

## REVIEW

### A STUDY OF PLUTARCH'S *SAYINGS OF KINGS AND EMPERORS*

Laurens van der Wiel, *An Opaque Mirror for Trajan: A Literary Analysis and Interpretation of Plutarch's Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata*. Plutarchea Hypomnemata. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2024. Pp. 519. Hardback, €89.00. ISBN 978-94-6270-390-2. Open Access eBook: ISBN 978-94-6166-535-5: <https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461665355>.

In recent decades, several publishers have produced translations of handbooks or selections of ancient authors, packages of advice from historians and philosophers, such as Princeton's *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers* series. Given the title here under review, one also thinks of Beneker's selections from Plutarch, *How to be a Leader: An Ancient Guide to Wise Leadership*.<sup>1</sup> It is particularly appropriate that Plutarch should have been the focus of such a collection given the number of advisory handbooks, guidebooks and collections of sayings that he himself composed. Laurens van der Wiel's monograph (revised from his 2022 Leuven dissertation)<sup>2</sup> is the first full-length study of the *Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata*, and makes clear that Plutarch's work is much more than a handbook or manual of convenient wisdom for a modern audience. He offers a thorough and incisive analysis of the collection, arguing persuasively and at length that Plutarch intended his work to be an object of serious and considered study both by the emperor Trajan and by a broader readership.

A brief introduction situates the book within Plutarchan scholarship and succinctly highlights the argument: the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* and its introductory letter are genuinely Plutarchan; the text should be considered as a cohesive and carefully curated work in the genre of *specula principum* and not merely as a collection of clever sayings; the collection is connected to the *Parallel Lives* in the intentions of the author and his expectations of the reader; reading and studying it will help Trajan improve his moral character and bring about a

<sup>1</sup> J. Beneker, trans., *Plutarch: How to Be a Leader: An Ancient Guide to Wise Leadership* (Princeton, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> L. van der Wiel, *An Opaque Mirror For Trajan: A Literary Analysis and Interpretation of Plutarch's Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata* (PhD Diss., Catholic University at Leuven, 2022): <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/retrieve/662343>.

better rule, both of which will ensure that he becomes an exemplar in his own right.

Part I focuses on ‘Preliminary Matters’, namely the authenticity, date and purpose of the collection as well as its commentary on the genre of anecdotal collections. Van der Wiel argues that there are no good reasons to doubt the authenticity of the letter, and that those reasons which have been advanced are unconvincing. To the arguments of Flacelière, Fuhrmann and Beck, he offers additional lexical and stylistic grounds to support Plutarch’s authorship, emphasising consistencies with and similarities to works accepted as genuinely Plutarchan.<sup>3</sup> He argues that the dedicatory letter and the collection itself date to the period between February 116 and Trajan’s death in 117, and so that the collection offers moral advice in connection with Trajan’s eastern campaigns. Perhaps the most valuable section of Part I, though, is van der Wiel’s discussion of the place of *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* in the genre of collections of anecdotes through comparison with Valerius Maximus. Both authors stress the usefulness of collections of *apophthegmata*. But where Valerius Maximus situates ‘usefulness’ in the convenience of consultation in the process of rhetorical composition, Plutarch sees his collection as useful for moral improvement. Unlike Valerius Maximus’ collection, Plutarch’s is not a collection to be dipped into, but rather one to be carefully studied and considered, *despite* Plutarch’s own claim that the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* is more convenient than the *Parallel Lives* for a reader without extensive leisure.

Part II, titled ‘A Literary Analysis’, explains in detail the method and results of the the careful and studied consideration that Plutarch appears to expect. The introductory letter serves as both dedication to Trajan and an apologetic for a reader who might object that the collection duplicates the moral purpose of the *Lives*. But van der Wiel argues that the letter does more, serving as a demonstration of the need for careful attention, for the anecdotes that Plutarch includes in the letter itself very deliberately avoid sayings and focus instead on deeds. This draws our attention to the importance of attending not simply to the individual sayings but also to the actions and context that accompany those sayings. Plutarch thereby creates a tension which reminds the reader to attend to subsequent contradictions in the text. Through these

<sup>3</sup> R. Flacelière, ‘Trajan, Delphes et Plutarque’, in F. Chamoux, ed., *Recueil Plassart: Études sur l’antiquité grecque offertes à André Plassart par ses collègues de la Sorbonne* (Paris, 1976) 97–103; F. Fuhrmann, *Plutarque. Œuvres morales. Tome III. Apophthegmes de rois et de généraux. Apophthegmes Laconiens* (Paris, 1988) 3–15; M. Beck, ‘Plutarch to Trajan: The Dedicatory Letter and the Apophthegmata Collection’, in P. A. Stadter and L. Van der Stockt, edd., *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch, Greek Intellectuals, and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan (98–117 A.D.)* (Leuven, 2002) 163–73.

tensions, van der Wiel argues, Plutarch warns us in the dedicatory letter of the importance of context in the collection.

For van der Wiel, context is vital in the collection. It may be supplied by our knowledge of the speaker from elsewhere in the Plutarchan corpus or more broadly, but the sayings themselves establish the primary context within which to understand any single *apophthegma*. An anecdote may be isolated from its original historical, biographical and philosophical context, but the surrounding *apophthegmata* help readers to begin their own consideration of any given *apophthegma*. The selection and organisation of the sayings create three parallel structures to shape the context: barbarian–Greek/Macedonian–Roman, most obviously, but also monarchy–popular rule–monarchy and an abbreviated world history of empire-building. These structures, van der Wiel argues, facilitate the moral edification of the reader by exploring the character of rulers and leaders, the relationship of ruler to subject and the growth of empire. This shapes the advice which the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* offers to Trajan, as the parallel structures encourage an examination of the virtues of a variety of ‘good’ princes, none of whom are perfect. Trajan, it is to be hoped, will learn from the *apophthegmata* and especially the moral evolution of the virtues within, becoming an ideal monarch, one who recognises, accepts and integrates the advice and lessons of a philosopher. The role of the philosopher in this process—and so of Plutarch and the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* itself—is emphasised by a single saying of Demetrius of Phalerum placed almost in the centre of the collection (189D): Demetrius advises Ptolemy that only books about kings and rulers provide truly beneficial advice, and so Plutarch offers such a book to Trajan as a wise philosopher to ruler in need.

Within sections consisting of sayings from individual figures, van der Wiel shows, Plutarch uses ‘gradual shifting’ (verbatim repetitions or verbal and thematic parallels and echoes from one *apophthegma* to the next) to create increasingly complex, integrated characters and virtues. The first anecdote of an individual section typically sets a theme or virtue for subsequent sayings. As the section continues through additional *apophthegmata*, building the context, Plutarch introduces nuance and even contradictions to encourage the reader to review and reassess their initial view of the speaker and his virtues. This gradual shifting builds towards the final sayings of the subject, which often end the section on a darker note. Agesilaus, for example, initially appears at 190F as a ‘true Spartan’, just and virtuous, but his subsequent sayings reveal lack of justice (191B), ultimately leaving him as an ambiguous figure whose commitment to justice we must re-evaluate.

The means by which Plutarch imagined that reading the collection would contribute to moral improvement forms the focus of Part III, ‘A Guide for the Emperor’. Here, van der Wiel argues that Plutarch expected Trajan to apply ‘role models at three levels: that of the individual sections; of groups of sections

on a people and groups of peoples (cultural identity and types of rulership); and of the work as a whole (as a world history)' (283). Doing so will result in an ongoing re-assessment of all of the protagonists in the collection, which will in turn instigate in Trajan the desire to become a role model himself—a ruler who might be included in a future collection of morally edifying *apophthegmata*.

Van der Wiel turns to the prologues of several of the *Lives* as well as *de Profectibus in virtute* to explore Plutarch's conception of how such comparison could lead to moral improvement. Considering the generally programmatic statements in several of the *Lives*—the *Demetrius–Antony*, the *Aristides–Cato Maior*, the *Aemilius–Timoleon* and the *Pericles–Fabius*—van der Wiel suggests that Plutarch saw this as a four-stage process (356–7): close and deliberative examination (*ἱστορία*) of great men of the past identifies specific virtues which we can further consider; repeatedly consulting those figures and considering their virtues (*συνήθεια*) creates a familiarity with those men such that they may become role models; comparing the conduct of multiple role models (*σύγκρισις*) leads to an appropriate decision; acting in accordance with that decision and imitating the role models (*μίμησης*) in action and in the desire for virtue leads to virtuous acts. At this stage, van der Wiel's analysis of Plutarch's discussion of education in virtue in the *Lives* is extensive, thoughtful and very rewarding. At first sight, the *Apoph.* seems to fade into the background (this section includes some forty pages on the *Lives*, and a mere three on the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.*). And yet this discussion is central to the purpose of the monograph, revealing as it does the manner in which the moral usefulness of the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* differs from the practical usefulness of collections such as that of Valerius Maximus. We are to examine the characters revealed, become familiar with the virtues and sentiments expressed by those characters, compare them to one another (and themselves), and desire to emulate the virtues. Moral improvement, though, only results if the reader recognises the collection as a cohesive whole and attends to the apophthegmatic context which Plutarch carefully and deliberately creates.

At the structural level of a world history, van der Wiel argues, Plutarch shows a chronological progression whereby great peoples lose their independence and fall to conquerors—e.g., Persians to Macedonians, Greeks to Romans. Plutarch suggests that the ruler of a people plays a leading role in the rise and fall of empires. If he is virtuous, his people will prosper; if he is not, his people will follow his example, lose their independence and fall to conquerors. If the Roman world is to remain stable, then, Trajan requires this guide: without his virtue, the world cannot retain its current stability. Here, then, is the lesson for Trajan: he must recognise that while there are no perfect kings and generals, a careful and repeated consideration of the collection as a whole offers a variety of instantiations of the virtues of a ruler which can collectively be imitated and temper an overweening *philotimia*. Trajan may

imitate Alexander in his eastern expedition, but he must also recognise that the *imitatio Alexandri* can go only so far. By imitating the virtue, and the intention towards virtue, Trajan may increase and preserve his virtues as a ruler and so avoid the downfall of Rome.

However, since Plutarch suggests in the introductory letter that this collection has the advantage over the *Lives* in that it does not require extensive leisure to read and understand it, one may well wonder whether Trajan would have recognised the nuanced and complex path to moral improvement which van der Wiel suggests the collection traces. But van der Wiel suggests early in the book that Trajan was not the only intended audience of the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* An attentive and recognising readership beyond the emperor himself may well have considered how Trajan would or should respond to Plutarch's advice (67). This point might be further developed, as it seems to have implications for the question of Trajan's understanding of the collection. If, as van der Wiel suggests, the reader has formed an image of a Trajan who successfully reads and learns from the collection, will that conceptual image of the now philosophically educated emperor (Trajan-reader) remain as a literary figure leading Plutarch's general reader towards virtue, even if Trajan himself fails to incorporate Plutarch's wisdom in his pursuit of martial glory?

Three appendices follow the main text. The first offers a tabulation of van der Wiel's restructuring of the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* Based on lexical markers, he shows that some sayings presented as separate *apophthegmata* in earlier editions are in fact intended to be a single *apophthegma* (or that one should be two). This has an important bearing on the development of the context created by the sayings themselves and in the gradual shifting by which the virtues in question are developed within a section. The second appendix tabulates parallel passages between the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* and Plutarch's other works, exhaustively demonstrating connections to the *Parallel Lives*. Appendix 3 revisits Jones' chronology of the *Lives*,<sup>4</sup> incorporating thematic and moral associations between *Lives*. The result is a clearer sequence of the *Lives* without, however, presuming absolute certainty.

Van der Wiel provides an immensely valuable study of the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* While it presumes a familiarity with the collection, clear programmatic introductions to each part and many of the subsections as well as regular summarising conclusions make the volume approachable and accessible even for those unfamiliar with the text. The breadth of parallel and comparative material from the Plutarchan corpus—especially the *Lives*—ensures the book will be informative and engaging for senior students and scholars interested in Plutarch's conceptualisation of moral education. Ultimately, van der Wiel

<sup>4</sup> C. P. Jones, 'Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works', *JRS* 56 (1966) 61–74.

offers a guide for how we can, and perhaps ought, to read Plutarch—in the *Reg. et Imp. Apoph.* itself, to be sure, but also in the broader Plutarchan corpus.

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