

## PLUTARCH AND ROME<sup>1</sup>

Discussion of C.P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome*.  
Oxford, 1971. pp. XIII + 158, £ 2.75

Jones' book is indicative for some of the current trends of research in Imperial history. Curiously enough the first major works to put to full use the prosopographical approach to Roman history dealt with the Republic; the difficulties inherent in the very scarcity of the sources proved more challenging than the abundance of material on the Empire. Now the tide has turned: while the near-exhaustion of the possibilities of legitimate speculation on Republican personages set in move a mounting opposition to the over-emphasis — and sometimes abuse — of the prosopographical method among Republican historians, the historian of the Empire has not yet arrived at the completion of those collections of material that would enable him to take into account all the factors relevant for his work. Thus every fresh attempt to place a historical person in his proper setting and to investigate his connections, attested or divined, with other persons is welcome: doubly so if this person is of so manifold interests as Plutarch. Sir Ronald Syme's *Tacitus* is an unsurpassable classic exploiting all the possible — and sometimes apparently impossible — approaches to an author: Jones' book is one of the mounting crop sprouting from the fertile soil where Syme has sown. But the study of Greek authors of the Roman Empire yields an additional advantage: "Not only the pattern of the literary evidence, or the existence of an immense mass of local documents, but the very nature of the Empire itself, means that it can only be understood by starting from the provinces and looking inward" (F. Millar, *The Emperor, The Senate and the Provinces*, JRS 56. 1966, 166). In the last instance it is the degree of success in the government of the provinces and the relations of the great masses of subjects with the centre of power in Rome with which our evaluation of the Empire stands and falls. Therefore, while a comprehensive study of the relations of the Greeks towards Roman rule under the Early and High Empire is still lacking, every serious contribution

<sup>1</sup> I am pleased to record that I find myself in substantial agreement on many points with the reviews of D.A. Russell, *JRS* 62 (1972), 226 ff. and Oswyn Murray, *Phoenix* 26 (1972), 404 ff.; I had opportunity to acquaint myself with these only after the present discussion went to press.

towards it should be accepted with due gratitude. Another welcome trend in modern scholarship is the growing appreciation of the originality of authors who were regarded as mere transcribers of (mostly lost) sources by a hypercritical generation: Jones himself attributes his historical approach to "the rediscovery of Plutarch as a literary personality" (p.V.). Unfortunately Jones' view of the state of Plutarchean studies is unduly optimistic: though no doubt much that has been obscured by nineteenth-century *Quellenkritik* and *Quellenforschung* is again coming into its own, a full-scale evaluation of Plutarch as an author and artist still remains a major desideratum of literary history.

Jones' book is divided into two parts: the first deals with Plutarch's life, the second with those of his works that bear directly on his relations with Rome. There are two short Appendices on textual points and a chronological table restating in the main the results published by Jones (*Towards a Chronology of Plutarch's Works*, JRS, 56. 1966. 61 ff.).

Part I ('Life') discusses Plutarch's *patria* (ch. I: 'Chaeronea'), career (chs. II-IV) and society (chs. V-VI).

The review of Plutarch's background as a wealthy citizen of Chaeronea assembles in a lucid manner the well-known facts of his local-patriotism (which is the more remarkable towards a small town, as Jones observes, in an age when Eastern intellectuals often preferred the important cultural centres of Greece and Asia Minor to the cities of their birth) family and descent. Jones takes up (p. 8) the suggestion (based on *sera num. vind.* 558A) of B. Einarsson — contested by none a lesser authority than Ziegler — that Plutarch might have claimed descent from such mythological figures as Opheltas and Daiphantus. A further possibility seems to have escaped Jones as well as previous scholars. In *Hdt. malign.* 854F Plutarch writes of Herodotus: *μάλιστα πρὸς τε Βοιωτοὺς καὶ Κορινθίους κέχρηται μηδὲ τῶν ἄλλων τινὸς ἀπεσχημένους, οἶμαι προσήκειν ἡμῖν, ἀμυνομένοις ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων ἅμα καὶ πῆς ἀληθείας, κατ' αὐτὸ τοῦτο τῆς γραφῆς τὸ μέρος.*

The best interpretation of this passage appears to be one that takes both the Boeotians and the Corinthians to be Plutarch's ancestors. Otherwise the gist of the sentence would be that Plutarch takes up the defence of the Boeotians on behalf of their being his ancestors and the defence of the Corinthians on behalf of the truth — thus arriving at an unintentionally ambiguous verdict on the truthfulness of Herodotus' attacks against the Boeotians.

Plutarch's career is discussed in three chapters (II: Youth; III: The Flavians; IV: From Nerva to Hadrian). Here Jones tries to establish a clear-cut coincidence between the main stages of Plutarch's life and well-defined periods of Imperial history. "The formative period, that of his youth and education, falls approximately under Nero, that of his maturity (the least known) under the Flavians, and his old age, in which he wrote the majority of his extant works, under Nerva and his successors." (p. 13). Yet almost all the data of Plutarch's

life "can only be pieced together from the hints scattered throughout his works" (ibid.). On the other hand the chronological problems concerning Plutarch's writings are notoriously difficult and there are very few facts here that are universally accepted. Thus, though Jones' effort in trying to convey an unambiguous picture is laudable, few will agree with him in all the details of his interpretation, however cautiously put. A few instances where my views are at variance with Jones' may suffice.

Plutarch's visits to Rome — both their number and their dates and durations — are among the more puzzling facts of the philosopher's life and potentially of prime importance for a writer whose subject is Plutarch and Rome. Jones makes an interesting case (p. 22) for Plutarch being in Rome in or around 89 out of a number of occurrences at Rome the descriptions of which in Plutarch might well accord with an eye-witness account. A more complicated case is attempted (pp. 22–5) for (another) visit of Plutarch to Rome in or around 93: unfortunately the facts adduced here are capable of different interpretations. First, describing the conversation in *quaest. conv.* 2.1.5 (632A), where Plutarch confirms the honesty of his friend Avidius Quietus as a proconsul, Jones deduces that "it follows that his province had been Achaia" where a proconsulship of Quietus is attested in 91/2. Yet there is no need to assume that Plutarch would vouch for the cleanhandedness of his friends only insofar as he was eye-witness to their actions; thus Quietus' attested proconsulship of Britain in 98 (see CIL III Suppl. 1 p. 1969) seems to be an equally reasonable possibility; since Quietus was dead by 107 (Plin. *epist.* 6.29.1) the incident might well date from the early years of Trajan. Again, in a well-known passage (*curios.* 522DE) Plutarch relates how Arulenus Rusticus — for there is certainly no need to doubt the identification — while attending a lecture of the philosopher refused to interrupt it in order to read a communication he received from the Emperor: the terminus ante quem is of course Rusticus' execution by Domitian in the last third of 93<sup>2</sup> but there is no reason to follow the suggestion of Barrow<sup>3</sup> that the incident occurred during Rusticus' consulship in 92. Next, though aware of Wilamowitz' refutation, Jones takes up the old suggestion of Volkmann that Plutarch's brother Timon be identified with the Timon whose wife Pliny defended on request of Arulenus Rusticus: again the connection between Plutarch and Rome remains unproved. The reason for Jones' perseverance in trying to establish this connection is not far to seek: if Plutarch was in Rome in 93 he might have been personally affected by Domitian's expulsion of philosophers from Rome

<sup>2</sup> The trial took place in 93, but Rusticus was still alive when Agricola died on Aug. 23rd of that year (Tac. *Agr.* 45.1).

<sup>3</sup> *Plutarch and his Times* (London 1967) 38; rejected by D.A. Russell, G&R 15 (1968) 132 n. 7.

and Italy (p. 25). Yet there is no need to look for personal injuries to explain Plutarch's hostility towards Domitian. Writers like Tacitus and Pliny who prospered under Domitian reveal much the same attitude. Jones himself a few years ago (*JRS* 56 (1966) 61 ff.) stressed the fact that no works of Plutarch can be dated with certainty as written under Domitian and drew the parallel with Tacitus who also had had to wait for the day 'ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet.' Nevertheless he suggests that the series of the Lives of the Caesars from Augustus to Vitellius (of which only those of Galba and Otho are extant) might have been written under Domitian. The arguments are two: first, the fact that the Flavians are excluded (an old suggestion of Hardy and Wilamowitz); second, the praise of Junius Mauricus who was exiled in 93 would point to a date earlier than that. Both these considerations can easily be harmonized with writing *after* Domitian — and this would better accord with the general tendency to remain silent under the tyrant.<sup>4</sup> The tentative dating of another work, the *de fraterno amore*, under Domitian (p. 52) is equally unconvincing. A result of Jones' insistence on a clear-cut periodisation of Plutarch's life is the viewing of the creative years under the first Enlightened Emperors as a sequel to the *Lehrjahre* and *Wanderjahre* of the earlier reigns: Plutarch by now "had almost entirely stopped travelling to Rome" (p. 28) and in fact Jones refuses in the following to take into account such possible journeys. This uncalled-for self-limitation works to the disadvantage of Jones' own analysis, when he tries to stress the possible connections between Plutarch and Trajan (pp. 30 ff.) without taking into account the possibility of personal acquaintance. Yet Jones himself emphasizes the parallel between Plutarch and Dio of Prusa and the importance of personal relations between the latter and Nerva and Trajan has not escaped him. The parallel with Dio Chrysostom is included in a larger framework discussing also the careers of Epictetus and Apollonius of Tyana (pp. 34 ff.). Though of course these short surveys do not pretend to more than restate some well-known truths their merit lies in the vantage point of social history from which they are viewed; Plutarch's career is "a reflection of a larger historical fact, the absorption of Greek men of culture in the social and administrative conditions of the empire" (p. 38). Here, as with Bowersock's work on the Sophists, facts that were up to now exploited mainly with a view to literary history yield their contribution towards the social history of the Empire.

The next two chapters treat Plutarch's society. Jones sensibly rejects the customary division into Greeks and Romans and prefers another into 'Domi Nobiles' (ch. V) and 'Rome and the West' (ch. VI). The first of these discusses Plutarch's social equals: wealthy provincials, more often than not from ancient and illustrious families, both fulfilling their traditional duties towards their

<sup>4</sup> I propose to treat this subject at some length elsewhere.

hometowns or leagues and increasingly involved in the affairs of the Empire. It has often puzzled scholars that Plutarch mentions nowhere his Roman citizenship and sometimes fallacious conclusions were drawn from this silence as to Plutarch's relations with Rome. The reason, according to Jones, is simple and revealing: "In his circle, the citizenship was like affluence, too familiar to deserve comment" (p. 45). Another conclusion as to Plutarch's social status is more difficult to accept: first (pp. 9, 29) Jones assumes, on rather general circumstantial evidence, that Plutarch might have been a knight; later (p. 45) this assumption is taken for granted. Nor does the comparison with people such as Cn. Cornelius Pulcher (pp. 45 f.) strengthen his case. According to Jones' division he should have been included in the second category of Plutarch's friends: Jones might have used here with profit the survey of Cornelius Pulcher's career by F. Millar, *JRS* 55 (1965) 147. This second category included knights and senators holding positions in the Imperial administration, friends and patrons of Plutarch, addressees of his works and parts of the social framework that provides the setting of the *quaestiones convivales*. The lesson to be drawn from their enumeration is the position of Plutarch as standing on the threshold of a new era of merger between the upper classes of Rome and the Greek East.

The second part treats those works of Plutarch that deal directly with, or throw important sidelights on, Rome. Ch. VII discusses the *de fortuna Romanorum*, where already Plutarch's sympathetic interest in Roman history can be discerned. Jones, like other scholars before him, assumes that this work, like the other declamations, is a product of the rhetorical youth of the philosopher. Though this may well be so one still hopes that one day more definite arguments for such a period will be forwarded.

Next (ch. VIII), a review of the Lives of the Caesars. It contains a sound analysis of the sources of the *Galba* and *Otho* and their relationship with Tacitus' *Histories*, duly emphasizing the wide reading and personal research of Plutarch and rejecting views, still current, that would make him a mere transcriber of sources. But pride of place naturally belongs to the *Parallel Lives*, ever since their composition the most popular and influential work of the author. Every discussion of the *Parallel Lives* must inevitably start with Plutarch's Sources and Methods (ch. IX). In a work where the focus naturally is on the biographies of the Romans there stands the vexed question of Plutarch's Latin and his use of Roman sources. Much here depends on the explanation of Plutarch's own admission of the inadequacy of his Latin (*Demosth.* 2): here Jones' interpretation appears to be somewhat rigid and unappreciative of Plutarch and his personality. Plutarch came to study Latin literature ὥς ποτε καὶ πόρρω τῆς ἡλικίας; but one can hardly concur with Jones' interpretation of the sequel: "It cannot be inferred that, because Plutarch says that he found himself (συνέβαινεν ἡμῶν) following words with difficulty, he was now past this



stage: he is clearly distinguishing between his own knowledge and that required for an appreciation of style" (p. 82 n. 6). On the contrary, Plutarch states two different things, and we have no valid reason to doubt either of them: a) that, though he came late in life to study Latin and to understand it, he has now acquired this skill (*pace* Jones); and b) that his knowledge is not adequate to make him a judge of style (and therefore does not enable him to compare Demosthenes and Cicero as orators). Only one who, while studying a language, has never approximated a degree of proficiency resembling that of Plutarch will find the two statements incompatible. Thus e.g. Jones' description of Plutarch as "a man who had difficulty following a Latin sentence" (p. 85) should be rejected unless supported by positive evidence (which is not equivalent with the production of occasional lapses). Hence the inference that Plutarch did not inspect personally the works of Cato is untenable and the burden of proof rests, in every case, on those who doubt that he quotes at first hand. There is an imputation of deliberate untruthfulness to Plutarch — so uncongenial with his character — especially as he was fully aware of the difference between primary and secondary sources (see p. 83 n. 18). Nor is it the natural implication of his admission not to be able to judge between the styles of Demosthenes' and Cicero's orations that he didn't read the latter. To sum up, it seems that though Jones deliberately rejects views that saw in Plutarch a mere copyist and transcriber, a man who would make only a minimal effort in reading sources and doing research, he is till reluctant to draw the appropriate conclusions from this approach.

Plutarch's 'Views of Roman History' (ch. X) are naturally sympathetic. Characteristic is his handling and selection of sources in the Life of Romulus: "Plutarch's procedure is . . . to give a hearing to the harsher version, but to prefer the kinder" (p. 91) ; "Plutarch is influenced by apologetic versions of Roman history propagated under Augustus" (p. 92); "Plutarch, while he rejects the traditions unfavourable to Romulus, does not follow Dionysius in suppressing them" (p. 93). Yet Jones is careful to appreciate Plutarch on his own terms: if his disposal towards his heroes was sympathetic, this was due to the requirements of the literary γένος and to Plutarch's moral purpose and should not be attributed to a veiled political purport. This brings us to the 'Purpose' of the Lives (ch. XI). Jones discards the widely held view that in addition to his express moral aims Plutarch wrote also with the diplomatic purpose in eye to reconcile Greeks and Romans. No doubt Plutarch's silence about such intentions leaves the burden of proof with the propounders of such a theory. From its rejection it follows that the device of parallel biographies of Greeks and Romans must be viewed as an artistic tool only devoid of contemporary political significance. Jones could have added that it is hardly consonant with definite political aims that Plutarch sometimes looks around for a Greek to accompany a Roman life (see *Thes.* 1.3; *Agis* 2.6; *Cim.* 3.1) and

sometimes vice versa (*Publ.* 1.1; *Nic.* 1.1; *Phil. fin.* & *Flam. init.*). Moreover, Plutarch does not confine himself in his comparisons to the pairs constituting a book each but also uses a similar scheme whenever an opportunity to compare heroes — of whatever nationality — arises (see e.g. *Arist.* 2–3 (compared with Themistocles); *Cim.* 5.1; 8.1–2 (with Themistocles and Miltiades); *Pomp.* 46.1 (with Alexander); *Cato Mai.* 24.7 (with L. Lucullus, Metellus Pius and Scipio Africanus) and the Lives of Brutus and Pelopidas, where these heroes are continuously contrasted with Cassius and Epaminondas, respectively). The synkrisis was long before Plutarch a standard equipment of biography which, like the whole literary γένος, was only brought to perfection by him. But whether or not one accepts Jones' view in rejecting any assumed diplomatic purpose of the biographies, it is certainly agreed that Plutarch was by no means uninterested in the questions posed by his own age. It remains to decide whether the general tenor of the Lives can be brought in accord with Plutarch's views, established from other sources. Thus it is as well to deduce about Plutarch's political views from those of his works that are expressly concerned with contemporary political problems — above all the Political Precepts (ch. XII). Few will deny that their overt message is an urge for concord and that unselfish devotion to the interests of one's hometown of which Plutarch was all his life such an eminent example. Nor can one fail to discern the tone of renunciation when Plutarch compares Greek past and present. True, he was aware that the vestiges of Greek freedom were more in danger of being discarded by Greeks than of being taken away by Romans and that in the given political situation there was a community of interest between the Roman rulers and the true patriots among the foremost citizens of the Greek world. Yet it still remains to be demonstrated that Plutarch's was a "muted resignation" (p. 120) and that the "had no cause to look regretfully to the past" (p. 121). To put it in other words, the fact that Plutarch was realist enough to see that under the present circumstances Roman rule was not only acceptable but perhaps even a lesser evil than free course given to Greek discord and faction is taken by Jones to mean that he confused the attainable with the ideal and that his mind divorced totally past from present. Yet precisely this antithesis between the glory of Greek past and the political impotence of the present day is the touchstone by which Greek attitudes to Roman rule can be tested. The problem looms large in the mind of Plutarch and his contemporaries and thus it would have been appropriate to discuss it in the concluding chapter, devoted to Plutarch's attitude to Rome viewed on the background of his contemporaries. Jones quite rightly rejects such extreme views that would make out of figures like Lucian and Apollonius of Tyana — whatever the truth behind the literary fiction — enemies of Rome: on the other hand the above-noted contrast remains and Jones' ignoring it simply will not do. To get a complete picture one will have to realise that there is

perhaps a wider divergence of opinion — conceded that it is often influenced by particular local or other circumstances — than Jones is ready to admit. Does his assurance that the upper classes sympathized with Rome (p. 129) include, e.g., the gymnasiarchs of Alexandria?<sup>5</sup> It might be useful to remember the diversity of attitudes towards Roman rule among the Jews, a nation notoriously more monolithic in its approach towards other people than the Greeks. The preoccupation with the past is perhaps the main cultural shibboleth of the period and it surely calls for an explanation: whether this preoccupation was an outlet for the frustrations of the present (thus E.L. Bowie, *Greeks and their Past in the Second Sophistic*, *P & P* 46 (1970) 3 ff.) or only a cultural 'frame of reference' (F. Millar, *P. Herennius Dexippus: The Greek World and the Third-Century Invasions*, *JRS* 59 (1969) 12 ff.), it will be unwise to allot to it secondary importance. The key towards Plutarch's relations with the Roman present may lie with his views of the Greek past: thus, paradoxically, a study of his attitudes in the *Greek Lives* might have contributed not less towards a solution of the problem posed in the book than an analysis of the biographies of the Romans.

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<sup>5</sup> Significantly Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* (Oxford 1954) is not included in the otherwise copious bibliography.