

## Plutarch's Politics

Plutarch's *Lives* were once treasured. Today they are studied by classicists, known vaguely if at all by the educated public, and virtually unknown to students of ancient political thought. The central claim of this book is that Plutarch shows how the political form of the city can satisfy an individual's desire for honor, even under the horizon of empire. Plutarch's argument turns on the difference between Sparta and Rome. Both cities stimulated their citizens' desire for honor, but Sparta remained a city by linking honor to what could be seen first-hand, whereas Rome became an empire by liberating honor from the shackles of the visible. Even under the rule of a distant power, however, allegiances and political actions tied to the visible world of the city remained. By resurrecting statesmen who thrived in autonomous cities, Plutarch hoped to rekindle some sense of the city's enduring appeal.

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# Plutarch's Politics

*Between City and Empire*

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*To my parents*

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## Preface

Every schoolboy knows that Plutarch wrote *Lives* of ancient heroes. Or at least every schoolboy used to know that, because until a few generations ago children were made to read Plutarch's works, as their parents had been before them. Plutarch was thought by all to be an author one could grow up with. Rousseau testified to the lasting impact these early encounters could have. Plutarch, he wrote, "was the first author I read in my childhood, he will be the last I read in my old age; he is almost the only author I have never read without gaining something."<sup>1</sup>

Plutarch's diminished status today makes it difficult for us to appreciate the extent to which his writings influenced not only Rousseau but virtually every other educated man (and many women) in the West. Plutarch's writings began to trickle into Europe during the fourteenth century, and by 1470 Renaissance humanists had compiled a complete Latin edition of the *Lives*.<sup>2</sup> A century later, Jacques Amyot translated Plutarch into French (the *Lives* in 1559, the *Moralia* in 1572), and Thomas North rendered Amyot's French into English. It was in these vernacular editions that Plutarch became the "schoolmaster of Europe."<sup>3</sup> Montaigne, having

<sup>1</sup> Rousseau (1992 [1782]) 43. For discussions of Plutarch's influence on Rousseau, see Keller (1939), Strauss (1953) 294, Pire (1958), and Kelly (1997).

<sup>2</sup> On the publishing history of the *Lives* and *Moralia*, see Hirzel (1912), Russell (1973) 148–9, and Dana (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Kimball (2000) attributes this moniker to C. J. Gianakaris. For studies of Plutarch's influence on particular authors, see Gillespie (1985) especially 148–9, Konstantinović (1989), MacPhail (2002), and Guerrier (2014) on Montaigne, and on Montaigne's context Smith (1990); Goodenough (1897) on Bacon; van Cromphout (1975) on Cotton Mather; Borthwick (1998) on Beethoven; Berry (1961) on Emerson; Ingenkamp (1988) on Nietzsche.

read Amyot's translations, thought Plutarch a "perfect and excellent judge of human actions" because of his acute psychological judgments and the moving portraits he drew of his subjects' inner lives. "Above all others," he said, "Plutarch is the man for me."<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare seems to have shared Montaigne's enthusiasm, judging from the extent of his reliance on Plutarch as his guide to ancient character.<sup>5</sup> A few centuries later, Rousseau would assign the *Lives* as the second book on Emile's syllabus and would attribute his own "republican spirit and love of liberty" to his lifelong meditation on Plutarch's works.<sup>6</sup> By the eighteenth century what had started as a trickle had grown to a torrent; a myriad of editions and translations of Plutarch's work appeared across Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Thanks in part to Rousseau's influence, *exempla* from the *Lives* enlivened not only the quiet hours of contemplative men but the rhetoric of revolutionaries. Given the pervasive classicism of early modern culture, rhetorical allusions to Plutarch's protagonists need not surprise; more striking is the passion and the sense of personal intimacy that Plutarch seemed to arouse in the revolutionaries themselves. The *girondiste* Madame Roland records in her *Memoirs* that as a girl she would smuggle Plutarch's *Lives* into church in lieu of her prayer book. Across the Atlantic, a young Alexander Hamilton serving as General Washington's aide-de-camp studied the *Lives* of republican founders, recording details that might serve him in the future.<sup>8</sup> When we imagine Hamilton reading the *Lives* by candlelight and figuring himself a latter-day Lycurgus, or *mademoiselle* Roland bent in pious reflection over the secreted text she treasured more than her prayer book, we gain some sense of the spiritual significance Plutarch's works had assumed. They were runes one consulted in solemn silence, shaping one's soul after ancient molds; they

<sup>4</sup> Montaigne (1976 [1580]) 250 (2.2), 303 (2.10).

<sup>5</sup> There is extensive literature on Shakespeare and Plutarch, mostly written by Shakespeare scholars dipping into Plutarch rather than vice versa. Several recent articles are published in Martindale and Taylor (2004); see also Braden (2014). For an example of reading in the other direction, from Plutarch to Shakespeare, see Russell (1973) chap. 9, "From Plutarch to Shakespeare"; Mossman (1994); Pelling (2002 [1997]), "The Shaping of Coriolanus: Dionysius, Plutarch and Shakespeare."

<sup>6</sup> Rousseau (1953 [1782]) 20–1.

<sup>7</sup> See Howard (1970) 15–27.

<sup>8</sup> See Chernow (2004) 111–12 and Stadter (2011a), for accounts of Hamilton's interest in the *Lives*; Richard (2014) surveys Plutarch's influence on the American founding generation. Plutarch also figures prominently in several studies of early American classicism; see, for instance, Reinhold (1984), Richard (1994, 2008, 2009), Winterer (2007), and Shalev (2009). For pseudonyms among the American founders, see Adair (1974), Owens (1984), and Shalev (2003).



were talismans to summon, as if in a séance, the spirits of bygone republicans to one's side. It was thanks to these modes of reading Plutarch that his protagonists – Publius, Cato, and Brutus, most famously – could rise from the dead to pen political pamphlets and oversee the renaissance of republicanism, not only in thought but in deed. While other authors may have loomed larger in the republican mind, none fired the republican heart quite like Plutarch.

And yet as these republics grew up their citizens put aside Plutarch's works as if doing away with childish things. Mature, modern goods like security and individual autonomy seemed to require that old republican ideals like martial valor and citizenship recede, or at least be recast and redefined. Speaking of such things in the hallowed tones of antiquity could only resonate, as Wilfred Owen put it, with "children ardent for some desperate glory." To their more reasonable, less ardent elders, Plutarch and everything he had come to stand for was all an "old lie."

Plutarch's work is still commonly thought a childish thing when it is thought of at all – and this despite the efforts of a generation of classicists to restore Plutarch's reputation and the efforts of a generation of political philosophers to reassert the present relevance of ancient political thought. Nevertheless, we stand to learn something important from Plutarch's work. Perhaps the first lesson we can learn from Plutarch is that what every schoolboy once knew about him was not quite right. His *Lives* were not so many eulogies to his heroes – or rather, they were not merely that. Their lesson was not, at any rate, *that* we should admire, but *what* does and does not deserve our admiration, *how* we should admire it, and perhaps most important, how our political condition reflects and informs our ability to admire properly. It is Plutarch's engagement with these sorts of questions that once made his writings an object of interest – indeed, passion – not only for children, but for figures like Montaigne and Shakespeare, Madame Roland and Hamilton, and, of course, Rousseau. If Plutarch instructed these men and women from their cradles to their graves, perhaps he still has something to teach us as well.

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many others at West Point demonstrate that the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* are not merely parallel ways of life.

As this work's founding myth could be set during my undergraduate education at Harvard College, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Harvey Mansfield for turning me toward political philosophy. His liberality and nobility have been a constant inspiration. I would also like to thank Istvan Hont, Glyn Morgan, and Michael Sandel; while they were not directly involved in this project, my work would have been quite different were it not for their influence as I entered the field.

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Finally, I owe more than I can say to my parents, to whom this book is dedicated; my wife, Rana; and our children, Ava, Annabel, and Hugh.

Editions and Abbreviations

I have used Plutarch’s works as they appear in the Loeb editions. All translations are based on those published in these editions: Bernadotte Perrin’s translation of the *Lives*, and the translation by various hands of the *Moralia*. I have occasionally modified the English to conform more closely to the Greek. Translations of all other ancient texts are based on the Loeb editions, excepting those specified under “Editions of Ancient Sources.”

I will refer to all ancient texts following the abbreviations found in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd ed., Oxford, 1996). References to the “comparisons” (*synkriseis*) following paired *Lives* are by both titles of the *Lives* that they follow (e.g., *Lyc.-Num.* 1). I have listed here the relevant texts of Plutarch and their abbreviations.

Parallel Lives		
<i>Theseus and Romulus</i>	<i>Thes.</i>	<i>Rom.</i>
<i>Lycurgus and Numa</i>	<i>Lyc.</i>	<i>Num.</i>
<i>Solon and Publicola</i>	<i>Sol.</i>	<i>Pub.</i>
<i>Themistocles and Camillus</i>	<i>Them.</i>	<i>Cam.</i>
<i>Pericles and Fabius Maximus</i>	<i>Per.</i>	<i>Fab.</i>
<i>Coriolanus and Alcibiades</i>	<i>Cor.</i>	<i>Alc.</i>
<i>Aemilius Paulus and Timoleon</i>	<i>Aem.</i>	<i>Tim.</i>
<i>Pelopidas and Marcellus</i>	<i>Pel.</i>	<i>Marc.</i>
<i>Aristides and Cato Major</i>	<i>Arist.</i>	<i>Cat. Mai.</i>
<i>Philopoemen and Flaminius</i>	<i>Phil.</i>	<i>Flam.</i>
<i>Pyrrhus and Marius</i>	<i>Pyrrh.</i>	<i>Mar.</i>
<i>Lysander and Sulla</i>	<i>Lys.</i>	<i>Sull.</i>
<i>Cimon and Lucullus</i>	<i>Cim.</i>	<i>Luc.</i>

<i>Nicias and Crassus</i>	Nic.	Crass.
<i>Sertorius and Eumenes</i>	Sert.	Eum.
<i>Agesilaus and Pompey</i>	Ages.	Pomp.
<i>Alexander and Caesar</i>	Alex.	Caes.
<i>Phocion and Cato Minor</i>	Phoc.	Cat. Min.
<i>Agis and Cleomenes and</i>	Agis	Cleom.
<i>Tiberius and Caius Gracchus</i>	T. Gracch.	C. Gracch.
<i>Demosthenes and Cicero</i>	Dem.	Cic.
<i>Demetrius and Antony</i>	Demetr.	Ant.
<i>Dion and Brutus</i>	Dion	Brut.

Moralia

<i>Ad principem ineruditum: To an Uneducated Ruler</i>	<i>Ad Princ. Inerud.</i>
<i>Adversus Colotem: Against Colotes</i>	<i>Adv. Col.</i>
<i>Amatorius: Dialogue on Love</i>	<i>Amat.</i>
<i>An seni respublica gerenda sit: Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs</i>	<i>An Seni</i>
<i>Apophthegmata Laconica: Spartan Sayings</i>	<i>Ap. Lac.</i>
<i>Bellone an pace clariores fuerint Athenienses: Were the Athenians More Famous in War or in Wisdom?</i>	<i>Bellone an Pace</i>
<i>Bruta animalia ratione uti: Beasts Are Rational</i>	<i>Brut. Anim.</i>
<i>Comparationis Aristophanis et Menandri Compendium: Summary of a Comparison between Aristophanes and Menander</i>	<i>Comp. Ar. et Men.</i>
<i>Coniugalia praecepta: Marriage Advice</i>	<i>Conj. Prae.</i>
<i>Consolatio ad Uxuroem: Consolation to His Wife</i>	<i>Cons. ad Ux.</i>
<i>De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute: On the Fortune or Virtue of Alexander</i>	<i>De Alex. Fort.</i>
<i>De amore prolis: On the Love of Offspring</i>	<i>De Am. Prol.</i>
<i>De recta ratione audiendi: On Listening to Lectures</i>	<i>De Aud.</i>
<i>Quomodo adulescens poetas audire debeat: How a Young Man Should Listen to Poems</i>	<i>De Aud. Poet.</i>
<i>De capienda ex inimicis utilitate: How to Benefit from One's Enemies</i>	<i>De Cap. ex Inim.</i>
<i>De cohibenda ira: On Lack of Anger</i>	<i>De Cohib. Ira</i>
<i>De defectu oraculorum: On the Obsolescence of Oracles</i>	<i>De Defec. Orac.</i>
<i>De E apud Delphos: On the E at Delphi</i>	<i>De E ap. Delph.</i>
<i>De exilio: On Exile</i>	<i>De. Ex.</i>
<i>De fortuna: On Chance</i>	<i>De Fort.</i>
<i>De fortuna Romanorum: On the Fortune of the Romans</i>	<i>De Fort. Rom.</i>
<i>De garrulitate: On Talkativeness</i>	<i>De Garr.</i>
<i>De genio Socratis: On the Sign of Socrates</i>	<i>De Gen. Soc.</i>
<i>De Herodoti malignitate: On the Malice of Herodotus</i>	<i>De Herod. Malig.</i>
<i>De invidia et odio: On Envy and Hate</i>	<i>De Inv. et Od.</i>

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<i>De se ipsum citra invidiam laudando: On Praising Oneself Inoffensively</i>	<i>De Ipsum Laud.</i>
<i>De Iside et Osiride: On Isis and Osiris</i>	<i>De Is. et Osir.</i>
<i>De Pythiae oraculis: Why Does the Pythia No Longer Give Oracles in Verse?</i>	<i>De Pyth. Or.</i>
<i>De sera numinis vindicta: On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance</i>	<i>De Sera Num.</i>
<i>De Stoicorum repugnantiiis: On Stoic Contradictions</i>	<i>De Stoic. Repugn.</i>
<i>De superstitione: On Superstition</i>	<i>De Superstit.</i>
<i>De tranquillitate animi: On Tranquility of Mind</i>	<i>De Tranq. Anim.</i>
<i>De virtute morali: On Moral Virtue</i>	<i>De Virt. Moral.</i>
<i>Lacaenarum apophthegmata: Sayings of Spartan Women</i>	<i>Lacaen. Ap.</i>
<i>Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum: That a Philosopher Ought to Converse Especially with Men in Power</i>	<i>Max. cum Princ.</i>
<i>Mulierum virtutes: Virtues of Women</i>	<i>Mul. Virt.</i>
<i>Non Posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum: That Epicurus Actually Makes a Pleasant Life Impossible</i>	<i>Non Posse</i>
<i>Praecepta gerendae reipublicae: Political Precepts</i>	<i>Praec. Ger.</i>
<i>Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus: How to Recognize that One Is Making Progress in Virtue</i>	<i>Prog. in Virt.</i>
<i>Quaestiones convivales: Table Talk</i>	<i>Quaest. Conv.</i>
<i>Quaestiones Romanae: Roman Questions</i>	<i>Quaest. Rom.</i>
<i>Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur: How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend</i>	<i>Quomodo Adulat.</i>
<i>Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata: Sayings of Kings and Commanders</i>	<i>Reg. et Imp. Ap.</i>
<i>Terrestriane an aquatilia animalia sint callidiora: Which Are Cleverer: Land Animals or Sea Animals?</i>	<i>Terrest. an Aquat.</i>

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