BOOK REVIEW

Paolo Desideri, *Saggi su Plutarco e la sua fortuna*. Edited by Angelo Casanova. Studi e Testi di Scienze dell'Antichità, 29. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2012. Pp. 406. Print edition: €29.90; ISBN 978-88-6655-178-2. Online PDF: €19.90, available at http://digital.casalini.it/9788866551799. ISBN 978-88-6655-179-9.

Paolo Desideri, Professor of Roman History at the University of Florence until 2011, is a key figure in Italian academia, with a guiding interest in the cultural history and historiography of the classical world, and in the reception of classics in modern European culture. He has especially focussed on the problematic relationship between intellectual autonomy and political power in the formative period of the Roman empire. In this volume, presented to Desideri on his 70th birthday, Professor Angelo Casanova presents a selection of twenty-one essays on the work and reception of Plutarch that were previously published in journals or in miscellaneous volumes. The pieces are grouped under the following thematic headings: I. The Cultural context; II. Politics; III. History; IV. Plutarch and European Culture; and V. Between Past and Future. The volume concludes with a unified bibliography, together with useful indexes of names and places. The collection is extremely rich and stimulating, and the space of a review is too short to summarise all its points of interest. It certainly provides a very important contribution and a strong stimulus to the flourishing field of Plutarch studies.[1]

In '"Non scriviamo storie, ma vite" (Plut., *Alex*. 1.2): la formula biografica di Plutarco', Desideri rehabilitates Plutarch as a writer of history and suggests that the *Vitae* do not presuppose any formal conflict between *historia*, to be intended as 'research', and *bios*, 'biography'. The difference lies in the objectives of the two genres. The biographical account presents itself as a *historia*, a research that entails both reusing earlier historical and historiographical materials and handling entirely different, additional material, such as

[1] The flourishing of Plutarch studies is witnessed by the activity of the International Plutarch Society, which has organised nine international congresses so far; the next and tenth meeting is to be held in 2014 in Delphi. On the Society's website (http://www.usu.edu/ploutarchos/index.htm) one may find a link to a complete bibliography updated through 2010.

Copyright © 2013 Livia Capponi

epigraphic evidence, monuments, and documents of various kinds. Biography is thus not a 'selection' from the 'totality' of the historical account, but an altogether different 'totality'.

At the beginning of *Aemilius Paulus* (1.3), Plutarch states the moral objectives of his work: it is almost impossible not to recognise some form of dissatisfaction with his contemporary time, which does not, however, imply an anti-Roman stance. The discourse is of a moral rather than a political nature. Biography is for Plutarch a specific type of historical discourse that reconstructs the human qualities of historical figures, thus allowing us to recover from the ancient historical past what is still alive and what deserves to be retold. The biographical genre is at the centre of a complex system of thought where religious attitude, moral and educational aims flow into each other in a narrative that takes into serious consideration the methods of historiographical discourse. Historical documents play an important function in Plutarch as they are analysed, investigated and used in order to sketch the profile of the character, and end up being more effective and lively than the traditional historical account of the vicissitudes in which the character was involved. Thucydides' (1.22.3) utilitarian/pedagogical idea of history is reinforced in Plutarch by a new significance. History becomes a philosophy based on examples, and, as Plutarch explicitly states in the *De profectibus in virtute* (*Mor.* 804D ff.), the living *exempla* of the *Vitae* are to be juxtaposed with the static philosophical tropes that the rhetorical schools of his time used in a dangerous and demagogic way (*Mor.* 814C). Plutarch's work is not only culturally, but also politically motivated. The intellectual creates an ideological orientation that eventually becomes public opinion. In Desideri's hands, the work of Plutarch, highly politicised, may be interpreted as the cultural foundation of the *Panhellenion*, as it contributes to building a complex system of social communication in the network of the *poleis* that ultimately helped to secure the stability of the political structures of the empire.

'La formazione delle coppie nelle *Vite* plutarchee' offers a magisterial reconstruction, on the basis of a group of explicit or implicit statements in Plutarch, of the theoretical basis and of the methods used by Plutarch to create the parallelisms in the *Vitae*. Its main argument is that in Plutarch we may detect a Roman 'ideology of parallelism', and the postulation of a 'bipolar parallelism' between Roman and Greek culture, politics, and society. In the introduction to the *De mulierum virtutibus* (243C–D), Plutarch develops the concept that there are no exclusively masculine or feminine virtues, and that we ought to compare only lives with lives and actions with actions, as if we were looking at great works of art. Despite the variety of the particular cases, the fundamental characters of humanity transcend differences of sex or time. Like the complementary polarity of the male–female principles, Greek and Roman history are seen as two halves of the same diptych—naturally

with a chronological phase-displacement (*Consolatio ad Apollonium*, 119D). That Rome walked in the footsteps of Athens is shown by some direct master–disciple relationships (see for instance Solon–Publicola, the introduction to *Phocion*, and the *synkrisis* of Aristides–Cato Maior). Cicero's comparison between Themistocles and Coriolanus in *Brutus* 41 lays the ideological foundation of the parallelisms, and, significantly, Plutarch reports that Cicero himself had planned 'to write a comprehensive history of his native country, combining with it many Greek details, and introducing there all the tales and myths which he had collected' (*Cic*. 41.1). The Ciceronian message of integration had arisen from Rome's need to create her own space in the history of civilisation, and Plutarch builds on this, but from a Greek perspective. In restating the absolute, universal value of Greek culture as a measure of Roman success, he recovers the foundations of Greek civilisation and takes a subtle revenge, by depriving Rome of her independent cultural identity. As 'Forme dell'impegno politico' (68–9) points out, Plutarch's work may be interpreted as a chapter in the formation of the national Hellenic identity, and ultimately in the making of the autonomy of the Eastern part of the empire, that resulted in the mutation of the empire from Roman to Byzantine.

'I documenti di Plutarco' examines the methods and ways in which, in writing the *Vitae*, Plutarch deploys documents and material other than historiography. It argues that the *Vitae* have a historiographical aim, which is the natural corollary of their political–educational purpose, and that writing biography entails the necessity of utilising new and different documents from those used by historians, such as archaeology and 'reception studies'. Desideri offers an attentive survey of the documentary material used in the *Vitae*. The *apopthegmata* of the protagonists, including erudite and literary quotations, help the reader not so much to appreciate the erudition of the speaker, but rather to define his historical situation through the literary paradigm (e.g. the Sophoclean verses quoted by Pompey before descending to the boat where he would be killed (*Pomp*. 78.4), or the analogy drawn between Antony and Timon (*Ant*. 69.4–70)). Inscriptions and decrees are of vital importance in the biography of Pericles, for whom Athens itself represents a monument or a document. Letters, often reported *verbatim*, serve to define the personality of their protagonists, and the case of Alexander is emblematic, as through his letters he emerges as a person endowed with strong philosophical interests, a superior moral sense, and generous and open-minded; and a page of the *Ephemerides* serves to bring some balance to the fictionalised narratives of his death that circulated in the Greek world (*Alex*. 75–6). Speeches naturally play an important role as 'documents' of the political action and the examples of Demosthenes and Cicero need no further comment. Plutarch also uses works of art and the iconography of his protago-

nists, deeming physiognomy an important indicator of personality. Also some 'reception' material is included, such as the ceremonies instituted for this or that figure, the linguistic uses, the memorial monuments or customs: the subterranean room where Demosthenes descended to train himself, remaining there even for two or three months, is an eloquent witness to his tenacity (*Dem.* 7.3). The use of documents is more evident in the Greek *Lives*, as is natural, given Plutarch's own cultural background and the greater documentary richness of the Greek world.

The essay 'Plutarco e Machiavelli' opens an extremely lively section of the volume, on Plutarch in modern European culture that, in my view, constitutes a fertile field for future research. The 16th century French philosopher and political thinker, Jean Bodin, coupled Plutarch with Machiavelli, which at first sight almost seems an oxymoron. The interest in Plutarch as a political thinker had a long history, but only in 1512 had Giovanni Corsi translated some *Moralia* into Latin, and a Latin version of the *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* or 'Precepts of Statecraft' had been published in 1485; so in Machiavelli's time Plutarch was literally hot off the press, and Machiavelli himself explicitly states that he owed much to the 'gravissimo scrittore'. Desideri argues that Plutarch's contribution to Machiavelli's thought is more important than assumed. First of all, the idea that the primary duty of the politician is to save the state, regardless of the morality of the means that he uses to this purpose, which seals Chapter 18 of *The Prince*, may be found both in the *comparatio* of *Theseus–Romulus* (2.1) and in various passages of the *Praecepta*. One of the most well-known metaphors of *The Prince*, that of the lion and the fox, echoes a saying of the Spartan king Lysander, reported by Plutarch ('where the lion's skin will not reach, it must be patched out with the fox's', *Lys.* 7.4). Plutarch's description of the duplicity and the opportunistic attitude of this king—who 'seemed to be unscrupulous and subtle, a man who tricked out most of what he did in war with the varied hues of deceit, extolling justice if it was at the same time profitable, but if not, adopting the advantageous as the honourable course, and not considering truth as inherently better than falsehood, but bounding his estimate of either by the needs of the hour'—surely left a mark in Machiavelli's mind. For Desideri, the substantial difference between Machiavelli and Plutarch is that in Plutarch the amorality is not a natural ingredient of political experience, but the consequence of the lack of political autonomy of the Greek city under the Roman empire. In the *Praecepta*, the statesman is by necessity ambiguous, as he needs to conceal the state of subjection in which the *polis* lives and the fact that his actions are strongly limited by the pressure of Rome; he does so to preserve the little credibility that was left of the civic institutions. He needs all his oratorical skills to keep control over the populace, a 'suspicious and capricious beast' (800C), and has to 'win the favour of the people by giving

way in small things in order that in greater matters you may oppose them stubbornly and thus prevent them from committing errors' (818A). The statesman should 'imitate the actors, who, while putting into the performance their own passion … yet listen to the prompter and do not go beyond the degree of liberty in rhythms and metres permitted by those in authority over them', as any trespass is punishable with death (813F). He should exploit all the spaces of freedom that are left, to prevent the conquerors from adding more power to that they already have (814E–F). However, while in Plutarch political ambiguity goes hand in hand with the fragility of the *polis* under Roman rule, in Machiavelli it becomes a physiological connotation of the politician that is determined by human nature itself and thus necessary at all times. The 'prince' (cf. esp. Chs. 15–19) needs to have a façade of justice and morality, but cannot put his solidity at risk by subjecting his political behaviour to ethical commandments. To what extent having read Plutarch was relevant for the Humanistic and Renaissance political writers, or whether Machiavelli ever regarded the republican system as something really feasible, are only some of the questions raised by this intriguing essay.

Two essays are devoted to the reception and interpretation of Plutarch in the works of the French 16th century philosopher Jean Bodin, and especially in the *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566) which praises Plutarch as the best source on the Spartan constitution and as a historian of Rome. Desideri conjures up the attitude of modern professors like Bodin, who read Plato, Aristotle, Livy, Tacitus, Dio and naturally Plutarch, not through the lens of the antiquarian, but, on the contrary, as lively, useful sources that provided vital nourishment to their reflections on modern politics.[2] Machiavelli's well known letter (of 1513) to his friend Francesco Vettori represents the standard way in which the great thinkers of the 16th century looked at the classical authors, as peers and intellectual companions:

> When evening has come, I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off my clothes of the day, covered with mud and mire, and I put on my regal and courtly garments; and decently reclothed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them lovingly, I feed on the food that alone is mine and that I was born for. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask them the reason for their actions; and they in their humanity reply to me. And for the space of four hours I feel no boredom, I forget every

[2] The recent *Storici antichi e storici moderni nella* Methodus *di Jean Bodin*, edited by A. Galimberti and G. Zecchini (Vita e Pensiero; Milan, 2012) responds to Desideri's 1998 wish for a proper scholarly analysis of Bodin's treatment of classical authors.

> pain, I do not fear poverty, death does not frighten me. I deliver myself entirely to them.[3]

For both Machiavelli and Plutarch, the great men of the past are both the propitious deities whom we should wish to encounter on our path, and humanity's repository of behaviours that, when conjured up by historical investigation, may guide us through the difficulties of the present.

The closing essay, 'Plutarco e la storia: una lettura obliqua dei dialoghi delfici', offers a reappraisal of the Delphic dialogues (*De defectu oraculorum*, *De E apud Delphos*, *De Pythiae oraculis*) as hitherto overlooked sources on Plutarch's philosophy of history. Here Plutarch connects mantic with memory, and purports that the past that is the object of historical knowledge is nothing but 'a different present', that must be constantly compared with our day. At the centre of the discussion, however, there is the problem of the political irrelevance of the Delphic oracle in his time. Plutarch's effort to recover the Greek past must thus be seen as complementary to his active participation in the life of the Delphic sanctuary, and as a component of his overarching religious, cultural and political mission, that is, ferrying Greek culture beyond the 'immutable orbit' (*De fort. Rom.* 317B–C) of the *pax Romana*.

Newcastle University LIVIA CAPPONI
livia.capponi@newcastle.ac.uk

[3] Translation by H. C. Mansfield, in *The Prince* (Chicago, ²1998).