

REVIEW

PLUTARCH AS STORYTELLER AND MORALIST

Chrysanthos S. Chrysanthou, *Plutarch's Parallel Lives: Narrative Technique and Moral Judgement*. Trends in Classics, Supplementary Volumes, 57. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2018. Pp. x + 228. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN 978-3-11-057298-8.

Anglophone scholarship on Plutarch's *Lives* comprises a crowded and well-cultivated field, one in which it can be difficult to stake out new territory. With this book, a 'slightly revised version' (vii) of his Oxford thesis, Chrysanthou (henceforward C.) enters the field and, rather than expanding it, finds a few ways to dig deeper. Aware of his approach, C. actively encourages us to read his work in the context of other scholarship, beginning with the first sentence of the first paragraph: 'Many readers in recent years have stressed that Plutarch's moralism in the *Lives* goes much further than simply allocating praise or blame' (1). As evidence, C. summarises the opinions of Christopher Pelling, Philip Stadter, and Timothy Duff in the three subsequent sentences, which constitute the balance of the book's first paragraph. The 'many readers', then, are really three, and these three—but especially Pelling and Duff—are an almost constant presence in the book. Their opinions carry great weight, and their scholarship largely defines the scope of C.'s study. It is fair to say that we do not encounter new problems in this book, but we do encounter some new ways of approaching old problems.

It would be easy to write a review that simply highlighted the book's debt to previous scholarship. C. himself, as I mentioned, points the way, with a generous supply of references to other scholars' work in footnotes and the main text. Moreover, he is never polemical; one could even argue that he states his differences with his predecessors so gently that he undersells his own ideas. He can also be brief when dealing with his sources (though in a revised dissertation, this could be counted as a blessing, too). There are some places where episodes from the *Lives* should be more fully explained, and others where C. assumes that his readers will know essential historical or cultural background. This is a book by a Plutarchan, for Plutarchans. Nonetheless, those who count themselves among that group and are comfortable with its brand of 'inside baseball' will know the material, recognise immediately the other scholarship to which C. is responding, and appreciate where he is adding depth.

The divisions of C.'s book mirror the divisions of Plutarch's own books. C. takes particular interest in the *Lives*' opening and closing sections. In Chapter 2, he studies the prologues, then in Chapters 4 and 5, the conclusions of *Lives* and the *synkriseis*, which appear as epilogues to most but not all the books. Chapters 3 and 6 draw on a wider range of material, though they concentrate on specific themes (see further below). Thus, C.'s book is not an introduction to the *Lives* as a whole but is, as claimed in the book's subtitle, a study of Plutarch's narrative technique and how it relates to moral judgement. He starts from the assumption that Plutarch engaged in an 'experimental' moralism, which exposed readers 'to the complexities and difficulties involved in making moral judgements' (3–4). This is quite similar to Duff's aim in his 1999 monograph, subtitled 'Exploring Virtue and Vice'.¹ In his own introduction, Duff claimed that Plutarch's *Lives* 'do not, or at least not always, simply expound a set of values. They throw questions back to the reader. Some core values are unchallenged, but many Lives intrude a thought-provoking doubt and uncertainty about morality and virtue'.² Duff's reading has been widely accepted, but some have cast their own doubt about whether Plutarch goes so far as to introduce moral uncertainty or leave his own views ambiguous; see, for example, the comments of Stadter and Anastasios Nikolaidis, who argue that Plutarch's own moral stance and his advice to the reader were more apparent than Duff often allows.³ C. similarly believes that Duff goes too far in this regard, though his disagreement is expressed gently and in a footnote (2 n. 7; see also 4 with n. 16), which makes it hard to spot. Rather than lead the reader to aporia, C. believes that Plutarch's approach 'empowers the reader to *explain* and *understand* rather than simply *judge* why a man acted or behaved as he did' (3, emphasis original). This line of reasoning is not a radical departure from Duff, and in fact it depends heavily upon work that Duff has already done, but it does reveal a difference in emphasis. In general, C. appears to be less interested in moral judgement *per se* (despite his book's subtitle) than in the process that can lead a reader to form a judgement. But even if he views Plutarch's readers as ultimately responsible for reaching their own conclusions, he asserts that Plutarch has given them the tools to do so, rather than tripping them up at times or leaving them at the end of a book without a way forward.

In the balance of the Introduction, C. discusses several techniques that he views as having allowed Plutarch to guide his readers in this process of

¹ The similarity has been noted by at least one other reviewer; see L. Fletcher, *BMCR* 2019.02.09.

² T. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford, 1999) 9.

³ P. A. Stadter *JHS* 122 (2002) 174–5; A. G. Nikolaidis, 'Morality, Characterization, and Individuality', in M. Beck, ed., *A Companion to Plutarch* (Oxford and Malden, Mass., 2014) 350–72.

explaining and understanding. He describes Plutarch as a 'self-conscious, overt narrator' who interacts directly with his readers, asserting his presence in the *Lives* as 'teller/writer' (8). C. sees Plutarch the writer as having created moral complexity for his readers to examine, mainly through revealing his characters' own perceptions (that is, through focalisation), and he sees Plutarch the teller as guiding the readers' experience. C. adopts a notion of focalisation that includes a psychological dimension, and he suggests that Plutarch uses this technique as a means of 'offering his readers access to the emotional and intellectual activity of the in-text characters, which, in turn, becomes fundamental to the readers' moral inquiry' (11). The readers, whom C. characterises through the lens of reader-response theory, are assumed to be sophisticated enough to utilise this access, often by bringing to bear their own knowledge and intuition, especially at points in the narrative where Plutarch (as both writer and teller) has gone silent (12–13). Reading a book of *Lives*, therefore, activates a relationship between narrator, characters, and readers that exposes the motivations that lie behind the characters' behaviour and encourages the readers to notice and appreciate their moral complexity.

As C. sets out his theoretical approach, and as he applies narratology and reader-response in his analyses in the later chapters, he largely regards Plutarch as a creative writer. Though he never loses sight of the fact that the *Parallel Lives* are biographies of historical figures, neither does he feel obligated to comment on how Plutarch can recreate the emotional and intellectual activities of his 'in-text characters' while remaining faithful to the historical record. This is not necessarily a shortcoming, at least for this reviewer, but it may strike others as ignoring problems of sources and methods. Some examples: in the second chapter, where C. describes the relationship between the narrator, characters, and readers, he suggests that readers of the *Lives* 'expect that Plutarch's biographical narrative will lay more emphasis on character (*Nic.* 1.5; *Alex.* 1), but also that it will not entirely free itself from the modes, concerns, and (accordingly) values of historical writing' (31, emphasis original). The phrasing suggests that Plutarch's readers (perhaps including C.) might be surprised to find a study of character embedded in history. Moreover, this comment introduces a discussion of *Theseus–Romulus*, a book in which Plutarch declares that he is dealing with unverifiable information and hopes his readers will indulge him as he makes 'myth appear like history' (32–4), implying perhaps that C. views the historical elements as form and not function. In a later section entitled 'Truth, Philanthropy, and Unity' (51–2), C. has in mind not historical truth but the true representation of the subjects' character. Here truth is thematic, as the discussion centres around Lucullus' commitment to the truth (in an incident that occurred long ago in Chaeronea), which in turn becomes the catalyst for Plutarch's own commitment to a truthful rendition of his life, by which C. means capturing the essence of

Lucullus' character. Plutarch's commitment to historical accuracy, however, is not what is at stake in the discussion, though maybe it is taken for granted.

Similarly, in the third chapter, where C. explores emotions more directly, he analyses Caesar's moment of contemplation before crossing the Rubicon (75–8). 'There is a self in dialogue here', he claims as he describes the several elements in Plutarch's account, but nowhere does he discuss Plutarch's source for what was happening inside Caesar's head, or how Plutarch managed to (accurately?) recreate it. Even when C. refers to Appian's similar version of the dilemma (75 n. 35), he does not wonder (as many have before him) if Appian and Plutarch are similar because they were relying on a common source. Instead, the point of the argument is that Caesar's perception 'is highly coloured by, or can be read as part of, the narrator's *as well*' (77, emphasis original). This Rubicon scene, then, is read as Plutarch's own creation and involves Plutarch the narrator as much as Caesar the character. Thus, C. remains focused on narrative technique, even crediting Plutarch with a 'mastery of intra-psychic conflict' (78), praise that strikes me as more complimentary to a writer of fiction than of history. One benefit of working in the crowded field is that research into Plutarch's sources and methods is well established and certainly well known to C.'s readers. In setting those issues aside, C. can home in on Plutarch's literary technique. With this approach he cannot provide a comprehensive account of everything that has gone into creating (for example) the self-dialogue at the Rubicon, but he can underscore what Plutarch is doing to draw readers into his 'narratives' and to raise questions about the motivations and behaviours of his 'characters'.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, C. studies the ends of *Lives* and Books. The originality of his work is perhaps hardest to locate in this section, since he begins with a discussion of *Alcibiades* and *Lysander* (§4.1) and ends up with a discussion of the *synkriseis* (Chapter 5), mirroring the content of the latter part of Duff's book. It was the handling of *Alcibiades* especially that caused Stadter to question whether Plutarch's moralism was as ambiguous as Duff suggested, and here again C. does not press his own difference with Duff very forcefully. But I think there is some difference. While C. acknowledges that Plutarch may leave a character in an 'ambiguous moral status' at the end of a *Life*, he asserts that this status in turn 'may also generate the sort of moral reflection that is appropriate before/for the final *Synkrisis*, where readers need to ponder anew on many of the themes and questions which were raised at the endings of the two *Lives*' (108). Thus, he reads the moral ambiguity at the end of a *Life* not as an end but as food for further thought. Later in the chapter, in a discussion of *Lycurgus*, he will argue that the conclusion to the *Life* 'pulls readers' reflections in a certain direction' (113; cf. 140) that will be better defined in the *synkrisis*. In his discussion of the *synkriseis* themselves, which depends more on the scholarship of Pelling than Duff, C. argues for a similarly guided exploration,

which he calls 'controlled readerly independence' (133). So, for example, concerning Caesar's murder in the *synkrisis* to *Dion–Brutus*, he argues that Plutarch had a definite view of why it occurred, but that he also 'allows his readers to consider and play with a range of alternative views. However, he often shows them not only how this game should be played but also who the winner might be'. And for *Theseus–Romulus*, 'although it is clear that Plutarch encourages a more negative treatment of Theseus, it is important that he exposes his readers to multiple plausible responses ... which the readers might consider for themselves' (133). Nonetheless, despite his argument that Plutarch is often 'pulling' the reader in a certain direction, C. continues to assert that the focus of the *Lives* and their *synkriseis* is how stories are told rather than promoting specific moral judgements or deriving simplistic lessons.

In the book's final chapter, C. analyses Plutarch's techniques in the *Lives* according to the traits that he attributes to malicious historians in *On the Malice of Herodotus*. The working assumption is that ideally Plutarch would avoid all of them, but in fact he engages in the *Lives* in some of the practices that he condemns in the essay. In this brief discussion, C. mainly reinforces his earlier points, especially when, on the last page of text, he suggests that Plutarch is making a one-sided case against Herodotus and 'casting his readers as thoughtful judges' (170). Reader-response is the thematic thread that runs through the entire book. In a way, C. has applied this technique to himself, reading Plutarch in light of prior scholarship, and then responding by filling gaps in the (admittedly few) places where his predecessors have been silent.

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