

# PLOUTARCHOS, n.s.

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Plutarchus



Plutarchus ein natürlicher maister vnd aussprechender geistlicher vntersuchung vnter dem Titulo ein gepie-  
ter vñ anrichter des kaisers Traiani ist zu diser zeit an dem Dolcantes in jener vnterrichtung vñ glantz-  
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Plutarchus der natürlich maister ist in dem heiligthumb schen der siten ein so vntersuchung vñ glantz-  
gewest das er leichtlich ein gepierer des kaisers hat miten erkant werden. vnter Plutar-  
chus ist sundern fleiß dem kaiser seinen unger vier ding eingepildet. nemlich das er vnter Plutar-  
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sachen in frechischem vnd lateinlichem gesung hat vil bicher von mancherley materien vnter  
tappferheit bey Traiano angenehme begabung erlangt.

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# MIRRORING VIRTUE IN PLUTARCH'S *LIVES*<sup>1</sup>

by

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## Abstract

The paper presents three points about Plutarch's pedagogy of mirroring virtue (cf. *Aem.* 1): 1) The *Parallel Lives* expect the reader to learn from weaknesses as well as strengths (cf. *De coh. ira*); 2) Plutarch expects his readers to distinguish what is admirable and what is not in a Life (e.g., in *Sulla*); 3) paralleling Greek and Roman lives heightens the mirroring effect.

I began the composition of my *Lives* for others, but I have continued and lingered with them for myself, using the narrative as a kind of mirror in some way to improve and assimilate my life to the virtue of these men.

This well-known passage from the proem to the *Aemilius-Timoleon* pair (*Aem.* 1) indicates that Plutarch expects

his audience, like himself, to use his *Lives* as a mirror; a mirror not of outward appearance, but of the inner person, of *arete* and of *ethos*. But how does Plutarch expect this process of reflection to work? I will argue that this mirroring encourages both a sensitizing to the nature of virtue and vice and an active process of ethical development.

The notion of external phenomena serving as a mirror for internal self-improvement occurs also in other contexts in Plutarch<sup>2</sup>. A young student is

<sup>1</sup> This paper is given here very much as delivered in Philadelphia. I have not attempted to provide bibliographic references, many of which can be found in my article cited in n. 9. I am grateful to the editor and to HUBERT MARTIN, president of the North American section of IPS, for arranging its publication with other papers of the Philadelphia panel here.

<sup>2</sup> *De recta aud.* 42B: "As a matter of course, when he rises to leave the barber's shop, he stands by the mirror and feels his head, examining the cut of his hair and the difference made by the trimming; so on his way home from a lecture or an academic exercise, should he not immediately direct his gaze upon himself, and note carefully his own spirit, whether it has put from it any of its encumbrances and superfluities and has become

advised, on returning from a lecture, to look closely at himself, studying his *psuche*, just as one leaving a barber shop studies one's haircut in a mirror. The man trying to improve himself is recommended to check himself against men like Plato, Epaminondas, and Lycurgus, using them as mirrors to check his control of his emotions. Even the humble ant can be seen as a mirror of greater things, a representation of every virtue. Today, in the limited time available, I would like to make three points about Plutarch's pedagogy of mirrors in the *Lives*.

First, Plutarch's readers did not find in the *Lives* solely noble examples to be imitated, as he seems to imply in the passage just quoted. Demetrius and Antony are specifically identified as negative examples, but many other protagonists have serious faults. Plutarch hardly expected his readers to imitate all the qualities of Coriolanus, who led a foreign army against his city, or Marius, who slaughtered fellow Romans to win his eighth

consulship. Examined more carefully, none of Plutarch's protagonists is perfect—not Philopoemen or Flamininus, not Cato Minor or Brutus—and many of the heroes are distinctly unattractive. Here we recognize a particular application of the notion of mirroring.

Plutarch's lives are not encomia, but re-creations of real people, who lived and acted on the stage of history, with all their faults and weaknesses. His readers discover not paradigms of perfect behavior, but case studies of the political life, tools from which they could learn what these men had done well and what badly.

Moral development requires awareness of one's weaknesses and a desire to improve. In Plutarch's thinking, reason works with the natural disposition (*phusis*) to create an acquired habit (*hexis*) of virtue. His dialogue *On controlling anger* gives an idea of how this concept of the action of the soul works in practice. In this work Sextius Sulla, just returned to Rome, asks Minucius Funda-

lighter and more pleasing." *De prof. in virt.* 85 AB: "With men of this sort it has already become a constant practice, on proceeding to any business, or on taking office, or on encountering any dispensation of Fortune, to set before their eyes good men of the present or of the past, and to reflect: "What would Plato have done in this case? What would Epaminondas have said? How would Lycurgus have conducted himself, or Agesilaus?" And before such mirrors as these, figuratively speaking, they would array themselves or readjust their manner or repress a more ignoble utterance or resist some emotion." *De soll. anim.* 967D: "It is impossible to state precisely the management and preparations of ants, but it would be careless to omit them entirely. Nature has, in fact, nowhere else so small a mirror of great and nobler enterprises. Just as you may see greater things reflected in a drop of clear water, so among ants there exists the delineation of every virtue." Cf. also [Plut.] *De lib. educ.* 14A. "Fathers ought above all, by not misbehaving and by doing as they ought to do, make themselves a manifest example to their children, so that the latter, by looking at their fathers' lives as at a mirror, may be deterred from disgraceful deeds and words."

nus how he has so successfully calmed his temper over the last year while Sextius has been away. Fundanus' monologue in reply, listing the steps that he took, occupies the bulk of the dialogue. The first and essential step in his process of self-improvement, Fundanus says, was sensitizing himself to the nature of anger, its effects, and the circumstances that produce it. This new awareness, derived from close observation of himself and of others, formed the basis for careful work strengthening himself in these areas. The process described by Fundanus is like the study an athlete makes of his performance and that of others he admires. He knows the basic movements, but now he reviews every stage of his performance to maximize his strengths and minimize his faults. Mirrors were a fundamental tool for external self-analysis, and not only for haircuts. Demosthenes, Plutarch tells us, even used a large mirror to check his appearance while speaking (*Dem.* 11.1).

One would like, Fundanus affirms, to have someone hold up a mirror to you during your moments of rage (456AB). Observing others at moments of anger is the next best thing<sup>3</sup>. The image of the mirror clarifies how seeing bad examples makes us aware of the evil, though often unintended, effects of our behavior. Seeing the terror on the face of an angry man's wife does more than philosophical analysis to encourage a person to curb his anger. Reading how the ambition and cruelty of Marius and Sulla brought terror and bloodshed to Rome could help Plutarch's contemporaries restrain their own competitiveness, as seeing the behavior of drunken helots could teach Spartiates the dangers of wine (*Demetr.* 1).

This leads to my second point: Plutarch relies on his readers to be able to distinguish what is admirable and what not in a *Life*. This ability is important when reading poetry, as Plutarch insists in *On Reading the Poets*<sup>4</sup>, and

<sup>3</sup> *De coh. ira* 455E-456B: "As for me —whether rightly I do not know— I made this start in the treatment of my anger: I began to observe the passion in others, just as the Spartans used to observe in the Helots what a thing drunkenness is. And first ... I observed that those who are transported by anger also change most in countenance, color, gait, and voice, and thus formed for myself a picture of that passion and was exceedingly uncomfortable to think that I should ever appear so to my friends and my wife and daughters ... But as for me, if I had some attentive and clever servant, I should not be vexed if he held a mirror up to me during my moments of rage, as they do —to no useful purpose— for some after bathing. For to see oneself in a state which nature did not intend, with one's features distorted, contributes greatly to discrediting that passion."

<sup>4</sup> *De aud. poet.* 25E-26A. A young man, while reading about famous heroes in the poets, should not think "that the men were wise and honest, consummate kings, and standards of all virtue and uprightness ... but let him cherish the belief that poetry is an imitation of character and lives, and of men who are not perfect or spotless or unassailable in all

even more so in contemplating history. Distinguishing the two is not always easy. Tim Duff in his recent book finds that in the Lysander-Sulla pair, “no simple classification of actions and men as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ has emerged,” and that Plutarch “problematiz[es] the moral stature” of figures such as Lysander and Sulla, so that there remains “an unresolved moral dilemma,” in which Lysander’s virtue competes with Sulla’s political success<sup>5</sup>. Certainly Plutarch did not classify his protagonists as simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but I do not think that he intended to create a post-modern ‘unresolved moral dilemma’. Plutarch portrays Sulla as a leader who is successful but vicious in his use of power, a tyrant in the worse sense. The Romans realized this, Plutarch notes, as soon as he entered Rome. Sulla had six thousand of the enemy who had surrendered to him brought to the Circus Flaminius, and then called a meeting of the senate nearby. I continue in Plutarch’s words:

At precisely the same time that he began to address the senate, picked men began to butcher the six thousand prisoners. As was only to be expected, the screams of so many men being slaughtered in a confined space reached the ears of the senators and filled them with fear, but Sulla continued speaking with the same face, unmoved, ... and

told them not to pay attention to what was going on outside, which was just some criminals being punished. (*Sulla* 30.4)

This kind of cold-blooded cruelty establishes Sulla as one of the most vicious of Plutarch’s ‘heroes’.

And yet, he was an amazingly successful general. While in Greece, Sulla laid siege to Athens and took it, defeated Mithridates’ generals several times, and forced Mithridates to accept humiliating terms. On his return to Italy he defeated several consular armies and regained control of Rome. As a commander he was extraordinary, and his successes changed Roman history.

Is then Plutarch suggesting in his biography that a life of ruthlessness and debauchery is redeemed by military success, and that victory is enough to make a man a suitable model for his readers? Certainly Plutarch was impressed by the contrast between Sulla’s personal life and his achievements, and perhaps even more by the significance of those victories for the Roman Empire he knew. Still, Plutarch as a Platonic philosopher refuses to take a purely pragmatic attitude to a figure like Sulla. His biography is in fact subtler than that.

At the beginning and end of the *Life* he makes an important observation

respects, but pervaded by emotions, false opinions, and sundry forms of ignorance, who yet through inborn goodness frequently change themselves for the better.”

<sup>5</sup> T. DUFF, *Plutarch’s Lives. Exploring Virtue and Vice*, Oxford, 1999, p. 204.

(*Sull.* 1 and *Comp. Lyc.-Sull.* 1): after noting that Romans in Sulla's day no longer practiced the old virtues of simplicity and thrift and that politics was now governed by violent mobs and money, he states that the type of man who can come to power in such a time cannot be expected to be a model of virtue. In support, he quotes the words of an ancient poet, "In time of faction, even the utterly bad person receives a share of honor"<sup>6</sup>. Historical circumstances condition the kind of leader who can emerge, and whether a man of true virtue can play a major role in political life. The reader must be aware that leaders who emerge during civic upheavals will naturally be of a much lower moral stature than those of less degenerate times. Similarly, very noble men, such as Phocion and Cato Uticensis, may not find the success they deserve (*Phocion* 3.2-3)<sup>7</sup>. Given these circumstances, we must not be surprised that a leading statesman is both debauched and ruthless, and that he governs

as a tyrant. In the mirror of the *Life*, the reader may admire Sulla's dynamic generalship and political success while shunning his flaws.

Plutarch, moreover, sees in Sulla a special virtue beyond mere success. His loyalty to the Roman state in a time of personal crisis is exemplary. When Sulla went to fight Mithridates, the Marian faction killed and exiled Sulla's supporters and confiscated their property. At this moment Mithridates' general in Greece offered to help Sulla deal with his enemies in Rome, promising him all the troops and ships he wished. Many men would have accepted the bargain —Plutarch indeed wrote the lives of Coriolanus and Alcibiades, two men who joined with their enemies to attack their own city. But Sulla contemptuously rejected such a move, which he rightly termed treason (*Sull.* 22). He chose first to repulse Rome's enemies, then to return to deal with his opponents at home. Plutarch sin-

<sup>6</sup> The whole passage from *Comp. Lyc.-Sull.* 1 is of interest: "In civil strife even villains rise to fame.' And so then at Rome, when the people were distempered, and the government out of order, one or another rose to power. No wonder then, if Sulla ruled, when the Glauciae and Saturnini drove out the Metelli from the city, when sons of consuls were slain in the assemblies, when they purchased men and arms with silver and gold, enacted new laws with fire and sword, and put down all opposition. I do not blame any one, in such circumstances, for working himself into supreme power, but I do not consider it a sign of great goodness to be head of a state in such a wretched situation."

<sup>7</sup> *Phocion* 3.2-3: "The same thing happened to him, in my opinion, as we observe in fruits ripe out of their season, which we rather take pleasure in looking at and admiring than actually use; so much was his old-fashioned virtue out of the present mode, among the depraved customs which time and luxury had introduced, that it appeared, indeed, remarkable and wonderful, but was too great and too good to suit the present exigencies, being so out of all proportion to the times."

gles out Sulla's willingness to risk his life for Rome, at a time when he had been rejected by the city, as his finest deed<sup>8</sup>. As fiercely competitive for honor as he was, he refused to join with Rome's enemies to attack his city.

The *Life of Sulla*, then, shows us that patriotism and dedication to Rome's greatness can coexist with a bitter internal feud and slaughter of fellow citizens. Even vicious men may show moral strength and prove valuable to the state. A reader can look into the mirror of Sulla's life and learn from him, both what to avoid—his competitiveness, viciousness, and debauchery—and what to imitate—his loyalty and military success. Plutarch does not intend to leave the reader perplexed, but to show him the complexity of the intermingling of flaws and virtues in the same person.

Finally, my third point, briefly. Plutarch heightens this mirroring by paralleling two lives from different historical periods and cultures. As a vernier scale on a rule allows a craftsman to measure more precisely, the two similar but different lives set side by side in one book permit us to observe each more

precisely, and encourage us to look in one for features we saw in the other. Only recently have we begun to take this comparative aspect of Plutarch's project seriously, and attempted the kind of observation that Plutarch expected from his readers. Comparison with Lysander helps us realize the greater viciousness of Sulla in slaughtering fellow citizens and establishing himself as dictator—for reasons that he considered noble and conservative. We can contrast the upright, simple life of Lysander with the dissoluteness of Sulla, and also appreciate that Lysander, although he held back from starting a constitutional revolution of the sort that Sulla carried through in blood, nevertheless severely disturbed the Spartan constitution with the imperial wealth which he introduced into the city. The system of pairs of *Lives* increases the readers' ability to recognize and differentiate virtues in their different manifestations and historical situations—and of course this carries over into their reflection on their own lives. The pair of *Lives* in fact offers readers a multiple mirroring: the Roman and Greek *Lives* reflect each other, and the readers' own lives are reflected in each of the pair<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> *Comp. Sull.-Lyc.* 5.4: "Sulla never performed a finer action, nor with a nobler spirit, than when he preferred the public good to the private, and like good hounds, where he had once fixed, never letting go his hold, till the enemy yielded, and then he set himself to revenge his own private quarrels."

<sup>9</sup> I discuss mirroring with additional examples in "The Rhetoric of Virtue in Plutarch's *Lives*," in L. VAN DER STOCKT (ed), *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch, Acts of the IV. International Congress, International Plutarch Society, Leuven, Belgium, July 3-6, 1996*, Leuven, Peeters, 2000, pp. 493-510.

Plutarch's technique revealed the virtues and flaws of his heroes to his readers "as in a mirror" and thus allowed them to see their own souls more clearly. They could recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, and where moral discipline was needed. As the project of the *Lives* progressed, the darker elements in the biographies increased. The much greater length of the late Republican *Lives* suggest that Plutarch came to recognize that the *Lives* of the protagonists of the extremely complex and difficult years of the Roman Civil Wars were those that touched most profoundly the needs of his audience. We know that Plutarch's audience included the highest level of imperial society: not only the ruling class in the Greek cities, but some of the most powerful men in the Roman Empire. The letter to Trajan preceding the *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*, now judged to be most likely authentic<sup>10</sup>, indicates that Plutarch hoped that his collection of sayings, if not the *Lives* themselves, would serve the emperor as mirrors of the thought of great men<sup>11</sup>. I suggest that the political

world of the late republic, so much more intense than earlier times, furnished a mirror closer to his readers' concerns. The constant struggle for power among able and ruthless men, backed up by armies who had fought and conquered under them and demanded their reward, was not so distant from Plutarch's times as we sometimes think. The horrors of civil war, the risks of political prominence, the necessity of military victory were very present. Domitian had been assassinated, Nerva threatened with revolt, and the settlement that allowed Trajan to come to the throne was precarious. Politics was played for high stakes.

The mirroring strategy of the *Parallel Lives* not only made readers sensitive to virtue and vice, but also stimulated them to emulate the best in his heroes, and to use their reason to control their most irrational impulses and their worst passions. Looking into his mirrors of famous statesmen, with all their flaws, his readers were encouraged, in the midst of the ambitions, crises, and dangers of imperial politics, to shape their souls according to reason and humanity.

<sup>10</sup> See M. BECK, "Plutarch to Trajan: The Dedicatory Letter and the Apophthegmata Collection," in *Sage and Emperor. Plutarch, Greek Intellectuals, and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan (98-117A.D.)*, P. A. STADTER and L. VAN DER STOCKT (edd.), Leuven 2003, pp. 163-73.

<sup>11</sup> *Apophtheg. Reg.* 172D: "It is true that you have also the *Lives*, a collection of the leaders, lawgivers, and rulers among the Greeks and Romans; but their actions, for the most part, have an admixture of chance, whereas their pronouncements and unpremeditated utterance in connection with what they did or experienced or chanced upon afford an opportunity to observe, as in so many mirrors, the workings of the mind of each man." [The mss. have "The (or My) work contains the lives..."].