PLUTARCH'S PRISM

Throughout the early modern period, political theorists in France and England drew on the works of Plutarch to offer advice to kings and princes. Elizabeth I herself translated Plutarch in her later years, while Jacques Amyot's famous translations of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* led to the wide distribution of his work and served as a key resource for Shakespeare in the writing of his Roman plays, through Sir Thomas North's English translations. Rebecca Kingston's new study explores how Plutarch was translated into French and English during the Renaissance and how his works were invoked in political argument from the early modern period into the eighteenth century, contributing to a tradition she calls 'public humanism.' This book traces the shifting uses of Plutarch in the Enlightenment, leading to the decline of this tradition of 'public humanism.' Throughout, the importance of Plutarch's work is highlighted as a key cultural reference and for its insight into important aspects of public service.

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Classical Reception and Public Humanism in France and England 1500–1800

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009243483
DOI: 10.1017/9781009243490

First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-24348-3 Hardback

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Preface

This book, like perhaps most books, has many points of origin. One account begins with a photograph.

A young girl, just five years of age, holds a bouquet of hand-picked flowers (poppies perhaps) sitting in the sun. Her sister will remind her that the staging of the photograph was a consolation prize. Her family had travelled to Rome from Oxford for the school holiday. Her two brothers were enrolled in the Christ Church Choir school where they were immersed in the ABCs of British public culture, jackdaws, knights in shining armour and the 'heroes' of the ancient world. Arriving in Rome was a moment not only to test that knowledge but to imbue it with something of a material and embodied reality. The statue of Julius Caesar was a special draw for school-age boys only beginning to grapple with the iconic status of the man. The parents of the young girl who made a fuss at not being photographed with her brothers in front of a Julius Caesar statue tried to appease her. They took a picture of her at another site, the Curia of Pompey. It was close to the spot where Julius Caesar, seated and speaking to Roman Senators, famously met his death, stabbed by his close associates. The young girl, most interested in the wildflowers and stray cats, was not aware of the events which had taken place there 2,000 years before. She didn't know that the public history that gave Julius Caesar renown included a ruthlessness and violence highlighted in precisely that location. Of course, it was also that place and the circumstances surrounding that event, that have shaped and inspired countless volumes of literature, history, and political reflection. The seeming allure, and threat, of Caesarism still loom large on public consciousness today.

Still, the gap between the resounding historical importance of that site and the ignorance of the person in the photograph can be thought of as symbolic of an ongoing and perennial gap between the ethos of our contemporary era and the world of the ancients. At some level, the disregard is both an insult and an affirmation that glory seeking and all that was

associated with it was rightly overtaken by a concern for individual comfort and personal happiness. A cursory measure of that historical gap could also be found through a simple mathematical calculation of the number of lives mentioned by Plutarch, not as the focus of his narrative, but as the victims of the countless battles and slaughters peppered throughout each page. What were the stories of those lives of captives, willing soldiers, ambitious aristocrats and poor peasants just trying to live or to survive from the booties of war and whose lives were ended prematurely and in horrible violence? What does Plutarch's consistent invocation of the praiseworthy quality of *humanité* mean in the face of such carnage? The girl in the photograph may not have even survived in that ancient world, given the life-threatening conditions of childbirth for both mothers and children at the time. Yet the photograph is taken *there*, and the site continues to be photographed by travellers partly due to the textual tradition that has issued from reflection on its significance, texts that continue to form a core of ongoing cultural and political narratives in the west. The historical gap persists but it is also mediated and partly bridged by traditions of writing and reflection that continue to engage with related themes. Still, the picture itself, I think, raises the question of the pertinence of the site to the life and cultural meanings of the society in which that child grows up and through which she seeks to define herself.

Of course, that child is me. I am still far removed from a full understanding of that world represented by the ruin. The purpose of this book is not to bring that world to life, but rather to try to shed light on a thread through which an interpretation of that ancient world, especially as it pertains to public life, helped to shape our understandings of politics in the early modern period in Europe. It is but one thread in a much broader story about how the gap between the world of the ancient past and our contemporary outlooks was shaped, in part through ongoing engagement with the stories and artefacts of that same past.

Acknowledgements

This book has been a journey in several respects. So many people have helped me along the way, and I could not have done it without them. My thanks go out to a vast number!

Thanks to various ancient Greek teachers, tutors and classicists over the years who have helped me to unpack Plutarch, learn the basics of ancient Greek and who have offered good advice and support, especially as I began this project. These include the late Elaine Fantham, Barrie Fleet, Noreen Humble, Christopher Pelling, Susan Jacobs (and other scholars of the International Plutarch Society who welcomed me to their meetings), Elizabeth Sawyer, Sara Monoson, Jeff Tatum (who assured me that Amyot's translation was excellent), Brad Hald, Emily Mohr, Alexandra Boleyn, Nada Conic and Lee Sawchuck. I also am very grateful for the thoughtful guidance and support of the classicist Alison Keith of the University of Toronto.

Thanks also go to the following for their great help in reading and offering suggestions for the revising of my manuscript in various stages of the process, including in a book manuscript workshop: Edward Andrew, Ryan Balot, Jeffrey Collins, Isabela dos Santos, Mark Jurdjevic, Erica Kunimoto, Mary Jo Macdonald, Andy Sabl and Jean Terrel. Thanks also to James Carley, Alexandra Franklin and David Howarth for both practical help and advice.

Many thanks to the countless staff members of several libraries, including The Fisher Rare Books Library and Robarts Library in Toronto, the Bodleian Library, the Cambridge University Library and the Arsenal library and Bibliothéque nationale in Paris, as well as staff in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, without whom faculty would be adrift.

Thanks is due to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada who helped to fund this project. I am thankful for an RBC fellowship that helped to fund a term of research at the Bodleian Library in

Oxford. In addition, I am exceedingly grateful to the Jackman Humanities Institute which awarded me a faculty fellowship for a year allowing me to complete the first draft of the manuscript. The warm community of fellows at the Institute also provided me with a welcome and intellectually stimulating environment in which to do my work.

I also wish to thank the reviewers and editors at Cambridge University Press, especially Liz Friend-Smith, who ensured that my best efforts were reflected in my work. Of course, all deficiencies here are due to my own limitations.

Our community of scholars at the University of Toronto over the years has been an important source of inspiration and support. These include Nancy Bertoldi, Joe Carens, Arturo Chang, Joseph Dattilo, Nate Gilmore, Kelsey Gordon, Ran Hirschl, Ryan Hurl, Peggy Kohn, Kanta Murali, Emily Nacol, Jennifer Nedelsky, Carla Norloff, Clifford Orwin, Catherine Power, Ayelet Shachar, Torrey Shanks, Grace Skogstad, Dale Turner, Constantine Vassiliou, Rachel Wagner, Matthew Walton and Melissa Williams.

I acknowledge the use of Figure 1 from Freyja Cox Jensen, "The Popularity of Ancient Historians," *The Historical Journal*, 61 (3), 578. Reproduced with permission from Cambridge University Press.

I want to thank my son Gabriel who has always kept me on-task, gives invaluable advice and assistance, and offers me incalculable joy each day. I also thank my siblings Fred and Cap, Liz and Andrew, and Paul (who know I am always trying to get back into the picture!). Kai Nikko Zhi-ai Beiner and Hayden Michael Kingston Hayes also offer hope for the future. Unfortunately, my mother Pauline and father Frederick Temple passed away before this book came to light, but they were supportive of me every step of the way and I will be forever grateful to both. Of course, love and thanks also go to Ronnie who has helped me to persevere and who is an exemplar, in the best sense, of a dedicated and thoughtful scholar and loving partner.