Introduction

> They are mistaken who think that engaging in public affairs is, like going to sea or to a war, something undertaken for an object distinct from itself and ceasing when that object is attained; for engaging in public affairs is not a special service which is ended when the need ends, but is a way of life of a tamed social animal living in an organized society, intended by nature to live throughout its allotted time the life of a citizen and in a manner devoted to honour and the welfare of mankind. Therefore, it is fitting that men should be engaged, not merely have ceased to be engaged, in affairs of State, just as it is fitting that they should be, not have ceased to do, right, and that they should love, not have ceased to love, their native land and their fellow-citizens.
>
> Plutarch, "Old Men in Public Affairs" 791 c

With a key focus on virtue ethics, Plutarch is a writer who once had a privileged place in traditions of political reflection and the history of political thought, as well as broader trends of historical, cultural and moral thinking.[1] His readers have ranged from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth I, and Shakespeare, to Frankenstein's monster and Charlotte Corday.[2] And

[1] Up to now the classic study of Plutarch reception has been Rudolf Hirzel's *Plutarch* (Leipzig: Theodor Weicher, 1912). *Plutarch's Prism* traces reception with greater emphasis on the early modern period in both England and France (and drawing on digital bibliographic sources to identify a broader array of significant texts) and with concerted focus on the history of political ideas, with special attention to depictions of the norms and ethos of public life.

[2] In the words of Frankenstein's monster: "The volume of Plutarch's *Lives* which I possessed, contained the histories of the first founders of the ancient republics. This book had a far different effect on me from the *Sorrows of Werther*. I learned from Werther's imaginations despondency and gloom; but Plutarch taught me high thoughts; he elevated me above the wretched sphere of my own reflections, to admire and love the heroes of past ages. Many things I read surpassed my understanding and experience . . . this book developed new and mightier scenes of action. I read of men concerned in public affairs governing or massacring their species. I felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence of vice, as far as I understood the significance of these terms, relative as they were, as I applied them, to pleasure and pain alone. Induced by these feelings, I was of course led to admire peaceable lawgivers, Numa, Solon and Lycurgus, in preference to Romulus and

while Simon Goldhill offers an account of the relative abandonment of the reading of Plutarch for broad moral and cultural education, he may not be as irrelevant as we might consider at first glance.[3] Still, to discern this we will need to explore the exact nature of this long tradition in political theory that has only been partially explored in existing scholarship.

The history of political thought offered in this book traces a series of reflections about public life drawing from the work of Plutarch. As we will see, there are many ways his thought was appropriated and adapted to the dominant concerns of the times. Thinkers having recourse to Plutarch did not use his work in the same systematic way and for the same purposes. Still, as I try to demonstrate, there are some guiding principles that tend to shape the various iterations of his work in the history of political thought. Appropriations of Plutarch in Renaissance France and England often highlight a sense of the nobility, importance and dignity of public life. Linked to this, the authors studied here offer some account of a unique ethos associated with public office, an ethos which incorporates both high

Theseus." Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 133–134. Charlotte Corday is said to have read Plutarch the day before her journey to assassinate Marat, or even carried a copy of Plutarch in her pocket on the way there. Jean Cocteau, *Theatre* (Paris: Grasset, 1957), vol. 1, 50 cited in Francesco, Manzini. "Plutarch from Voltaire to Stendhal," in Sophia Xenophontos and K. Oikonomopoulou eds., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 515–527. Emerson wrote a famous essay on Plutarch serving as an introduction to revised editions of *Plutarch's Morals* in late nineteenth-century America. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Introduction," in William Goodwin ed., *Plutarch's Morals* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1874) and Edmund G. Berry, *Emerson's Plutarch* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1961).

[3] Simon Goldhill, "The Value of Greek. Why Save Plutarch?" in *Who Needs Greek? Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 246–293. One example of the direct contemporary relevance of Plutarch can be found in Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential election in April 2019, a notable event due to his lack of political experience. As a comedian and actor, he made his way on to the ballot through his starring role in the television series "Servant of the People." There Zelensky plays a lowly history teacher by the name of Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko who is caught on video complaining of corruption within the political elite. His students post the video on-line; it goes viral and catches the sympathy and imagination of citizens catapulting this fictional teacher into a fictional and then ultimately real presidential office. On the screen the character is an honest humble fellow and the first time we meet him in the fictional series, four minutes into the first episode, he is reading Plutarch's *Lives*. Indeed, in the second episode, Plutarch himself has a cameo in a dream sequence where he is discussing with Herodotus the challenges and implications of the election. The sculptural bust that is a permanent fixture of the history teacher's classroom is more than likely meant to be that of Plutarch.

Presumably the writers of the series chose Plutarch to emphasise the moral uprightness and honesty of the lowly teacher now elected as president, in contrast with the corruption of the established elites and of the political culture more generally (given the immediate expectations of even Holoborodko's own family to share in the wealth that access to political power could allow for). Of interest is that Plutarch is invoked in this context not through the trope of heroism or greatness, but as a representative of a morally judicious, prudent and well-intentioned approach to public life and as a defender of an earnest commitment to public service.

expectations of public service and awareness of trade-offs and compromises that public accommodation can require, all in the spirit of moderation, concord and pursuance of the public good. It is a set of ideas and expectations that together I call *public humanism*. While the contours and balance of these tendencies shift historically, through the tradition of Plutarch reception traced here, politics is regulated by an overriding conception of justice, and the public official bound by a commitment to an idea of the public good (of course, understood beyond the confines of a restrictive economist definition and used to invoke what responds best to the needs of the whole) and a conception of the dignified and distinct nature of their role. At the same time, this is subject to expectations of prudential judgement and practical reasoning, all constrained by an understanding of the limits beyond which politics can become noxious and corrupt. This exploration of intellectual history and the evolution of political reflection in England and France 1500–1800 through the lens of Plutarch reception will demonstrate key moments in the development of this ethos of public service as well as key moments of its decline in the eighteenth century.

Three Objectives of the Book

I have three overriding objectives in the writing of this book. At one level it is a contribution to the field of reception studies with a focus on the reception of Plutarch in the history of European political thought. I provide an account of the different ways in which Plutarch's work related to political reflection and was translated into the vernacular languages of French and English from 1500 to 1800 by key thinkers who also wrote essays and treatises on politics. I explore some of the possible links between an interest in and interpretation of Plutarch and broader reflections on politics. Given that a seminal translation of Plutarch was made available in French by Jacques Amyot by the end of the sixteenth century, a work which was subsequently translated into English vernacular by Thomas North, I also explore the work of political theorists who drew from Plutarch's work (and those vernacular translations available to them) after the late sixteenth century. So, this account at the level of reception begins with a story of translation into the vernacular, with a focus on selective translators of the early modern period (with special attention to those who went on to write treatises in the history of political thought). Then, the narrative shifts to explore reception in a slightly different sense, namely the various ways the new canonical translations and subsequent ones were used and cited and interpreted by key thinkers in the history of

political thought (broadly conceived) in both France and England. Thus, this book stands partly within more traditional hands-on approaches to classical reception (certainly more than works in the history of political thought have tended to do), and partly within a more general practice of assessing the legacy of classical ideas within the history of political ideas, but with a focus on the work and legacy of Plutarch, and through the theme of the nature of public life.[4]

So why a focus on Plutarch for this study? As any historian of political thought will know, Plutarch is an important resource and reference for key thinkers in the development of the tradition from medieval times to the nineteenth century. Indeed, it has been shown that his work was in circulation more than previous scholarship assumed. The research of Freyja Cox Jensen has helped in the launching of this study, benefitting from more sophisticated research tools offered by initiatives in the digital humanities, including recourse to the new Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC), and thereby correcting an authoritative picture of the distribution of works of classical historians in early modern Europe.[5] You can see in Figure 1 how her findings regarding the availability of the works of classical historians in early modern Europe challenge the 1966 findings of Peter Burke, findings which had served to guide the field of intellectual history for several decades.[6]

[4] Because of my purpose in exploring the development of themes in the history of political thought, traditions largely though not exclusively written up in vernacular languages, I focus less on philological questions of nuanced translation, except in a few key moments where it is of relevance for the theme I am discussing. I do not dwell much on competing theories of translation in various historical periods, nor do I study the life of Plutarch's texts more generally within Latin culture of early modern Europe, significant as it may be. (Thanks to Keith Sidwell for reminding me of the enormous importance of this side of Plutarch reception. Because I focus on references from Plutarch in the history of political thought and in the vernacular, I have not been able to focus on broader commentaries on his thought in Latin. I acknowledge that this detracts from the comprehensiveness of my account, but many rulers in early modern Europe were not well trained in classical languages. As far as the history of political thought is concerned, a vast majority of relevant texts in this regard could be found in vernacular languages.) I will not explore how the reading and study of Plutarch for traditions of political reflection intersect with the reading and study of other ancient authors, such as Xenophon or Lucian, whose centrality in the education and formation of political thinkers in the early modern period has yet to be fully explored. (Thanks goes to Noreen Humble for this very pertinent point. I look forward to her forthcoming work on Xenophon reception. It should be noted that there is a similar pattern with Xenophon as with Plutarch – namely, that a good number of thinkers associated with traditions of political reflection took it upon themselves to translate Xenophon, thereby demonstrating his central importance to their own development as thinkers.) While these questions are of interest, to linger too long in these matters would detract from the specific narrative I am developing here.

[5] Freyja Cox Jensen, "The Popularity of Ancient Historians, 1450–1600," *The Historical Journal* 61.3 (2018), 561–595.

[6] Peter Burke, "A Survey of the Popularity of Ancient Historians, 1450–1700," *History and Theory* 5.2 (1966), 135–152.

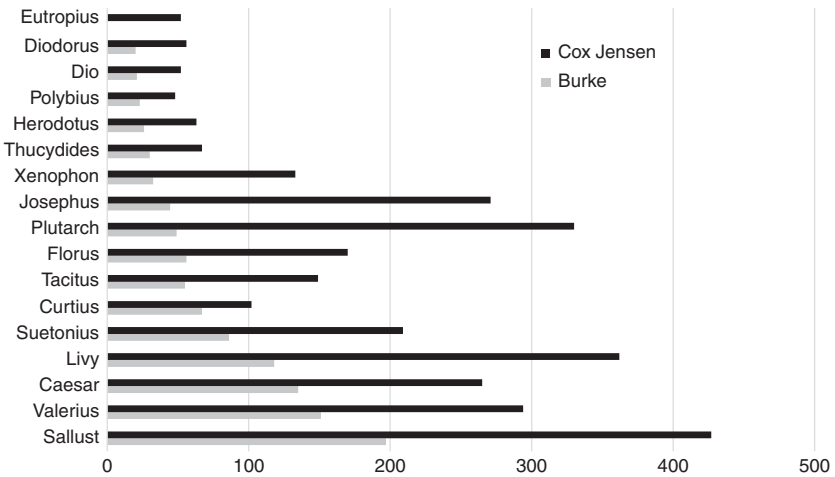

Figure 1 Comparison of Peter Burke and Freyja Cox Jensen on the availability of the works of classical historians 1450–1599
From Freyja Cox Jensen, "The Popularity of Ancient Historians 1450–1600," *The Historical Journal* 61.3 (2018).

As Cox Jensen notes, this Table brings to light three key points: more books of the ancient historians were printed from 1450–1599 than previously acknowledged; Peter Burke's conclusions concerning the ranking in popularity of ancient historians in this period requires serious revision; and there has been severe underestimation of the popularity of several key authors, especially Josephus and Plutarch.[7]

This table does raise some further questions. For example, the line between historical works and more broadly moral works, especially in the cases of Xenophon and Plutarch, is not always clear so that the category of the 'historical' for purposes of this table may be subject to some degree of contention, thereby having an impact on which editions are to be counted and which not. In addition, as in most research drawing from the USTC, there is a great deal of reliance on how the works explored have been catalogued by their home institutions, so that certain variations of method or of accuracy in cataloguing may affect the end results. This is all to say that reliance on the USTC allows the researcher to draw a general picture of broad trends. Regardless, clearly the work of Burke on the matter of the prevalence of editions of ancient historians needs substantial revision and, considering

[7] Cox Jensen, "Popularity," 574.

this, the work of Plutarch was clearly much more central to the book collections and to the education of the literate in the early modern period than has previously been accounted for. Of course, the revelation of the *quantitative* presence of Plutarch begs the question of its *qualitative* impact, something this study seeks to address.

Challenges nonetheless emerge in considering the history of political thinking from the perspective of Plutarch's work. These include: Plutarch's debt to a number of earlier political thinkers, including Plato and various Hellenistic philosophers, influences which may at times obscure where the lines of influence are to be drawn in an accurate way; some similar themes among Plutarch and other important classical sources for early modern political thought, including Aristotle, Cicero, Sallust, Tacitus, Xenophon, etc.; certain disputes, some ongoing, concerning whether Plutarch was actually the author of the works and treatises claimed or believed to be written by him in an earlier period; and perhaps most importantly, the myriad ways in which works of his vast corpus were taken up and used in political thinking and justification in early modern thought. Despite these challenges, there is ample reason for the need and significance of such a study. Given the findings of Cox Jensen there is clearly good reason to seek to understand the impact of the pervasiveness of Plutarch in early modern book culture, especially as it pertains to political reflection.

This leads to the second objective of this book: to use the lens or prism of Plutarch to revise our current understandings of the evolution of the history of political thought through the early modern period. At present, there exist competing narratives about the place of classical strands of thought in the development of our political thinking, and these narratives, of course, not only add to our understanding of the past, but also feed into a certain number of dominant accounts of how we should or do understand ourselves as moderns in relation to the unfolding of those classical ideas. One approach focuses on the importance of strands of Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism in the development of early modern thought.[8] In their origins, those strands of Hellenistic thought looked to individual self-regulation as the key to moral behaviour often, arguably, with suspicion or at least an attitude of personal indifference towards the

[8] Relevant studies (to give very few examples) include Christopher Brooke, *Philosophic Pride. Stoicism and Political Thought from Lipsius to Rousseau* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), John Christian Larsen and Gianni Paganini, eds. *Skepticism and Political Thought in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), Jeffrey Edward Green, "Solace for the Frustrations of Silent Citizenship: the Case of Epicureanism," Citizenship Studies, 19.5 (2005), 492–506, Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

inherent importance and worth of a life of public service.[9] It is easy to acknowledge strands of anti-politics quite prevalent today that may stem in part from those Hellenistic roots.[10] Another important (and indeed dominant) strand of thinking about the legacy of classical ideas in the history of political thought has been the longstanding focus on republicanism or civic humanism, said to have been inspired by either Aristotelian or Roman thought and inspirational from the Renaissance on for a whole tradition of argument prioritising liberty and collective self-rule.[11] Yet, more recently, James Hankins has questioned the argument that republicanism is the clear legacy of the Italian Renaissance for the history of political thought. He argues convincingly for the overriding thrust of what he calls 'virtue politics' in Italian Renaissance political thought, or the idea that what was most important to those political thinkers was *character* and *not institutions*, focused on education (*paideia*) and the need to promote an attachment to justice in the heart of the rulers and a desire and respect for justice in the ruled.[12]

This project offers a distinct perspective while building on the Hankins argument. Instead of a focus on Italy, I look to both the French and English traditions of political reflection, beginning in 1500 and reaching up to 1800. Also, instead of a broad treatment of all strands of political thought in this period, I focus on those which reflect significant engagement with and interpretation of the work of one classical thinker, namely Plutarch. I argue that his work, at least initially, resounded in French and English political thought in different ways, though both within a broader perspective that could be characterised as virtue politics. However, and here is where I most acutely diverge from Hankins, I argue that the way in which Plutarch was received in the French tradition led at first to a more pointed political reflection, and with a more applied if not realist bent.[13] English thinkers of the sixteenth century received Plutarch as a traditional

[9] I will address the central question of Cicero's *On Duties*, much inspired by the Stoic Panaetius in Chapter 1. Cicero's defence of public engagement of course can be seen as an exception to this general characterisation.

[10] For a general discussion of contemporary anti-politics, see Eliane Glaser, *Anti-Politics: On the Demonization of Ideology, Authority and the State* (London: Repeater Books, 2017).

[11] J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

[12] James Hankins, *Virtue Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2019).

[13] The application of the term 'pragmatic' to characterise Plutarch's *Lives* more generally has been invoked in Susan Jacobs, *Plutarch's Pragmatic Biographies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018). I do not address in this book the question of the relative weight of moral and pragmatic advice within the *Lives* itself, only sticking to analysis of differential aspects in Plutarch reception.

virtue theorist arguing for good character and a standard account of the virtues for those with ambitions to serve in public office (much like Hankins argues for the broad Italian Renaissance project). However, the reception of Plutarch in the French case offered distinct twists on this approach. French Renaissance thinkers, as shaped by Plutarch reception, developed an awareness of the unique status of the public figure, meaning not only that the moral challenges of public office were greater and more significant, but also that the very nature of the public sphere affected how the virtues were to be understood. We see in the French case of the sixteenth century, with greater focus on the *Lives*, either a strong tendency to celebrate the singular achievements of Plutarch's subjects as heroes in a category of their own (so treating the classical source as encomium to serve the cause of emergent absolutism), transforming the critical reflection on character, or using the text to shed light on the features and challenges of public responsibility. In both cases, French reflection invoked a logic of public uniqueness, of public persona or of public office, as a lens through which Plutarch's lessons for public life were filtered and understood.

To some degree we could envisage Plutarch's sixteenth-century legacy as triple. The English focus exclusively on virtue politics was matched by a French tendency to consider public life as driven by unique and specific norms along with considerations of virtue. In effect, French political reflection as engaging with Plutarch combined a need for an overall commitment to justice with attention to the special context of public life that could impact the application of traditional virtues. At times this could shift into yet another form which came to elevate Plutarch's subjects to the level of heroes – that is, as objects of admiration and public emulation. The broad set of ideas focused on the unique ethos of public life as articulated through the tradition inspired by Plutarch is what I call *public humanism*.

Given this depiction, it may become clearer how this project seeks to shed new light on the existing narratives in the evolution of early modern French and English political thought. There are strands of political reflection in the French and English context drawing inspiration from the work of Plutarch and acknowledging the importance of public life as well as the norms, ethos and demands specific to it. For many of the French thinkers I explore in this work, a commitment to justice was not *sufficient* as a guarantee of good politics because certain knowledge of the nature of public life was also thought to be required to be effective. Being in a position of political power and responsibility brought into play various considerations of expectations, duty, perception and attributions that all had an impact on how one should act. However, I argue that despite

attention to the uniqueness of public life and responsibility, French thinkers drawing on Plutarch differed from both Machiavellian and reason of state thinking partly through considerations of the inner life of the public figure (including their motivation and justifications) and thus by not fully replacing the language of virtue with that of utility or effectiveness. In other words, while the public sphere was treated as a unique realm with its own specific norms and ethos, the goals of public action were still dictated by an overriding need to pursue justice (rather than solely ambition or maintaining the state or staying in office) and a concern for the public good with no blurring between the goals, practices, and motivations of the good political leader and that of the tyrant. The major thrust of my argument is that Plutarch served as a source through which early modern political thinkers could reflect on very practical questions of virtue politics in their application. Plutarch brought to traditions of later political reflection an idiom through which a certain form of virtuous prudence, tailored to the specific needs and challenges of public life, became apparent to early modern readers, especially as the intended audience grew. And while, as we will see, the thrust and significance of this idiom shifted in stages of reception – focusing at times on the virtuous character of the ruler or the need for an overriding commitment to the public good, and at others on the ways in which the specific nature of the public sphere shifted prudential application of the virtues, or on the need to avoid the greatest evil of political life, namely tyranny – all are unified by recourse to Plutarch as a source of both moral theory and example and by an overriding concern to balance considerations of pursuit of the good, the avoidance of tyranny, and a thoughtful exercise of prudence and a sense of pragmatic reason in the development of a model for political rule and advice. To put it another way, it is possible through Plutarch to envisage the distinct nature of relations in the public sphere and the way in which norms and rules apply without having to collapse into reason of state thinking.

Some might ask why Plutarch as a source and not Cicero? Despite some of the overlap in themes (an issue that I will address more systematically in Chapter 1), I am suggesting that there is a uniqueness to the tradition stemming from Plutarch, most evident in the French tradition of reception, which allows for insights not possible with a focus on Cicero. Part of my case lies with the dynamic of transmission and reception in the French case, and part on the substance or emphasis of the theory. There is no doubt that Cicero was an important inspiration in both the English and French context, and that his work was both widely available in Latin and read by all with formal education in the classics. Indeed there is no doubt

that his work was more broadly available in the Latin culture of early modern Europe than that of most Greek thinkers, barring Plato and Aristotle.[14] Still, Plutarch was also an author of choice for translation into vernacular French by a long list of French political thinkers and intellectuals in a way unmatched in the case of Cicero, at least for the sixteenth century. Further, Plutarch's vernacular reception in the French case has an early trajectory that was largely unmet in England. This is significant because while the educated public often were immersed in Cicero, the French monarchs of the Renaissance did not read Latin well, as their education was focused on state and military matters. Thus, French vernacular translations of Plutarch were often first completed by political theorists for rulers who did not have the skills for ready access to works of political reflection in Latin. Seyssel and Budé worked on translations of Plutarch (and not Cicero) so that they could be read to the king and court, to offer them direct instruction in matters of state. Only later were these translations issued in published form for a broader public. Subsequently the published vernacular translations ensured the circulation of these ideas beyond the usual circles where education in Latin was a given, opening access to literate noble women for example. So, Plutarch's work appeared in the early sixteenth century in France as a popular source of stately advice for those in close association with the king and court.

In addition, Plutarch's work offered an array of historical examples speaking to a need for practical advice and provided a set of observations based on experience rather than deductive reasoning. Plutarch also offered deeper analysis of the various aspects of moral psychology associated with the challenges of governance. While Cicero's *On Duties* was couched in loose Stoic principles, Plutarch offered a more emotionally engaged model of political action and stewardship. It may be these features which help to account for a continued resonance of Plutarch in the French tradition, as we will see, with a figure like Montaigne confessing greater attachment to the work of Plutarch over that of Cicero.

I suggest in the early chapters that Plutarch was read differently in the early modern English and French traditions of political reflection. In the case of England, Plutarch is predominantly taken to be a moralist, with few

[14] See, for example, William Altman, ed., *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Daniel J. Kapust and Gary Remer, eds., *The Ciceronian Tradition in Political Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020); Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Catherine Steel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Reception of Cicero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013);