

## REVIEW

### WHAT PLUTARCH DIDN'T SAY

Jeffrey Beneker, Craig Cooper, Noreen Humble, and Frances Titchener, edd., *Plutarch's Unexpected Silences: Suppression and Selection in the Lives and Moralia*. Brill's Plutarch Studies 10. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022. Pp. xiv + 307. Hardback, €140.00. ISBN 978-90-04-51424-9.

As the proverb goes, silence speaks louder than words. Thus, *Plutarch's Unexpected Silences* draws attention to an important, yet often overlooked, facet of Plutarch's works, namely what he did *not* write. The volume focuses on gaps and omissions that mainly concern historical events or details both in the Chaeronean's oeuvre as a whole and in particular texts. Together, the contributions shed light on various aspects of his thinking about literature and, in the first place, the role of the narrator, his ideas about (the writing of) history, his views on the characters of the *Parallel Lives* and how he depicts them, and his historical interests—aspects which sometimes also influenced or even defined our knowledge of the ancient past. All sixteen articles included in the book, many written by experts in the field of Plutarchan studies, are based on papers that were presented at the conference on 'Plutarch's Unexpected Silences' organised at Utah State University in May 2019.

The volume consists of three parts: (1) 'Silence and the Narrator' (9–62), describing gaps at the level of the narrator, usually related to characterisation, and how the audience should respond to them; (2) 'Silence as a Literary Technique' (63–170), mainly presenting case studies of how Plutarch leaves out details, facts, or historical events in order to characterise his subjects in a certain way; (3) and 'Silencing the Past and Present' (171–293), which primarily discusses larger parts of history or contemporary issues ignored by Plutarch. In general, this tripartite division is convenient, although it is, inevitably, also somewhat artificial: the distinction between the first and second part in particular might not always be obvious to every reader. However, the first part aptly begins with two chapters that are more theoretical in nature and show that Plutarch as an author—and indeed perhaps as a kind of literary critic as well<sup>1</sup>—was well aware of the possibilities of the 'silent narrator'. As such, these

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Konstan on Plutarch's literary-theoretical views: D. Konstan, "The Birth of the Reader": Plutarch as a Literary Critic', *Scholια* 13 (2004) 3–27.

chapters, in my view, justify the assumption of most contributions of the second part: silences in Plutarch are mainly intentional, thus serving specific goals.

The thought-provoking opening chapter of Eran Almagor (11–35) is interesting in two ways. First, he describes the different categories of silences of Plutarch's narrator, making a distinction between cases where one can see that the narrator remains silent about certain facts (which can be further defined as intertextual, narrational, and intratextual silences), and cases where he explicitly claims to suppress information (12–13). By providing a series of examples, Almagor points out that these silences usually support characterisation (13–31). Second, he also reopens two important philological discussions: the beginning of *Caesar*, he argues, is not lost (16–21), and Plutarch in fact never planned *Metellus* as announced in *Marius* 29.12 or *Leonidas* as promised in *De Her. mal.* 866B (26–8). This final point has the potential to influence the future debate on the relative chronology of the *Parallel Lives*, as it has been argued that the non-existence of *Metellus* could be in line with the late (or possibly latest) position of *Pyrrhus–Marius* in the series.<sup>2</sup>

Within the theoretical framework of Iser's 'gaps', Michael Nerdahl's contribution (36–49) describes how silences in *Dion* serve characterisation again: the emphasis on the relevance of reader-response criticism fits well at the outset of the volume, as the prior knowledge and expectations of the (ancient) reader obviously always remain an issue to be tackled in discussions of any author's 'silences', not in the least when they seem to be intentional—and in Plutarch they often are intentional. This is also illustrated by the final paper of the first part (50–62), less theoretical in nature. Bernard Boulet argues that *De genio Socratis* invites the readers to compare Epaminondas with Socrates and that they should draw conclusions concerning the balance between the philosophical, contemplative life, and the active life of the politician, without any guidance from the narrator.

Except for the final chapter, the second part focuses on the *Parallel Lives*; the *Moralia* appear only rarely. In the first contribution (65–80), Thomas Rose points out that in *Demetrius* Plutarch mainly remains silent about the subject's achievements that might be praised or admired, in line with the prologue to *Demetrius–Antoni*, announcing negative *exempla*. For the same reason, one almost never hears the king himself speaking, as Rose proves by means of a detailed comparison of direct speech in *Demetrius* and in other *Lives*, and a systematic discussion of the few words uttered by Demetrius in his own biography (74–8). Equally comprehensive and systematic are Susan Jacobs'

<sup>2</sup> A. G. Nikolaidis, 'Plutarch's Methods: His Cross-References and the Sequence of the Parallel Lives', in A. Pérez Jiménez and F. Titchener, edd., *Historical and Biographical Values of Plutarch's Works. Studies Devoted to Professor Philip A. Stadter by the International Plutarch Society* (Málaga and Utah, 2005) 283–324, at 286–7 and 318.

extensive appendices (92–101) at the end of the next chapter (81–101): they convincingly support her argument that in *Alcibiades*, *Agesilaus*, and *Fabius Maximus* Plutarch left out episodes or details known from Thucydides, Xenophon, and Livy in order to highlight specific instructions for rulers and commanders, a reading which fits Jacobs' seminal 2017 book on the *Parallel Lives*.<sup>3</sup>

In the third paper (102–16), Rex Stem addresses the question of why Plutarch seems so reluctant to directly condemn Sulla's cruelty and excesses in the dictator's biography—a difficult question which often intrigued earlier scholarship, as Stem maps out in a convenient overview (103–4). He argues that the author really admired Sulla's qualities as a general and therefore decided not to be exclusively negative. Next, Colin Bailey (117–37) points out that Plutarch omits Aemilius Paulus' earlier *repulsae* in his *Life* in order to depict the Roman as being unaffected by ambition. Plutarchists will probably appreciate that Bailey not only discusses this theme in the context of the *Life* itself, but also of the pair *Aemilius–Timoleon* as a whole, and even of other *Lives* (128–32), reminding one of Hans Beck's influential article on 'internal *synkrisis*' in Plutarch.<sup>4</sup> With similar due attention for the fact that Plutarch wrote most of his *Lives* in pairs and for the *Parallel Lives* as a project, James Chlup's article (138–50) attempts to explain the strikingly brief account of the period 70–55 BCE in *Crassus*, because of which the work gives the impression that the Roman did not achieve much in his lifetime.

Up to this point, then, the volume has almost exclusively discussed silences serving characterisation, especially in the biographies. The next contribution (151–69), however, has a different focus, approaching the theme of 'silence' in another, refreshing way. Charles Oughton shows that in *De Herodoti malignitate* Plutarch himself accuses Herodotus of malice in a surprisingly malicious way: the treatise, Oughton argues, is therefore full of irony (cf. also Almagor's contribution in the book, 26–30). The many examples he provides are convincing, especially in light of his brief contextualisation and comparison with Lucian and the Second Sophistic (163–5), and I expect this paper to significantly influence future research on the treatise.

The third part of the book contains discussions of various types of larger omissions concerning the past *and* present. In the first paper (173–87), Brad Cook wonders why Philip V only rarely appears in Plutarch's texts, thus suppressing his various accomplishments. Cook argues that Philip's role in *Aratus* might provide an explanation: the author's disgust for the base king made him ignore the man in most of his other works. Perhaps, one might add

<sup>3</sup> S. G. Jacobs, *Plutarch's Pragmatic Biographies: Lessons for Statesmen and Generals in the Parallel Lives* (Leiden and Boston, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> H. Beck, 'Interne *Synkrisis* bei Plutarch', *Hermes* 130 (2002) 467–89.

that Plutarch's personal acquaintance with Aratus' descendent Polycrates, to whom *Aratus* is dedicated (cf. *Arat.* 1), explains this radical dislike for Philip V, while in the case of Sulla, for example, the Chaeronean could still praise some aspects of his generalship despite his outrageous dictatorship (as discussed in the contribution of Rex Stem, 102–16). Next, Chandra Giroux (188–209) argues that Plutarch's surprising silences about his hometown—for especially in his descriptions of the battles of 338 and 86 BCE he had the opportunity to dwell on Chaeronea in detail—help in painting a picture of its inhabitants as being most loyal to Rome and living in a peaceful place. As such, Plutarch's contemporary concerns might again explain an unexpected absence in his oeuvre.

Christopher Pelling (210–22) examines how Plutarch fills in 'gaps' in Thucydides' account of Nicias' failed Sicilian campaign: interesting cases are, for example, those where Plutarch describes or explains the motivation of his subjects for certain actions—or rather what he believes their motivation might have been, when Thucydides' work requires such explanations. In the following paper (223–44), Noreen Humble discusses the great impact of Plutarch's unhistorical image of Lycurgus' Sparta on later times, its influence on populist politicians, and even on modern scholarship. In the prologue Plutarch himself indeed points out that 'about Lycurgus the lawgiver, on the whole nothing indisputable can be said' (*Lyc.* 1.1), as Humble cites on p. 235. Another prologue that comes to mind here, I would say, is that to *Theseus–Romulus*, where Plutarch seems to regard *Lycurgus–Numa* as nearly legendary *Lives* (*Thes.* 1.4): perhaps, then, he did not even want to write 'real' history in the pair, although, as Humble points out in her conclusion, Plutarch's specific goals are not that important when it comes to the reception of his work (241). In the next contribution (244–62), Craig Cooper shows that Plutarch made direct use only of Demosthenes 18 and Aeschines 3 in his *Demosthenes*, and that he left out Aeschines' most defamatory claims about his opponent, or adjusted them to the advantage of the subject of the biography. Cooper's methodology and the strong implications of his conclusions for characterisation in the *Life* seem close to the general focus of the second part of the volume, where his paper might have fitted better.

In terms of their content, the final two contributions closely belong together and are also interesting from an argumentative point of view. Frederick Brenk (263–81) wonders why Plutarch never mentions the Christians in his works and provides some plausible explanations for this silence. He does so with due nuance: nearly half of Plutarch's oeuvre is lost, which of course complicates the picture, since the Christians might have figured in *Claudius* and *Nero* (270 and 278). Joseph Geiger (282–93) tries to explain the absence of any reference to Jewish monotheism in Plutarch, which might just be the consequence of his interest in religion which mainly concerned rituals.

Perhaps, then, we should not expect such discussions in Plutarch. I consider this a fitting addition to a claim of Pelling earlier in the volume, namely that ‘we need not always strain to find a clever reason why Plutarch inserts something that Thucydides omitted’ (212): in the same way, we should perhaps not always strain to find a *clever* reason behind the omissions of historical events or contemporary issues in his oeuvre.

As appears from the above overview and brief comments, the volume successfully addresses various aspects of ‘Plutarch’s unexpected silences’ announced by the title: silences that should guide the reader, often serving characterisation of historical subjects or even (in an ironic way) of the author himself, silences about larger parts of the past for clear or unclear reasons, and silences in other authors that Plutarch might have noticed (and felt compelled to fill in). It is, however, also clear now that the book mainly concerns the *Parallel Lives* (as in fact announced by the editors in the introduction (4)), while the *Moralia* are the focus of only a few chapters—the more philosophical treatises in particular are generally absent. Yet this ‘silence’ is not too problematic, for the book accomplishes its goals, presenting different possible methodologies, approaches, and ways in which Plutarchan silence can be explored, thus paving new and exciting paths for future scholarship.

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