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Plutarch



Synopsis

Written around the year 100, Plutarch's Lives have shaped perceptions of the accomplishments of the ancient Greeks and Romans for nearly two thousand years. This engaging and stimulating book introduces both general readers and students to Plutarch's own life and work. Robert Lamberton sketches the cultural context in which Plutarch worked "Greece under Roman rule" and discusses his family relationships, background, education, and political career. There are two sides to Plutarch: the most widely read source on Greek and Roman history and the educator whose philosophical and pedagogical concerns are preserved in the vast collection of essays and dialogues known as the *Moralia*. Lamberton analyzes these neglected writings, arguing that we must look here for Plutarch's deepest commitment as a writer and for the heart of his accomplishment. Lamberton also explores the connection between biography and historiography and shows how Plutarch's parallel biographies served the continuing process of cultural accommodation between Greeks and Romans in the Roman Empire. He concludes by discussing Plutarch's influence and reputation through the ages.

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Customer Reviews

"An excellent book that offers real literary and historical criticism, sound scholarship, and an interesting interpretation." -- Frances B. Titchener, Utah State University

I am not the best judge of the secondary literature on Plutarch. I have late in life come to a reading of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* and of the messy collection of dialogues and essays that have come to be known as the *Moralia*. I have started to delve in the secondary literature because of some basic hermeneutic issues that even a casual reading of the *Parallel Lives* brings up. I wanted a basic understanding of Plutarch in terms of his life, his times and his intentions. Lamberton does a good job of providing his readers with those basic understandings and with addressing some of the hermeneutic issues. Plutarch lived in the 1st century AD. The Roman Empire completely dominated the Mediterranean world. Curiously enough, this was also a period when Greek culture was very influential with wealthy and educated Romans. Part of the reason that Plutarch wrote the *Parallel Lives* is to assert the claims to military and political greatness (as opposed to just cultural greatness) on the part of the Greeks. The book also serves to provide the young educated Greek men with paragons of the various virtues. In many ways, the *Parallel Lives* are case studies of those paragons being tested by each other, by circumstances and by other aspects of their own selves. Often they are tested by all three. Lamberton provides nice discussions of the lives of Anthony, Sulla, Pompey and Alexander among others. Lamberton also makes the plausible suggestion that Plutarch also wrote the *Parallel Lives* to provide students of rhetoric with case materials for rhetorical studies: "as a huge, hybrid textbook to complement rhetorical training, where the student can simultaneously absorb principles about the structure of argument and a wide range of sayings and anecdotes. [This served as] a propaedeutic to philosophy, a first crucial stage in the molding and shaping of the person." (pp. 144-5 of Lamberton, quoted out of order by me). Lamberton also provides us brief studies of several of the *Moralia* pieces, e.g., *The Face in the Moon* and *Socrates' Sign*. It is in these studies that we get to see Plutarch as both Platonist and as Delphic priest. I found Lamberton to be very insightful in these studies. He is suggesting that they too as best read as a propaedeutic to philosophy, i.e., as an intro to philosophy that does not provide definitive answers but which presents the questions and the issues in such an seductive way that the student begins to explore the problems on their own and to apply their lessons to their lives. Plutarch's approach also allows us to see that there is more than one way to knowledge. We can learn from a philosophic argument, from the contrasting points of view presented in a dialogue or from the telling of a myth. I think Lamberton goes a long way toward explaining the diffused non-judgemental sprawl that is the *Parallel Lives* and the *Moralia*. The only thing Lamberton misses is this: I get the feeling that Plutarch loves the mess that is humanity. He is

amazed at the excesses of his heroes, awed by their achievements, proud of the way that some of them honored their cities and their fellow citizens and moved by their falls from grace. Plutarch really liked to read and write about all that. He is not just an educator and a philosopher. He loves the telling of a good tale. This is the only aspect of Plutarch that Lamberton does not remark on. Maybe he thought it was too obvious. I will be reading other secondary sources as I continue my reading of the Lives and the Moralia. I will be reviewing any others that I think are good guides as well. But for now, I can recommend Lamberton as an exemplary introduction to one of the great writers in the Western tradition.

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