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Plutarch and the Victorians

For nineteenth-century readers, Plutarch was a familiar name. In an 1873 essay in the *Fortnightly Review*, the classical scholar W.J. Brodribb comments that "no classical author is better known to the average modern reader than Plutarch", and at the same time he is "hardly known except as a biographer".[1] The frequent appearance of "Plutarch's Lives" in the memoirs and novels of the period establishes the text as a familiar presence in Victorian homes, read in translation and representing an accessible version of the classical tradition. In a description of his classical reading as a child, John Stuart Mill recalls his "great delight" in the Langhorne version of Plutarch, which he read as a recreation. Engaged in an intensive study of Greek from the age of three, he read ancient history by himself and retold the stories to his father on their daily walks.[2] In Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), it is one of the works of ancient history that the illiterate Mr Boffin, attempting to make up for his lack of education, hires Silas Wegg to read aloud. Boffin finds the *Lives* "extremely entertaining, though he hoped Plutarch might not expect him to believe them all".[3] Allusions to Plutarch in Victorian literature demonstrate that texts other than the *Lives* were known to nineteenth-century readers, yet he is renowned principally as an influence on authors such as Shakespeare and Montaigne (see Dimitrova and Edelman in this volume) and on the heroes of the French and American revolutions, as a supplier of biographical anecdotes and a genial essayist. To scholars he was an enjoyable but unreliable historian (inferior to Herodotus or Thucydides). Such ideas affected the popular reception of Plutarch, who was excluded from series such as *Ancient Classics for English Readers* (published by William Blackwood from 1870 onwards), which included volumes on Herodotus, Xenophon and Tacitus but no Plutarch.

In *Who Needs Greek?* (2002), Simon Goldhill traces the decline of Plutarch's reputation in the nineteenth century after a period of notable prominence in the late eighteenth century, as Plutarch's inaccuracies and second-hand knowledge were attacked by ancient historians.[4] Goldhill argues that scholarly neglect of Plutarch from 1850 onwards was influenced by the concerns of German scientific historical research, which prioritised originality and

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[1] Brodribb (1873: 631). Although the model of paired biographies was rarely followed, "Plutarch" had become a shorthand for a biographer in the Romantic period. There was also a "modern British Plutarch", a "Cambrian Plutarch" and a "Juvenile Plutarch". The pairing of ancient heroes may have influenced Walter Savage Landor's five volumes of *Imaginary Conversations* (1824-9), which take the form of prose dialogues rather than biographical studies. In the *Classical Dialogues* he pairs Greek with Greek and Roman with Roman. Nevertheless, the influence of Plutarch's *Lives* is evident in dialogues such as "Diogenes and Plato", "Lucian and Timotheus", "Marcellus and Hannibal" and "Lucullus and Caesar".

[2] Mill (1873: 7).

[3] Dickens (2008: 476).

[4] Goldhill (2002: 246-93).

accuracy. Whereas Thucydides offered a contemporary perspective on the age of Pericles and made a point of accuracy, Plutarch wrote centuries later than many of the heroes he described and was regarded as "a corrupt and misleading collector of other sources".[5] Arthur Hugh Clough wrote in 1860 that Plutarch's *Lives* had been neglected in the last twenty years because readers had become increasingly interested in political history rather than character studies:

> Plutarch wrote in the time of Trajan; and we have learnt the value of contemporary statements: it is justly felt that for the time of Pericles, his evidence is not to be compared to that of Thucydides. Plutarch is a biographer and a moralist; and our recent curiosity has been rather for the politics of the ancient world. Plutarch, in writing lives, to illustrate a point of character, very naturally neglects the order of time; but we have been busy to establish an accurate chronology.[6]

Franklin Lushington's 1860 review of Clough's version of the *Lives* observes that the "growing accuracy of the classical historians of the nineteenth century" and the "dispassionately sceptical habit of mind into which the modern student of Greek and Roman history is trained" have undermined Plutarch's "popularity and general esteem". He emphasises that the text is usually read in translation "even among first-rate classical scholars, … except for the purpose of verifying the exact meaning of a particular passage, or satisfying their minds as to the alleged rhetorical crabbedness of the general style".[7] Plutarch's style is cited as a reason for scholarly neglect of the *Lives:* "their style so often deviates from the canons of Attic purity".[8] This made him one of the rare classical authors it was permissible for classically-educated men to read in English, although German scholars in the nineteenth century did produce new editions of Plutarch's works.

For many Victorians "Plutarch's Lives" meant the 1770 Langhorne version, the most broadly available option. North's version (see Lucchesi in this volume) was acknowledged as a Shakespearean source but there had been no new edition between 1676 and 1895, when the text was published in a series of Tudor translations.[9] Published in 1859, the five-volume *Plutarch's lives: The translation called Dryden's. Corrected from the Greek and revised by A.H. Clough* was widely read towards the end of the period. Clough aimed to restore Plutarch to the popularity he had once enjoyed, writing in a letter to an American correspondent,

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[5] Goldhill (2002: 285).
[6] Clough (1860: v).
[7] Lushington (1860: 261). Attributions of authorship of anonymous articles are from the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824-1900*.
[8] Donne (1860: 430-1).
[9] Whibley (1895).

Charles Eliot Norton: "Plutarch is not sought for here as a library book; indeed, he is quite put out of fashion by Thirlwall, Grote & Co., and some effort is needed to recall attention to him".[10] However, his best hope was for an American readership: "I hope the young America will read it. Young England, I fear, is too critical, and thinks Plutarch an old fool".[11] Despite the low status of Plutarch in Britain, American readers continued to take Plutarch seriously. Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed that Plutarch was next in importance to Shakespeare and Plato.[12]

> Plutarch occupies a unique place in literature as an encyclopædia of Greek and Roman antiquity. Whatever is eminent in fact or in fiction, in opinion, in character, in institutions, in science, – natural, moral or metaphysical, – or in memorable sayings, drew his attention and came to his pen with more or less fulness of record.[13]

The Boston booksellers Little and Brown offered Clough a fee of $350 to revise Langhorne's Plutarch, and gave him a free hand with the translation. He decided instead to base his version on "Dryden's Plutarch", and worked on it from 1853 to 1857. During this time he was first engaged in classical tutoring and writing periodical articles, and later as a civil servant in the Education Office and secretary to the Nightingale Fund (responsible for money donated by the public in honour of Florence Nightingale's work in the Crimean War). He hoped to make the new version "tolerably readable and correct", although he felt that a complete retranslation would have been preferable:[14]

> It is odd how much better I like this Plutarch than I do anything which requires distinct statement of opinion or the like. That doesn't look very ambitious, does it? It bothers me a good deal, for mending up an old translation seems often like putting new wine into old bottles; and I was at my wits' end about what I should do, last Saturday: I thought all that I had yet done must be thrown away, and, that I must begin with another translation. They would hardly allow time; or else I could almost believe it would be best even for my own sake to spend time on translating it myself.[15]

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[10] Clough (1869: 241).
[11] Clough (1869: 240).
[12] Goldhill (2002: 250-1).
[13] Emerson (1903: 297). See also Klotz in this volume.
[14] Clough (1869: 225).
[15] Clough (1869: 195).

Clough's version of Plutarch's *Lives* was published in Boston and London in 1859. He also prepared a one-volume selection for British schools, *Greek History from Themistocles to Alexander, in a series of lives from Plutarch* (1860). Norton commented that the project "turned out to involve little less labor than a complete new translation, and it was so accomplished that henceforth it must remain the standard version of this most popular of the ancient authors".[16] James Hannay also praised Clough for the painstaking thoroughness of his revisions, claiming that "He has, throughout, employed the best recent texts, to secure the exactness of meaning dear to scholarship". Clough had not merely updated the language of the translation but "rebuilt it, so to speak – and with a constant eye to the edifice of the Greek architect of which it is a copy – cleaning here, restoring there, and touching up everywhere".[17]

Articles responding to Clough's version of the *Lives* represent Plutarch not as a "scholar's author" but "popular everywhere" and "as well known in translation as he was in the classical world".[18] W.B. Donne's article on "Plutarch and his Times" in the *Westminster Review* (1860) begins by stating "A revised translation of Plutarch's Lives may seem a doubtful experiment at a time when the kind of heroism he portrays is out of date" and his philosophical maxims little regarded. However, Donne goes on to argue for the influence of the *Lives* as "for centuries the manual of men great in arts or arms", far exceeding the impact of Thucydides, Aristotle, Livy or Polybius.[19] Brodribb claims that Plutarch's age was one in which biography was particularly popular and theorises that this was due to the "extraordinary importance with which imperialism had invested a single man. History, if not identified with, was at least of necessity closely connected with the character and habits of the reigning emperor".[20] Such an emphasis on the role of the great man in history connects Plutarch with the individualism of the Victorian period, and Henry David Thoreau commented on the similarity between Plutarch's approach to history and that of Thomas Carlyle:

> All of Carlyle's works might well enough be embraced under the title of one of them, a good specimen brick, "On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History." Of this department, he is the Chief Professor in the World's University, and even leaves Plutarch behind.[21]

Simon Goldhill notes, however, that there is a telling silence about Plutarch in Carlyle's work: "it is perhaps both Carlyle's seductive modern approach to

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[16] Norton (1862: 466).
[17] Hannay (1861: 470).
[18] Hannay (1861: 459-60).
[19] Donne (1860: 431).
[20] Brodribb (1873: 631).
[21] Thoreau (1847: 244).

heroism and his all too easy sidestepping of Plutarch that help consign Plutarch to the shadows".[22]

Plutarch's strength, W.B. Donne argues, lies not in representing military history or politics but in humanising the great men of history:

> From Thucydides we learn that Pericles was a consummate statesman and orator: from Plutarch… we gain the knowledge that Pericles' head was "somewhat longish and out of proportion;" that the Athenians were once minded to ostracise him for his resemblance to the old tyrant Pisistratus; that his voice pierced every corner of the agora; that his manners were reserved, and his demeanour majestic. … In other writers, the elder Cato is little more than a stern and vigilant conservative setting his face against all change… In Plutarch's portrait of the Tusculan aristocrat we see him with his keen grey eyes and red hair, in his coarse gown and unsandalled feet, carking and carping, to-day ploughing his own glebe, to-morrow shrill in voice and vehement in gesture, declaiming against bribery at home, or shrieking inexorably against the existence of poor moribund Carthage.[23]

For an age fascinated by historical fiction, Plutarch's popularity depended not on accuracy but on his vivid portrayal of character. Donne describes the *Lives* as analogous to the "living picture" of Scottish history in Sir Walter Scott's Waverley novels; Thucydides and Livy provide the facts, but Plutarch illuminates the heroes' human foibles and virtues.[24] The comparison is an interesting one given Victorian readers' enthusiasm for Scott's historical fiction, its centrality to a nostalgic and romanticised understanding of Scotland and the formation of a British national identity. John Henry Raleigh sums up the appealing qualities of Scott's novels for the Victorian reader in terms which suggest some similarities with Plutarch: "their originality, their humor, … the individuality of the characters, the melodrama, the sentiment, the good spirits, the 'sound' morality, ... the historical accounts, the thrilling battles".[25] The novels' popularity lay in the combination of romance and realism; despite his defects as an historian, Scott represented kinds of heroism that nineteenth-century observers found to be lacking in their own era. J.P. Mahaffy also compares Plutarch with Scott: "We feel him, as we feel Sir Walter Scott, not only the originator of an inestimably

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[22] Goldhill (2002: 291).
[23] Donne (1860: 432).
[24] Donne (1860: 432).
[25] Raleigh (1963: 9).

instructive form of historiography, but also essentially a gentleman – a man of honour and of kindliness, the best type of the best men of his day".[26] Plutarch's essays were praised in similar terms. Brodribb writes, "When he deals with ordinary matters of life, he almost always shows good sense, and often acuteness. His moral essays constantly remind us of our friend Miss Edgeworth. A pleasant and healthy tone pervades them".[27] In his essay, "Books", Emerson observes:

> Plutarch's "Morals" is less known, and seldom reprinted. Yet such a reader as I am writing to can as ill spare it as the "Lives." He will read in it the essays "On the Dæmon of Socrates," "On Isis and Osiris," "On Progress in Virtue," "On Garrulity," "On Love," and thank anew the art of printing, and the cheerful domain of ancient thinking.[28]

Poets and novelists used episodes from Plutarch in their work. L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) wrote a poem on the "Death-Bed of Alexander the Great" and another on "Antony and Cleopatra. An Anecdote from Plutarch". Felicia Hemans also based a poem, "The Festal Hour", on Plutarch's *Life of Antony*. Ancient history was a frequent subject of study for girls, and stories based on Plutarch were reproduced in textbooks and histories. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch,* Mary Garth, who had expected to become a teacher, writes a book for children, *Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch*. One of Eliot's own projects was partly inspired by Plutarch's *Lives*: she was planning to write a long poem on Timoleon, and consulted the *Life of Timoleon* as well as those of Theseus, Pericles and Aristides.[29] Charlotte Brontë wrote an essay based on an episode from Plutarch's *Life of Lysander* while at school in Belgium, on the theme of "Athens saved by poetry".[30] Following the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, Lysander and his allies consider burning down the city but are mollified by the performance of a chorus from Euripides' *Electra.* They decide that it would be cruel to destroy a city that produced such poets, so they tear down the walls, burn the ships and establish a Spartan garrison (*Lys.* 15). The power of Euripides' plays to save Athenian lives is similarly invoked in Robert Browning's *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871). The circumstances of the heroine's performance of Euripides' *Alcestis* are based on Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*. After the defeat of the Athenian forces in the Sicilian Expedition, the survivors who returned to Athens expressed their gratitude to Euripides because the Sicilians' love of Euripides had saved the Athenians who could recite his works. Browning represents Balaustion as one of the Kaunians who were at first prevented from

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[26] Mahaffy (1890: 293).
[27] Brodribb (1873: 633).
[28] Emerson (1903: 166-7).
[29] Gordon (1995: 31).
[30] Fiske (2008: 76-97).

entering the harbour at Syracuse to escape from pirates and later admitted because they could perform Euripides' poetry for the Sicilians (*Nic.* 29):

> "Wait!"
> Cried they (and wait we did, you may be sure).
> "That song was veritable Aischulos,
> Familiar to the mouth of man and boy,
> Old glory: how about Euripides?
> The newer and not yet so famous bard,
> He that was born upon the battle-day
> While that song and the salpinx sounded him
> Into the world, first sounds, at Salamis –
> Might you know any of his verses too?"[31]

George Eliot invokes an episode from the *Moralia* (*Virtues of women* 13) in *Daniel Deronda:* "the beautiful story Plutarch somewhere tells of the Delphic women: how when the Mænads, outworn with their torch-lit wanderings, lay down to sleep in the market-place, the matrons came and stood silently round them to keep guard over their slumbers; then, when they waked, ministered to them tenderly and saw them safely to their own borders".[32] Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Dead Pan" alludes to the story that the oracles of the Olympian gods fell silent at the moment of Christ's crucifixion, which took place simultaneously with the death of Pan. The refrain "Pan is dead" refers to Plutarch's *On the obsolescence of oracles* 17. In Barrett Browning's poem, this refrain begins as a lament for the gods and later becomes joyful as the Greek gods gradually lose their powers and superstition is defeated by the spread of Christianity. Later in the Victorian period the transition from the pagan era to the Christian was treated with greater ambivalence. The title of Arthur Machen's Gothic novella *The Great God Pan* (1894) may allude to Barrett Browning's poem "A Musical Instrument", which begins "What was he doing, the great god Pan / Down in the reeds by the river?". Roger Luckhurst argues that representations of Pan by A.C. Swinburne, R.L. Stevenson and Machen belong to a *fin-de-siècle* counter-reaction to the idea that the death of Pan marked the end of the pagan world and the dominance of Christianity.[33]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century scholars increasingly shifted away from a focus on fifth-century Athens and Augustan Rome to later antiquity. Plutarch and his contemporaries, in their belatedness, seemed to have much in common with the decadence of the late nineteenth century. J.P. Mahaffy's *The Greek World Under Roman Sway, from Polybius to Plutarch* (1890) presents Plutarch as the voice of sober compromise in the era of "the small and shabby

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[31] Browning (1981: 1. 872).
[32] Eliot (2008: 165).
[33] Luckhurst (2005: 278-9).

gentility of Roman Greece".[34] Brodribb praises Plutarch's comparative approach to biography, finding it apt for a period of transition:

> His Lives are thoroughly healthy reading – the idea of comparing eminent Greeks with eminent Romans was in itself a good one, and it was especially suited to a reflective self-conscious age which was witnessing the fusion of two such singularly contrasted worlds as the Roman and the Hellenic.[35]

R.C. Trench, Archbishop of Dublin, argues in a series of four lectures on Plutarch that the "utter decadence and decay" of Plutarch's beloved Greece motivated him to "show what manner and breed of men she once had borne, men that could be matched and paired with the best and greatest among that other people which, having passed her in the race, was now marching in the forefront of the world". The Romans, too, while powerful, needed narratives of the virtues of their ancestors "to remind them by what virtues, by what temperance, what frugality, what self-sacrifice those had made, and in a sense had deserved to make, the world their own".[36] The sense that the time for great heroes had passed continued to make Plutarch's *Lives* resonate at the end of the century but the praise of Plutarch took an increasingly melancholy tone.

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[34] Mahaffy (1890: 300-301).
[35] Brodribb (1873: 631).
[36] Trench (1873: 32).

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