Representing an extensive original survey of the ancient world’s preeminent biographer and philosophical essayist by leading scholars from around the world, this Companion gives readers a clear and concise overview of all major topics of study and a single comprehensive synthesis of Plutarch’s massive and diverse oeuvre.

Editor Mark Beck first outlines important aspects of Plutarch’s early life and discusses contemporary approaches to the study of the author. The first section gives rich historical, political, and cultural background information about life in the Imperial period, and the intellectual currents of the day, which serve to contextualize further Plutarch’s thought. The second and third sections focus on his philosophical perspective, religiosity, and his various biographical projects, such as his magnum opus, the Parallel Lives, and his other major contributions contained in the Moralia.

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A Companion to Plutarch presents Plutarch’s thought and influence in a coherent, comprehensive, and elegant survey.

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Mark Beck

WILEY Blackwell
To my wife, Pia.
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Note on the Translations and Abbreviations

All translations in this volume are by the authors themselves unless otherwise indicated. All abbreviations of classical authors’ names and works used in this volume follow the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edition, edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford, 2012).
Introduction

Plutarch in Greece

Mark Beck

Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus (c. 45–c. 125 CE), whom we know simply as Plutarch, lived at a time when Rome dominated the Mediterranean world politically and militarily. The glory days of Greece, the Persian Wars, and Alexander the Great’s Macedonian Empire belonged to the distant past. The influence of Greek literary culture remained strong, however, and even experienced a type of renaissance, the so-called Second Sophistic. Plutarch was arguably the most important Greek intellectual in this movement (Swain (1996) 135; Schmitz). He is generally considered to be the ancient world’s foremost biographer and philosophical essayist. His most widely read and influential work is undoubtedly the collection of forty-eight biographies entitled Parallel Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans.¹ This work, based broadly on the heuristic principle of comparison (synkrisis), explores the constitutive elements of individual greatness in politics and warfare, the two realms of activity that served as the proving grounds for male virtue (aretê) in the ancient world.

With the rediscovery of his works in the Renaissance through translations by Leonardo Bruni (Pade), Jacques Amyot (Guerrier), and Sir Thomas North (Braden and Mossman), Plutarch became the most widely read and influential classical author in Europe. The list of those whom he has influenced is long and contains many illustrious names of individuals from all walks of life: Erasmus, Machiavelli, Rabelais, Vasari, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Bacon, Walton, Dryden, Rousseau, Johnson, Boswell, Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller, Alfieri, Hamilton, Macaulay, Nietzsche, Emerson, Strachey, Truman, and Foucault to name just a few (Braden, Frazier, Mossman, Pérez Jiménez, Richard). In Plutarch’s writings his readers discovered the most accessible compendium of Hellenic thought and Greco-Roman history, rich in personal detail, anecdotes, and bons mots. The West for centuries saw its classical past primarily through the eyes of Plutarch.

1. Plutarch’s Early Life

Plutarch was born and educated in Chaeronea, a small village located about sixty-seven miles northwest of Athens, as the crow flies (Bowie). He speaks with warmth of his family, his wife Timoxena, his father Autobulus, his grandfather Lamprias, for whom he expresses special admiration, and his brothers Timon and Lamprias. He deeply loved his wife Timoxena and their five children, only two of whom survived into adulthood. We have the Consolation to his Wife (608A–612B) that he wrote after the death of their only daughter at the age of two. It remains a moving testimonial to his love of family. His views on his own marriage can be summed up in one of his memorable quotes: “Very fortunate is the man who in the entire span of his life knows from the beginning only one woman, the one whom he marries” (Cat. Min. 7.3). Plutarch’s thoughts on marriage, women, and sexuality have attracted considerable attention of late (e.g., Foucault (1984); Nikolaidis (1997); Pomeroy (1999); Walcot (1999); Beneker (2012); Tsouvala and Beneker).

Informally his education was augmented by conversations at the dinner table with his family, relatives, and circle of friends (De tuend. san. 133E). We are able to acquire an approximate idea of what these evening sessions may have been like from reading Plutarch’s lengthy Table Talks (Quaest. conv. 612C–748D; Klotz (2007); Ribeiro Ferreira et al. (2009); Klotz and Oikonomopoulou (2011); Klotz). Some historical details he learned in this way have been incorporated into his works. Plutarch heard, for example, from his great-grandfather Nicarchus that Mark Antony virtually enslaved the freeborn Greeks of Chaeronea by forcing them with whips to carry grain to the harbor, after having taken their money, slaves, and yoke-animals (Ant. 68.4). From his grandfather Lamprias he learned of an eyewitness report (relayed by one Philotas, a physician from Amphissa) illustrating the inordinate luxury of Antony and Cleopatra’s dinner feasts (Ant. 28.2–3). The dramatic and unfortunate story of Damon, whose murder led to the haunting of the vapor-bath, was part of the oral tradition in Chaeronea until Plutarch used it to introduce his Lives of Cimon and Lucullus (Beck (2007)). Such memorable details gleaned from oral tradition appear frequently in the Lives and enrich our historical perspective, telling us something about the life of a young man growing up in Chaeronea.

At the age of twenty he went to Athens and resided for a time there. He later returned to the city at an interval of thirty years (De sera 559B). His intimate knowledge of the city and its environs is frequently displayed in the Parallel Lives (e.g. Sol. 25.1; Per. 13; Arist. 27.1). As he informs us in De E ap. Delphos 1(385B), it was in Athens that he studied with the Egyptian philosopher Ammonius who was head of the Platonic Academy there at the time when Nero visited Greece (66/67 CE) (Dillon).

2. History and Topographies of Memory

History and all things historical held a particular fascination for Plutarch (Payen). He had read and absorbed the works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Theopompus, Polybius, Sallust, Livy, and many other historians (Schettino). He was not an uncritical reader as we know from his essay The Malice of Herodotus and the prologue to the Life of Nicias (De mal. Her. 854E–874C; Nic. 1; Bowen (1992) 1–13). Undoubtedly his
interest in biography arose out of his immersion in historical literature, since ancient political biography is an offshoot or *genus proximum* of ancient historiography, and he felt compelled to distinguish his biographical form of narrative from historiography (*Alex.* 1; Geiger (1985) 22; Burridge (1992) and (1997) 371–391). But Plutarch was more than just a man of his books. He had visited many places that were the sites of significant events. His own birthplace elegantly represented the stimulating intersection of history, topography, and memory.

As a boy growing up in Chaeronea not far from the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi he would have had ample opportunity to walk the plain between the city and the Kephissos River. His thoughts would likely have turned to one of his greatest heroes, the Macedonian king Alexander the Great, who personally took part in the battle of Chaeronea on August 2 in 338 BCE. In his biography of the Macedonian king written in his mature adulthood, Plutarch informs us about the oak tree (“Alexander’s oak”) under which Alexander pitched his tent that stood near the Kephissos River not far from the Macedonian *polyandreion* that has been rediscovered by archaeological investigation in modern times (*Alex.* 9.3; Buckler (1992) 4802; Ma (2008) 73–78). He then may also have reflected on the Roman general Sulla and the second battle of Chaeronea in 86 BCE, in which the forces of Mithridates VI Eupator, king of the Pontus, led by his general Archelaos, were vanquished. His *Life of Sulla* (15–21) contains a careful account of the battle rich in topographical details that provides “indisputable evidence of Plutarch’s autopsy to augment his literary sources” (Buckler (1992) 4803). Even the story of Damon’s crimes and murder, mentioned above, ultimately necessitated the personal intervention of Lucius Lucullus, a very notable historical figure, on behalf of the citizens of Chaeronea. This seemingly insignificant incident in local history thus eventually led to the Roman statesman and general being regarded as the savior of Chaeronea. As a result the citizens of Chaeronea honored Lucullus with a marble statue erected in the marketplace and Plutarch in turn, years later, sought to honor him with a literary monument by including him in his pantheon of heroes opposite Cimon, who for his part had helped to save the day for the Athenians during the Second Persian War (*Cim.* 1.5–2.5). The intertwining of Greek with Roman history was a natural part of his world, throughout his youth and adulthood, and explains in part the Greco-Roman format of the *Parallel Lives* (see also Geiger (1985) and Ramón Palerm (1992) on the influence of Cornelius Nepos). His residence in Athens brought him close to the most significant series of events that influenced Greek history.

While the Second Punic War contested with Hannibal figured as the turning point for the Romans in their history, the Persian Wars in contrast represented Greece’s watershed moment. Plutarch displays an acute awareness of the historical magnitude of these events in his descriptions of the nearby battle sites, as he gazed at the memorials to the fallen (Pelling (2007) 150–151). He describes for us in vivid sensory detail his visit to the small temple of “East-looking” Artemis he saw there and how after he rubbed his hands on the blocks of white marble on the ground there they assumed a “saffron-like color and smell” (*Them.* 8.2–3). He records the inscription that he read on one of those marble slabs:

There was a time when on this stretch of sea the sons of Athens
In battle overcame a varied host of men of Asian stock;
To mark their destruction of the army of the Medes,
They erected these tokens in honor of the maiden Artemis.
He also visited Thermopylae, the site of the majestic last stand of the 300 Spartans under the command of their king, Leonidas. His first-hand knowledge of Thermopylae, revealed in his descriptions of the topography and vegetation in the *Life of Cato the Elder*, gives us an idea of what his more elaborate account in the unwritten or lost *Life of Leonidas* would have been like (*Cat. Mai.* 13–14). Sparta obviously fascinated him as it had Plato (Rawson (1969); Tigerstedt (1974) 226–264; Talbert (2005)). His *Lives* of Lycurgus, Lysander, Agesilaus, and Agis and Cleomenes are notable as rich sources of Spartan history providing us with a great store of information about Spartan education and institutions. He had visited Sparta to consult the public archives, and seen king Agesilaus’ spear on display there (*Ages.* 19.11–12; Buckler (1992) 4814–4815). He witnessed the ritual whipping of Spartan youths at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, many of whom were whipped to death, as he grimly notes (*Lyc.* 18.2).

His visits to sites in Italy enable him to better understand his Latin sources, a language he tells us he never completely mastered (*Dem.* 2.2–4; see Stader). First-hand experience enabled him to compare the splendor of Athens with the magnificence of Rome and come down squarely on the side of Periclean Athens (*Comp. Per.-Fab.* 3.5). These instances of autopsy, and many more, in Plutarch’s writings are compelling and enhance the value and interest of his narrative for us. The importance of cities, monuments, and artifacts correlates with people and the doing of great deeds (*erga/praxeis*) in his cognitive universe.

### 3. *Erga* and Aesthetics

The purest and most lucid expression of the psychological importance of seminal achievement is to be found in the prologue to his *Life of Pericles* (1–2). The key to unlocking human potential, according to Plutarch, involves exposure to edifying auditory and visual stimuli (*akousmata kai theamata*). This is not a passive reception of visual and auditory stimuli but an active and analytical process achieved by selective application of the intellect (*nous/dianoia*) to the desirable types of experience that elicit imitation and emulation. The appropriate objects of contemplation, according to Putarch, are virtuous deeds/works (*en tois ap’ arêtes ergois*). The meaning of *ergon* (pl. *erga*) shifts subtly in this section of the prologue, in that it refers to an action as well as the physical, tangible result of an action. This prologue explains the powerful psychological effect that contemplation of superlative deeds can have as well as the commemorative structures associated with those deeds. Its direct role in the *Life* is to condition the reader for an enhanced appreciation of the Periclean constructions on the Acropolis that are presented in detail (*Per.* 12–13). The Bakhtinian concept of the chronotope finds fruitful application under such circumstances, as Plutarch recreates the landscape and buildings of Athens and Rome, in expressing “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (Bakhtin (1981) 84; see Banta (2006), (2007a), (2007b); Beck (2012)). Numerous chronotopes appear as focalizing devices in the *Lives* and reflect strongly on the character and achievement of the biographical subject.

It has been noted that, in addressing the role of deeds (*erga*) and of *mimesis* in instilling the desire to behave virtuously, Plutarch exploits in this prologue the semantic ambiguity of the terms *ergon*, *mimesis*, *historia*, and *ethopoia*, as he “links and merges the activity
of the heroes of the past, of the writer and of the reader” (Duff (2001) 353). Thus a third meaning of *ergon* in this context is that it refers to the work of literature itself that represents (*mimesis*) deeds worthy of imitation (*mimesis*). The representation of character (*ethopoiia*) serves the proper formation of character (*ethopoiia*). The correct appreciation of historical literature (*historia*) requires investigation (*historia*) of an analytical nature. Timothy Duff ((2001) 356) persuasively links the activities represented by the term *historia* with a passage in the treatise *On the Sign of Socrates* (575B–C) that represents the ideal reader as one who “looks at” and studies history carefully, like an art connoisseur. The difference being that Plutarch expects his narrative will compel action in the form of emulation. As in the case of Plato, there exists in Plutarch’s thought a close connection between ethics and aesthetics (on this connection in Plato see Hobbs (2000) 66; for Plutarch see Duff (1999) and (2004)). The frequent reference to vision in the prologue is employed “as a parallel for the activity of the mind” (Stadter (1989) 55). The placement of vivid “images of excellence” before the mind’s eye of the narratee is designed to elicit an emotional response that renders them more memorable, thus enhancing their didactic efficacy (Mueller (1995) 287–300). The close association of emotion and virtue is Aristotelian (Becchi), and is one of the fundamental points of disagreement between Plutarch’s philosophical position and Stoicism (Opsomer). The link between aesthetics and the representation of character is brought out in the prologue to the *Life of Lucullus*, wherein Plutarch acknowledges that “a portrait which reveals character and disposition is far more beautiful than one which merely copies form and feature” (*Cim.* 2.3). The literary likeness (*eikon*) he composes to honor Lucullus is thus aesthetically more satisfying in that it is capable of revealing character (*ethos*) and disposition (*tropos*).

4. Characterization, Individuality, and the Condensation of Knowledge

The moralizing tendency of Plutarch’s method of characterization in the *Lives* is now well established (Pelling (1995), (2002) 237–251, 283–338; Frazier (1996); Duff (1999); Nikolaidis). While his biographical subjects differ from one another in possessing their own unique set of attributes, and a certain degree of individuality, their behavior nevertheless seems to be evaluated according to the same identifiable register of traits (Bucher-Isler (1972); Gill (1983), (1990); Pelling (2002) 283–338). The thematic correspondence between the *Lives* and the ethical and political treatises in the *Moralia* is particularly pronounced in this regard (see, e.g., the contributions in de Blois et al. (2004–2005) and Nikolaidis (2008)). Plutarch’s hierarchical system of valuation ranks human achievement according to its degree of ontological dependency. That is to say he regards more highly those individuals who are doers of deeds (including statements) than those who write about or represent them (see, e.g., *De glor. Ath.* 345F). He is fond of quoting Homer’s verse (*Il.* 9.443) in his major political treatises that stipulates one should strive to “be a speaker of speeches, and also a doer of actions” (*Prae. ger. reip.* 798B; *An seni* 795E). The individuals who actively embody this ideal of civic commitment are political and military leaders (see Pelling). The ultimate goal of talented individuals was to serve their communities in a political capacity, however diminished that role may
have been in light of Roman political hegemony (see Trapp 2004). This is what Plutarch himself chose to do and in this he diverges significantly from the Epicureans (see Kechagia-Ovseiko).

On the other hand he also wanted his readers to experience these men as people that could be identified with. Excessive idealization was thus avoided. Instead he endeavors to break down the distance between his subjects and his readers (narratees) and render a more intimate portrait that we can examine and identify with, at least in part. The metaphor that he uses is that of a mirror (Zadorojnyi (2010); Frazier (2011); Geiger). Such identification and comparison of one’s self with others leads to self-discovery and moral improvement (see Larmour on synkrisis in this volume). It is apparent that Plutarch viewed the apophthegm as a didactically important way of condensing knowledge and vivifying his portraits to render people and situations more thought-provoking and proximate, and to stimulate ambition and emulation (Beck (2010)). He clearly appreciated laconic brevity in speaking and his apophthegm collections contain much Spartan material, including sayings attributed to women (Mor. 172B–242D; see König (2010)). Many of the apophthegms in these collections appear in the Lives and the Moralia, and the relationship of these collections to Plutarch’s compositional methods is an ongoing question (Van der Stockt (1999); Pelling (2002) 65–90; Stadter (2008); see Van der Stockt and Zadorojnyi). There is a strong likelihood that he even sent the emperor Trajan a copy of his Sayings of Kings and Commanders as a sort of breviarium of the Lives, which the busy man did not have the leisure time to read (Beck (2002)). If correct, this would attest to Plutarch’s views on the edifying value of apophthegms.

5. Plutarch in Chaeronea

As he himself tells us, Plutarch looked into the mirror he had created and lived his life accordingly (Aem. 1). Despite traveling widely, visiting Greece, Macedonia, Crete, Italy (including Rome), Northern Egypt, and parts of Asia Minor (Buckler (1992) 4799–4800), Plutarch’s home remained his beloved Chaeronea, and in the prologue to his Life of Demosthenes (2.2) he expresses his desire to live there that “it may not become even smaller.” He was politically active in Chaeronea, he served on embassies to proconsuls, accepted municipal posts, and oversaw local building projects. As a sign of his literary repute he was bestowed with the ornamenta consularia. Young people gathered in his home for instruction in philosophy and mathematics. Notably he also became priest of the nearby sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi for a number of years (“many Pythiads”) (An seni 792F). We do not know in what year Plutarch died. According to Eusebius, Plutarch was appointed Procurator of Achaea in 119 CE and none of his writings contain references beyond this date. At his death the people of Chaeronea and Delphi erected a portrait bust in his honor (see Jones (1971)).

6. The Contents and Scope of this Volume

This volume brings together contributions from noted authorities around the world in the hope of doing justice to Plutarch’s immense literary and intellectual legacy. The first section (Part I) locates Plutarch in his literary and cultural milieu, his connection with
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Rome (Stadter), the Second Sophistic (Schmitz), and philosophy in the Imperial period (Trapp). In Part II, Plutarch’s voluminous *Moralia*, comprising seventy-eight essays, declamations, and dialogues, and spurious works, comes under discussion. The contributions of Dillon, Becchi, Opsomer, Kechagia-Osveiko, Bonazzi, Van Hoof, and Pelling explore all aspects of Plutarch’s philosophical thought. This is currently one of the premier areas of investigation in Plutarch studies and the chapters assembled here provide a comprehensive overview of the field. Plutarch’s religiosity is closely associated with his philosophical thought and Hirsch-Luipold’s contribution focuses on religion and myth in his writings. Along with Plato, Plutarch was one of the ancient world’s foremost philosophical mythmakers. Education was one of Plutarch’s primary concerns and Bowie’s contribution explores this aspect of his thought. As a sign of his undying relevancy, Plutarch’s advocacy of poetry in the instruction of children has been recently taken up again by Martha Nussbaum (1996). The four contributions by Tsouvala, Klotz, Newmyer, and Payen expose more personal and idiosyncratic aspects of Plutarch’s thought, his views on love and marriage, his portraits of *symposia*, his high regard and love for animals, and his antiquarianism.

The third section (Part III) of this work comprehensively presents Plutarch’s biographical oeuvre, fifty-two biographies in all. Forty-eight of these biographies contrast a Greek with a Roman protagonist (or in one instance two Greeks, Agis and Cleomenes, with two Romans, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus). This work, entitled the *Parallel Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans*, is generally regarded as Plutarch’s *magnum opus*. Of the four remaining biographies, two, the *Lives* of Galba and Otho, belong to his earlier large-scale biographical work, the *Lives of the Emperors*, and two independent biographies, the *Lives* of Aratus and Artaxerxes, that were not part of any larger collection, as far as we know. The chapters by Georgiadou and De Blois deal with the *Lives of the Emperors*, while Almagor focuses on the *Lives* of Aratus and Artaxerxes. The remaining contributions focus primarily on Plutarch’s compositional techniques (Geiger, Zadorojnyi, Van der Stockt, Duff, Larmour, Cooper), use of historical sources (Schettino), and various salient themes in the *Lives*: childhood (Soares), characterization and morality (Nikolaidis), tragedy (Mossman), philosopher-king (Boulet), Socratic paradigm (Beck), fate and fortune (Titchener), ambition (Frazier), sex, eroticism, and politics (Beneker), and philanthropy, dignity, and euergetism (Roskam).

The fourth and final section of this volume (Part IV) traces the early reception of Plutarch from late antiquity to the Italian Renaissance (Pade), as well as his influence in France (Guerrier and Frazier), in Spain (Pérez Jiménez), in England (Braden and Mossman), and in the early history of the United States of America (Richard).

NOTES

3 This ambiguous usage of *ergon* is already present in Herodotus (see Immerwahr (1960) 261–290).
REFERENCES


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