Plutarch’s readers and the moralism of the Lives

by

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Abstract

This paper examines the moralism of the Lives by looking at how the response of the reader is constructed or implied in the text itself. Moral judgements on the behaviour of Plutarch’s subjects, or injunctions to the reader to certain sorts of behaviour, are rarely made explicit, because the reader is assumed to share the narrator’s value-system. This sense of shared values stems in part from a common culture: although the Lives are dedicated to a Roman, the ideal reader is constructed in the text as Greek. But the Lives do not simply reinforce this value-system; they also invite the reader to question it - that is, to engage in what Plutarch’s age would have called ‘philosophy’.

Key-Words: Plutarch, Parallel Lives, Ancient Biography, Greek Ethics, Greek Philosophy.

Plutarch’s explicit claims for the moral purpose of his Parallel Lives, made in the prologues to several pairs, are well known. At the start of the Alexander - Caesar he declares that an understanding of the character of his subjects, conceived in terms of right or wrong behaviour, will be a determining factor in his choice of material: he will select for inclusion, he says, material in which there will be ‘a revelation of virtue and vice’ {Alex. 1}². In other prologues, Plutarch makes explicit the purpose of such a focus on the moral character of the subject: understanding the character of the subject will lead to an improvement in the reader’s own. Thus at the start of the Pericles - Fabius, Plutarch talks of how reading about the great men of the past will encourage the reader to imitate their virtues {Per. 1-2). Similarly, in Aemilius 1, Plutarch describes his own experience as a writer as being like spending time with the heroes of the past and getting to know them; ‘what’, he asks, ‘could be more effective for improvement of character?’ {Aem. 1.4).

Plutarch’s Lives, then, had a strong ethical dimension. In recent years the nature of this ethical content has come under a good deal of scrutiny. One fruitful approach has been to focus on the prologues of the Lives and on what

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2 For the ancient tendency to conceive character in moral terms, see Gill (1983); (1990); (1996). On the Alex. - Caesar prologue, Duff (1999), 14-22.