaviour, set out to be considered and evaluated by the reader. Although Plutarch often points the way to the interpretation of an action which he considers preferable, the reader is encouraged to work actively in evaluating the behaviour and choices of the heroes, forming his own judgement as to their value and effect. Plutarch invites his readers to observe, then fashion their own lives based on what they have learned.

Furthermore, as Plutarch notes elsewhere, observation of behaviour in one area can be applied in other contexts. In the last

¹⁴ *Control of Anger* 455e–456b.

book of the *Iliad*, Achilles receives Priam in his tent, has pity on him, and determines to give back Hector's body to his father. But he wisely decides not to bring the mutilated and disfigured body into Priam's sight before carefully washing and preparing it, lest Priam become angry, and Achilles end up killing him. Plutarch approves of Achilles' foresight concerning his own emotions, and the use of reason to guard against his irrational passion. But Plutarch goes on to assert that this lesson can be generalized, and be applied in different contexts: in the same way, one who is given to drink should be wary of drunkenness, or one given to love be wary of love, as was Agesilaus with the kiss of the beautiful boy.¹⁵

Each individual Life, while presenting a vivid portrait of an ancient statesman in action, invites moral reflection. As has been noted, this process is enriched by the technique of presenting the Lives in pairs: the reader is induced to shift focus back and forth between the two, comparing, changing perspective, re-evaluating. The formal syncrisis repeats this process, again shifting perspective, refocusing the elements of comparison. Both techniques prepare readers to use the pair as a double mirror for their own lives. The *Lives* acts as a powerful imaginative tool, recreating with extraordinary vividness the characteristics of statesmen of the past, and bringing them alive in the readers' minds.

The understanding of the human self implied in Plutarch's biographies differs from that of many modern thinkers. Although he treats major historical figures, his general rule is not to glorify them as independent spirits, breaking away from their social world by an act of will to create an autonomous self. Nor does he see them as unique personalities, unparalleled in the particular conglomeration of environmental influences and personal drives at the basis of their personality, which create strong tensions pulling them in different directions. Greek thinkers thought of the human person first of all as a rational animal, able to act on the basis of reasoning which was generally available to other humans as well. This thinking, as developed by Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics in different ways, argued that it was theoretically possible for a person, in active co-operation with other persons, to arrive at '(a) objective knowledge of what constitutes the best in human life and (b) a corresponding

¹⁵ *On Reading the Poets* 31bc, referring to Homer, *Iliad* 24. 560–86. The story of Agesilaus and the kiss is found in *Ages.* 11.

character and way of life'.¹⁶ In addition, an individual who was acting like a human being (i.e. reasonably) would attempt to shape his life according to that knowledge. In this conception, the individual could and would want to form his own life according to objective criteria of behaviour, rather than follow spontaneous responses to the situation of the moment, or a set of moral principles established solely by oneself, and subject to change based on new experience. This is the basis for the moral thinking which pervades the *Lives*, and which modern readers sometimes find intrusive or gratuitous. Plutarch as a Platonist accepts that there are moral truths which, at least in theory, can be established by reason, to which any sensible person would wish to subscribe, and according to which he would shape his behaviour. From this standpoint Plutarch is able to evaluate the behaviour of his heroes, offer judgements and criticisms, and suggest alternative behaviour. Moreover, this is precisely the perspective from which Plutarch is able to use his heroes as mirrors for himself and his readers, presuming that they, like him, wish to shape their lives by reason in the most suitable way.

However, Plutarch's Platonism was strongly tinged with scepticism, the philosophical notion that many truths were in fact not knowable, so that one may have to hold back from a final decision in individual cases. This awareness of the difficulty of certitude allows Plutarch to be unusually flexible and even tolerant in his judgements, or to leave questions in abeyance. To take an example: Pericles' refusal to back down from a confrontation with Sparta precipitated the Peloponnesian War, a war between Greeks of which Plutarch could not approve. The decision could be a major black mark against Pericles, and Plutarch initially treats it that way. As his discussion proceeds, however, and he examines various reasons Pericles may have had, he ends up withholding judgement: 'So these are the reasons given by my sources to explain why he did not allow the people to yield to the Spartans; the truth is, however, uncertain.'¹⁷ For this reason also the formal comparison often presents a different evaluation of an action from the narrative, or there are different evaluations in different Lives. While moralist in theory, Plutarch's sensitivity to human motives and circumstances creates a vivid

¹⁶ The formulation is that of C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 12.

¹⁷ *Per.* 32. The whole discussion is at 30–2.

picture of the dynamics of moral decision, and in the last resort transfers to the reader the final judgement on his hero's behaviour.

Another aspect of the ancient view of character was that a number of traits tend to cluster in one type of character: an early philosophical example is Plato's descriptions of the different kinds of lives associated with different regimes in *Republic* books 8 and 9. Whereas moderns tend to emphasize the complexity of character, looking for those unexpected traits or quirks which make each individual unique, Plutarch tends to search for unifying factors. This results in what have been called 'integrated' characters:

a man's qualities are brought into some sort of relation with one another, and every trait goes closely with the next. We are unsurprised if Antony is simple, passive, ingenuous, susceptible, soldierly, boisterous, yet also noble and often brilliant; or the younger Cato is high-principled and determined, rigid in his philosophy, scruffy (as philosophical beings often are), strange but bizarrely logical in the way he treats his women, and disablingly inflexible and insensitive in public life.¹⁸

In this kind of integrated character-portrayal, the different traits of character are seen as naturally cohering facets of a given combination of inborn qualities, education, and mind-set. Antony's or Cato's characters are unique, yet in a certain sense expected, because the different elements which might seem contradictory in fact complement each other so well. Thus the deceptive simplicity of Plutarchan character-drawing hides an exceptional sensitivity to the variety and complexity of human behaviour. The reader is not shocked by startling quirks or unexplained outbursts of genius, but gradually led to see, in the course of the biography, the complex and often surprising results of traits already visible in childhood or at the beginning of a political career.

Biographical Method

Plutarch's method is generally to set out at the beginning basic features of his subject's nature and the influences which affected

¹⁸ C. Pelling, 'Aspects of Plutarch's Characterization', *Illinois Classical Studies*, 13 (1988), 256–74 at 262; cf. also his 'Childhood and Personality in Greek Biography', in Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 213–44.

it: thus we learn in the first chapters of the respective Lives of Agesilaus' training in the Spartan educational system and his ambitious competitiveness, and of Antony's tendency to let others set his agenda and susceptibility to women. Physical appearance, when it is reported, often provides a clue to character: Sulla's blotched face and intimidating eyes point to the harshness of the later tyrant. This preliminary sketch prepares for the statesman's political career, which usually proceeds in a series of stages, with one or two major peaks. The Life ends with the subject's death, though often Plutarch chooses to follow out some narrative thread—the fate of his children, or of his murderers, or his successors—to reach an effective closure.

This basic outline, which implies that the structure is straightforwardly chronological, is deceptive. Writing in an age when rhetoric formed the basis of education, Plutarch carefully shapes his presentation for maximum effectiveness. Each Life is thought out in terms of the problems which it presents, the features which Plutarch wishes to highlight, and the material available. The resulting organization therefore combines chronological, thematic, and rhetorical principles. While maintaining for clarity a basic chronological scheme, Plutarch uses flashbacks and future references to call attention to continuing traits or explain particular incidents. Moreover, he regularly introduces anecdotal material from all periods of the life to exemplify traits which he treats in connection with a given event.

Anecdotes are frequently clustered at major points in the subject's life, e.g. in *Themistocles* 18, just after the victory at Salamis; in *Alexander* 21–3, after the victory at Issus. The first sixteen chapters of *Alcibiades* are almost continuous anecdotes, which gradually lead from Alcibiades' youth to his relations with his lovers and with Socrates to the beginnings of his political career.¹⁹ The anecdotes may be taken from every sort of source, historical, philosophical, or rhetorical, and can be combined in different lengths and degree of elaboration. 'They need not be correctly placed in date in relation to their neighbours,'²⁰ so that extreme caution is needed in trying to fit them into a chronological sequence. While all anecdotes assist in

¹⁹ See D. A. Russell, 'Plutarch Alcibiades 1–16', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* (1966), 37–47 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 191–207).

²⁰ Russell in Scardigli (above n. 19), 206.

portraying *ēthos*, Plutarch's method of employment can be extremely flexible. *Alexander* provides numerous examples. Alexander's taming of Bucephelas (*Alex.* 6) seems to be especially significant, raising the question of mastery and training of genius. The sequence which forms the account of naphtha in *Alex.* 35 falls immediately after the battle of Gaugamela and is often considered a digression, but in fact comments on *ēthos*, exploring Alexander's own dangerous fieriness. Sequences of anecdotes build up a larger picture: after Alexander wins the battle of Issus, three chapters of anecdotes show his idea of kingship and his self-restraint (*Alex.* 21–3). They can also create a sense of false continuity, when a series of anecdotes serves in place of historical narrative, as at *Alex.* 25–6 and 45–56. Finally, Plutarch can use a sequence of anecdotes as a technique to comment on and interpret his subject's behaviour, as he does in *Alex.* 45–56. In presenting the most scandalous actions of Alexander's career, anecdotes are able to suggest that Alexander was not completely guilty and that the Macedonians also had some responsibility in the events.²¹

The whole is united by a remarkably facile style: 'learned and allusive, imaginative and metaphorical, exuberant and abundant.'²² Strongly influenced by classical models, he fashioned a literary language for his own day, a varied and rich instrument to express his thinking on everything from philosophy and medicine to vegetarianism and astronomy. His style tends to be generous rather than spare: he regularly doubles synonyms, and employs amplification, in the form of examples, general thoughts, and anecdotes, to enlarge on a topic. Frequent poetic quotations give authoritative support to an argument as well as a cultured flavour. When he wishes a higher style, the sentences can become quite long, built up carefully from subordinate clauses, creating luxuriant accumulation of words and ideas. Throughout, the range and aptness of examples and metaphors delights and instructs, while the vividness of the narrative charms the imagination.

²¹ Cf. P. A. Stadter, 'Anecdotes and the Thematic Structure of Plutarchean Biography', in J. A. Fernández Delgado and F. Pordomingo Pardo (eds.), *Estudios sobre Plutarco: Aspectos formales* (Madrid: Ediciones Clásicas, 1996), 291–303.

²² Russell, *Plutarch*, 20. The whole chapter, 18–41, is an excellent study of his style, to which this paragraph is indebted.

Historical Value

The *Parallel Lives*, however, are most often read as historical sources for the periods which he treats. They are in fact extraordinarily valuable as sources, both because they give us Plutarch's insight into the men he treats and because they preserve a vast spectrum of evidence which otherwise would have been lost, collected in the course of Plutarch's omnivorous reading and his special research for the *Lives*. His historical contribution came under severe scrutiny from positivist historians in the nineteenth century, but in the latter half of the twentieth century, as we have learned more of his method and his purpose, a clearer picture has emerged of his value to the historian.

Although he famously protests that he is a biographer, not a historian (*Alex.* 1), historical narratives provide the base for his biographies. Political biography before Plutarch was not a common genre. The only example we possess is a Latin writer and contemporary of Cicero, Cornelius Nepos, and his biographies, though they treat many of the same Greek figures as Plutarch, have a much more limited scope.²³ There do not seem to have been biographies in any way similar to Plutarch's before he wrote the *Lives*.

Plutarch was one of the most educated men of antiquity. His reading from childhood on provided him a comfortable background in the history of Greece. Latin, however, he admits to learning late and imperfectly (*Dem.* 2). He cites many fewer Latin authors than Greek, and does not cite passages from Latin poets, though he frequently quotes from Greek poets. He knows and quotes all the major Greek historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius—and many historians and antiquarians now lost to us. But these historical narratives are supplemented with information from contemporary letters and poetry, inscriptions and public documents, philosophical authors, and his own autopsy and conversations with knowledgeable friends.²⁴

A clearer idea of Plutarch's method of using these sources

²³ Cf. J. Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography* (*Historia Einzelschriften*, 47; Stuttgart, 1985).

²⁴ Cf. e.g. B. X. de Wet, 'Plutarch's Use of the Poets', *Acta Classica*, 31 (1988), 13–25; F. Frost, 'Some documents in Plutarch's Lives', *Classica et mediaevalia*, 22 (1961), 182–94; P. Desideri, 'I documenti di Plutarco', *ANRW* II.33.6 (1992), 4536–67; J. Buckler, 'Plutarch and Autopsy', *ANRW* II.33.6 (1992), 4788–830.

emerges when we compare his account against an extant source, as we can in many Lives, or when we compare two accounts of the same events in two Lives. Particularly instructive are the Lives of the late republic at Rome, six of which apparently were written at about the same time and used many of the same sources (*Crassus, Pompey, Caesar, Cato, Brutus, Antony*).²⁵ For these lives he used first-hand sources, probably Pollio for the Civil Wars and Dellius for the Parthian War of Antony, memoirs, Cicero's *Second Philippic*, Livy, Sallust, and other writers. In addition he used oral tradition, both Greek and Roman. We can identify two stages of composition, an initial reading of sources (undoubtedly less necessary for the Greek lives than for the Roman) and preparation of detailed notes, before the final draft or drafts.

In adapting the historical material, Plutarch took several steps to focus attention on his protagonist. Thus he may abridge his source by simplifying it, either conflating several similar incidents into one (e.g. meetings of the senate), by chronological compression (making two items seem to follow closely which in fact were separated by a period of time), or reorganizing events in non-chronological order, especially to bring out causal or logical connections. Occasionally he may even transfer an item from one character to another, whether consciously or not. More commonly, he may attribute to his protagonist an action which might be generally ascribed to a group (the senate, the city) in his source, personalizing an impersonal action. On the other hand, he will expand inadequate material, not by free invention but by a visualization of what must have been the case, what antecedents would naturally precede an action, or what context seems to be implied by a historical notice.²⁶

His interpretations of his characters' motives are not fixed, but can vary depending on the biography in which they are given. Naturally, more complex motives are likely to appear when the actor is protagonist of a Life. Moreover, generally Plutarch tends to view his protagonist more favourably than other characters in a Life, and to

²⁵ Cf. C. Pelling, 'Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman Lives', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 99 (1979), 74–96 and 'Plutarch's Adaptation of his Source Material', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 100 (1980), 127–40 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 265–318 (with postscript) and 125–54 respectively), to which the following paragraph is indebted. Cicero and Lucullus were written earlier.

²⁶ Cf. C. Pelling, 'Truth and Fiction in Plutarch's Lives', in D. A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 19–52.

adopt the protagonist's perspective on the events of which he takes part. This focalization via the protagonist of a Life, and therefore on multiple protagonists in several Lives dealing with the same events, is a significant aspect of Plutarch's metamorphosis of history into biography, and supported his philosophical purpose by permitting his readers to identify individually with each protagonist, moving, for instance, from Pompey to Cato to Caesar in different pairs of Lives. Again, different Lives will emphasize different aspects of the protagonist: some will concentrate on historical incident (e.g. *Caesar*), others will be more philosophical or personal, such as *Cato the Younger* or *Pompey*.

Of course, the effort to bring out parallel aspects of Lives which form a pair has a significant effect on choice of detail and overall presentation, and sometimes on the interpretation of particular incidents. Plutarch might have passed over as insignificant Pericles' offer to give his land to the city if it were not ravaged in the war, though it is recorded in Thucydides, if he had not known that Hannibal caused difficulties at Rome to Pericles' parallel figure, Fabius, by sparing Fabius' land.²⁷

Viewed from a historical perspective, Plutarch's work has a number of limitations, many tied to his biographical purpose, others reflecting the views of his class and his society, others still his Platonism. Although more familiar than most men of his time with the society of classical Greece, he is not always able to abandon a somewhat idealized picture of the great age of Greece. His basic political scheme, seen again and again in both Greek and Roman Lives, is set in terms of a conflict between élite and populace, where the élite may be land-owning Athenians, leading Spartans, or the Roman senate. Within the élite struggles will occur, and some men will appeal to the emotions of the crowd. This scheme glides over the marked differences between different systems of government, and the nature of practical politics at different times. Plutarch rarely takes a larger view of his protagonist's actions, and generally refrains from commenting on their effect in the history of their city or of world affairs:

²⁷ *Per.* 33, cf. *Fab.* 7. On such parallels, see e.g. P. Stadter, 'Plutarch's Comparison of Pericles and Fabius Maximus', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 16 (1975), 77–85 (= Scardigli, *Essays on Plutarch's Lives*, 155–64), and id., 'Paradoxical Paradigms: Lysander and Sulla' and A. B. Bosworth, 'History and Artifice in Plutarch's Eumenes', in P. Stadter (ed.), *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 41–55 and 56–89.

he clearly expects his readers already to have some idea of the importance of these figures on the stage of history. Finally, given the fact that our historical sources are often so meagre, the potential misunderstandings and distortions introduced by Plutarch's biographical technique can offer frustrating barriers to modern efforts at historical reconstruction and interpretation. Nevertheless, it is hard for the historian to imagine ancient history without him: his contribution to our understanding is invaluable.

Plutarch encapsulates the greatness of Greece and Rome, and brings alive the great moments of history as lived by their protagonists. The range of his sources is immense, and he regularly uses contemporary materials otherwise not available to us. To these he adds his own narrative gift and insight into the dynamics of character,²⁸ which bring alive in a uniquely vivid presentation scores of figures from classical antiquity. It was this drama of living which Shakespeare recognized in Plutarch, from whom he drew not just the plot, but many of the scenes and the dynamics of action for *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The liveliness, intimacy, and imagination of Plutarch's vision of his heroes has moulded our modern understanding of classical antiquity.

This Selection of Roman Lives

The eight Lives in this collection illustrate the variety of Roman statesmen in the second and first centuries BC and the path which the republic followed from a strong senatorial oligarchy to a monarchy based on the loyalty of the military and the realization by all that one-man rule was preferable to anarchy. Each figure is of interest in his own right, but each also plays a significant part in the changes, often violent, which reshaped the Roman empire. The first two figures are a study in contrasts. Cato the Elder (234–149), gruff, unyielding, a figure of old-fashioned integrity in a Rome flooded with the wealth of Macedonia and Carthage, insisted in his eighties that Carthage should be destroyed. Aemilius Paullus (c.228–160), a patrician and philhellene, ended the Third Macedonian War by his defeat of King Perseus of Macedon in 168, but the glory of his

²⁸ Cf. e.g. C. Pelling, 'Plutarch and Thucydides', in *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1992), 10–40, noting that Plutarch's comments on character can be more perceptive than Thucydides'.

triumph was shadowed by the death of his two sons. The lives of Tiberius Gracchus (c.164–133) and his brother Gaius (153–121) mark the beginning of the Roman revolution, as each in turn tried to use his position as the tribune of the people to force the senatorial oligarchy of which they were a part to share some of its newly acquired wealth and power with a larger segment of citizens and allies. Both died in the streets of Rome, introducing a hundred years of civic violence. There follow two outstanding generals, who locked in a vicious battle to control the city. Gaius Marius (c.157–86) made his fame and was elected consul by denouncing the nobility, then won five more consulships when it seemed that he was the only man who could defeat the Germanic tribes threatening to invade Italy. Not content, he attempted to usurp the command against Mithridates, was outlawed, and returned to soak the city in blood. Cornelius Sulla (138–79) won his reputation under Marius in 107, but the rivalry engendered early came to a head in 88, when Marius attempted to deprive him of his command. He seized the city once in 88, then, after a victorious campaign against Mithridates, returned again in 82. Made dictator with the intention of upholding senatorial government, his proscriptions and executions terrified the city. Out of this carnage emerged two outstanding generals and statesmen, Pompey the Great (106–48) and Julius Caesar (100–44)—at first reluctant allies, so that each could pursue his own goals, then bitter foes in a new civil war. When Caesar defeated Pompey at Pharsalus it seemed that the end of strife had come, and he was made perpetual dictator, only to be assassinated by senators who could not accept his domination. Mark Antony (83–30) attempted to pick up the mantle of Caesar, pursuing and defeating the Liberators, Brutus and Cassius, at Philippi with the help of Caesar's young heir, Octavian. Soon, however, these two divided the empire into two halves, East and West. Antony, distracted more than aided by his alliance with Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen, was defeated at Actium, finally leaving Octavian to consolidate his position and emerge as undisputed monarch. Again and again, these Lives put before us the dynamic relation between power and character, examining from every side the nature of ambition, of compromise, of friendship, of integrity, as manifested in these outstanding individuals. Always present is Plutarch's own world of the second century AD, when the imperial monarchy seemed strong and fair with Trajan as emperor. But the

biographer had lived through times of civil war and assassination, and he writes with insight on the drives and tensions which can destroy individuals and republics.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

THE Greek text used as the basis for these translations (with one exception) is the Teubner edition. Any places where I have adopted a different text have been marked in the translation with an obelus, which refers the interested reader to a note in the Textual Notes section at the back of the book. The Teubner editions of Plutarch's Lives are currently (1998) in the process of being updated, but this process is not complete. To be precise, therefore, I have used the following editions:

For Cato the Elder: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, I.1, ed. K. Ziegler (1969).

For Aemilius Paullus: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, II.1, ed. K. Ziegler, addenda by H. Gärtner (1993).

For Caesar: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, II.2, ed. K. Ziegler, addenda by H. Gärtner (1994).

For Marius and the Gracchi: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, III.1, ed. K. Ziegler, addenda by H. Gärtner (1996).

For Sulla and Pompey: *Plutarchus, Vitae Parallelae*, III.2, ed. K. Ziegler (1973).

For Antony: *Plutarch: Life of Antony*, ed. C. B. R. Pelling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).