

Nachleben of the Classics: the Case of Plutarch

Joseph Geiger

Visiting the recent Cleopatra exhibition (British Museum 12.4.2001-26.8.2001, previously in Rome and to reopen in Chicago) one is relieved to find that Plutarch is alive and well. Of course this life is but an afterlife, *Nachleben*, but it thrives, such as it is. The great popular interest in Cleopatra probably owes more to Plutarch — directly or via Shakespeare — than to all other ancient writers combined. This can be well perceived in the handsome catalogue (S. Walker and P. Higgs, *Cleopatra of Egypt. From History to Myth*, London 2001), where Plutarch plays a more prominent part (see Index) than any other person save the protagonists Cleopatra, Mark Antony and Caesar. Exhibition and catalogue devote a very large space to Cleopatra's *Nachleben* — alas, due to a refusal from Hollywood, without stills of Elizabeth Taylor (though featuring Claudette Colbert). Christopher Pelling contributes to the catalogue a well-written survey of the figure of Cleopatra in ancient literature, not unexpectedly giving Plutarch his due ('Anything truth can do, we can do better: the Cleopatra legend', 292-301) and Mary Hamer discusses 'The myth of Cleopatra since the Renaissance' (302-11). Though some very beautiful illuminated MSS of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* are exhibited or feature in the catalogue (nos. 365-7), one misses an illuminated MS of Plutarch's *Antony* — a case for some wonderment, in view of the fact that the British Museum itself possesses an illuminated MS of ten Plutarch *Lives* in Renaissance Latin translations, well known since they became available in facsimile to the public: the very first Life is Leonardo Bruni's rendition of the *Antony* and the first two illustrations are 'Antony and Cleopatra' and 'The Death of Antony'.¹ Less surprisingly, nobody seems to have noticed the Jewish connexion and the Queen's figure in Talmudic literature (for which see *Zutot* 1 [2002], forthcoming).

Indeed, Plutarch's *Nachleben* could provide a fitting paradigm for the growing interest in the influence of the Classics. R. Hirzel's *Plutarch*, published in 1912 in the series *Das Erbe der Alten*, was an admirable work, the lightly worn erudition of a great scholar. Of course in a survey that is of necessity eclectic it may seem best to let personal taste account for choice. Another author might have mentioned Charlotte Corday reading Plutarch on the day of the assassination of Marat or young Nikolai Bolkonsky dreaming, at the very end of *War and Peace*, 'that he and uncle Pierre, wearing helmets like the helmets in his illustrated edition of Plutarch, were marching at the head of a huge army' — and in any case the task of writing a history of the *Nachleben* of Plutarch may be well beyond the capability of any single scholar.² Moreover, both Hirzel and Russell concentrate almost exclusively on literary influence, to the total neglect of the

¹ C. Mitchell, *A Fifteenth Century Italian Plutarch (British Museum Add. MS. 22318)*, London 1961.

² Even one of the great Plutarch scholars of our time would not attempt more than 'the merest outline of a vast subject': D.A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London 1972), 143.

visual arts. Yet Plutarch provided inspiration to a considerable number of great masters, from Beccafumi to Poussin and Delacroix, a theme to which we shall return.

The extraordinary scholarly activity on Plutarch of the last fifteen years or so, centered around the International Plutarch Society (= *IPS*) and its various national branches — pride of place belongs to Italy and Spain — could not for long ignore the vast territory of the author's *Nachleben*. At the present (May 2002) 6th Congress of the *IPS* in Nijmegen (Netherlands) special sessions are devoted to this subject for the first time,³ though it was the theme of a conference of the Italian branch a few years ago: *L'eredità culturale di Plutarco dall'Antichità al Rinascimento. Atti del VII Convegno Plutarco. Milano-Gargnano, 28-30 maggio 1997*, a cura di I. Gallo, Napoli 1998. Since a very detailed summary of all papers (though not of the Editor's Introduction) is readily available on the Internet⁴ it will suffice to mention here authors and subjects only. Two main interests are apparent. A fair number of papers is devoted to Plutarchean echoes and connexions in antiquity: A. Garzya writes on Plutarch and Byzantium, G. D'Ippolito on pseudepigraphical works in the corpus, F. Stok on Plutarch in the Latin literature of the Empire, M. La Matina on our author in Christian Greek authors, A. Rescigno on his appearances in the work of Proclus, F. Ferrari on Syrianus and Plutarch and R.M. Piccioni on Plutarch in Stobaeus. The other contributions are mainly concerned with the Renaissance and Humanism. B. Zucchelli writes on Plutarch and Petrarch (though Petrarch read only the pseudepigraphical *Institutio Traiani* he did have some other second-hand information); R. Guerrini — presently to be discussed again in a wider connexion — writes on iconography inspired by Plutarch in Humanism, M. Pade on the tradition of the *Lives* in the quattrocento, B. Scardigli on Plutarchean echoes in Acciaiuoli's *Life of Scipio* (a first attempt to supplement missing *Lives*), P. Desideri on Plutarch in the political thought of the Renaissance (concerned with Jean Bodin), A. De Pace on Plutarch in the philosophy of the Renaissance, S. Cavazza on Erasmus and Plutarch, G. Indelli on the Florentine writer Giovambattista Gelli (1498-1563) and Plutarch. Two Spanish contributions concern their compatriots: C. Garcia Gual writes on Antonio de Guevara (1480?-1585, bishop of Mondoñedo) and the many-sided Plutarchist A. Pérez Jiménez on Luisa de Sigea. The last contribution, G. Brugnoli on Amyot, discusses the man with the greatest credit in modern times for spreading acquaintance with the works of our author. Even this cursory survey shows the pronounced bias towards literature, the Renaissance and — in this case, inevitably — Italy.

Among the many new journals appearing in the last few years a most welcome addition is a new journal devoted to *Nachleben*: since the editor is the leading scholar of the *Nachleben* of Plutarch in Renaissance art it is hardly surprising that Plutarch features in it so prominently. Indeed, the greater part of the first issue (*Fontes. Rivista di Filologia, Iconografia e storia della tradizione classica*, I 1-2, 1998) is devoted to the acts of a

³ It is planned to devote a special volume of the acts of the congress to these studies. The *IPS*'s long-standing and meritorious chairman can hardly be blamed for this somewhat late concern, as his own interest was demonstrated long ago, see P.A. Stadter, 'Planudes, Plutarch, and Pace of Ferrara', *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 16 (1973), 137-62. Fittingly, a conference on the subject *Modelli eroici dall'Antichità alla cultura europea* (with acts to be published in due time) was devoted to him in November 2001 at Bergamo.

⁴ <http://www.dia.unisa.it/DSA/plutarco5.html>

conference in December 1996 in Siena, dealing with Latin translations of Plutarch and the iconography of heroes in Renaissance art.⁵ Editor and venue both guarantee that due prominence is accorded to Siena.

Ernesto Berti, 'Manuele Crisolora, Plutarco e l'avviamento delle traduzioni umanistiche', makes it clear that though the first humanist translations were made under the influence of the school of Chrysoloras, his main intention was to help Italians to read the works in the original. The students of Greek as well as the translators were driven by the realisation that more was to be learned about Roman history from Greek than from Latin authors. Translation in the Renaissance not only was *ad sententias* (according to the classification of Jerome), but, as may be seen e.g. from the writings of Leonardo Bruni, was intended in the first place to preserve the beauty and rhetorical qualities of the original, to represent the author's *persona*.

Marianne Pade, 'Sulla fortuna delle *Vite* di Plutarco nell'umanesimo italiano del Quattrocento', is closely connected to the preceding paper.⁶ It examines the first Latin translations of Plutarch from the early efforts of Leonardo Bruni at the end of the fourteenth century and before the collection and first printing of the Latin Vulgate of all the Lives by Campano in 1470. The main interest is in the choice of Lives by the various translators, very often the direct outcome of the political circumstances of the diverse cities where they were active: Florence, where Bruni had discovered in Cicero the Republican roots of the city which previously preferred to believe itself to be a foundation of Caesar, invoked the heroes of the Late Republic in the first quarter of the Quattrocento, while eastward-looking, maritime Venice was interested in Athenian generals. It is instructive that the present much-lamented separation of the biographical pairs started with the very first arrival and first translations of the Parallel Lives in the West: Bruni translated the *Cato minor* in Florence in 1405-8, while the parallel *Phocion* was Latinised only a decade later by Guarino in Venice; *la Serenissima* also claimed to be inspired by Plato, Phocion's teacher.

Fabio Stok discusses the Latin translations of the far less influential *Moralia*. The same standards of *ad sententias* translation prevailed also here, and here too the subject matter was often chosen for contemporary reasons: the ongoing debate on the relative greatness of Alexander and Caesar was not unconnected with the translation of the treatises *de Alexandri fortuna* and *de fortuna Romanorum*. It is not devoid of interest that in the first half of the fifteenth century the most popular treatise seems to have been the pseudo-Plutarchean *de liberis educandis* translated by Guarino. In the second half of the century the greater availability of manuscripts was among the causes that brought about an ever-growing number and variety of translations. Nevertheless the first printed edition of the translations of all the *Moralia* followed that of the *Vitae* by almost a century (1566), though Guarino's translation of *de liberis educandis* had been printed already in 1471; conversely the first printed edition of the Greek text of the *Moralia* (1509)

⁵ Needless to say my omission here of contributions not pertinent to the subject of this review article does not constitute any sort of criticism.

⁶ See also this author's 'The Latin Translations of Plutarch's "Lives" in Fifteenth Century Italy and their Manuscript Diffusion', C. Leonardi and B. Munk Olsen (eds.), *The Classical Tradition in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Proceedings of the first European Science Foundation Workshop on The Reception of Classical Texts* (Spoleto 1995), 169-83.

preceded that of the Lives (1517). The most important person translating the *Moralia* in the middle of the century was Niccolò Perotti (1429-80), who under the influence of Bessarion favoured more literal renditions. Stok takes pains to save Perotti's reputation not only as far as *ad verbum* translation is concerned, but also from the criticism (starting with Casaubon on Perotti's Polybius and echoed by modern scholars) concerning his inadequacy in the technical terminology of various aspects of antiquity.

Roberto Guerrini, who has written extensively on Renaissance art influenced by Plutarch, is the editor of *Fontes* and obviously the driving force behind it. 'Dai cicli di uomini famosi alla biografia dipinta. Traduzioni latine delle *Vite* di Plutarco ed iconografia degli eroi nella pittura murale del Rinascimento' follows a long series of publications on Plutarch's influence on the visual arts of the Renaissance.⁷ It discusses a now lost series of paintings depicting the career of Caesar commissioned between 1505 and 1507 by Cardinal Fazio Santoro for his Roman palace; the accompanying *tituli* survive in a MS and are derived from Plutarch's *Life*. A second series of paintings there is dedicated to Trajan, whose deeds are reconstructed from a variety of sources. Though obviously Plutarch could not be used here, the *res gestae* illustrate the *mores* on the Plutarchean model, and there is a strongly implied parallelism and comparison between Caesar and Trajan, who is seen as a follower of Caesar's policies. This then is progress from the statue-like *uomini famosi* to a *biografia dipinta*, of various personages, an intermediate stage being *fatti de' Romani* or *degli antichi*. Evidently the choice of heroes was influenced by particular circumstances, e.g. a correspondence with the name of the commissioner of the pictures. The most impressive feature of all this is perhaps the wide diffusion of the concept of *uomini famosi* and of the influence which the biographies of Plutarch had on them.

Cecilia Filippini, 'Codici miniati del Plutarco latino' starts by considering three MSS, now in the British Museum, Verona and the Vatican. The choice of illustrations and attitude to the heroes reflect prevailing Republican sentiments: the Verona MS exhibits *iustus Brutus* and *Bruti unica imputatio* while in the Vatican MS Brutus resembles St George — we have come a long way since Dante placed Brutus and Cassius with Judas Iscariot. The Verona MS did not include the pair Alexander-Caesar, but on the other hand in a three-volume edition prepared for Domenico Novello Malatesta, ruler of Cesena and pupil of Guarino, Caesar appears with appropriate royal attributes. Other MSS discussed include one now at Bologna, a magnificently illuminated one in the Laurentiana and another beautiful Florentine one now in Modena. In the two generations between Plutarch's first arrival in Italy and the beginning of print, MSS of high artistic interest and value attest the popularity of the author.

Marilena Caciorgna,⁸ 'Temi plutarchei nella pittura del Quattrocento. Neroccio di Bartolomeo de' Landi e il Maestro di Stratonice', demonstrates how swiftly the first

⁷ His latest contribution is 'Dulci pro libertate. Taddeo di Bartolo: il ciclo di eroi antichi nel Palazzo Pubblico di Siena (1413-14). Tradizione classica ed iconografia politica', *RSI* 112 (2000), 510-68; a score — by no means all — of his earlier contributions to the subject are referred to in the bibliography.

⁸ Among other contributions of this author to related subjects see, e.g. 'Giovanni Antonio Campano tra filologia e pittura. Dalle *Vitae* di Plutarco alla biografia dipinta di Pio II', *Quaderni dell'Opera* 2 (1998), 87-138.

printing of the *Lives* in 1470 was reflected in painting. Among the earliest of these are two faces of a *cassone* by Neroccio de' Landi, now at Raleigh (North Carolina), depicting the famous encounter of Antony and Cleopatra at Tarsus and the battle of Actium. It is shown that the painter was inspired by Leonardi Bruni's Latin translation, as was Shakespeare at a later time by the rendition of Sir Thomas North (after Amyot). The two faces of another *cassone*, now in California, depict the well-known story of Antiochus and Stratonice. In all probability this story, retold in a number of ancient sources, is taken here from the version by Plutarch in the *Life of Demetrius*, the parallel to the *Life of Antony*, by the Master of Stratonice. Finally, Lisa Barbagli, 'I *Lupercalia* di Domenico Beccafumi tra Ovidio e Plutarco', traces the derivation of the painting, now in Florence (Palazzo Martelli) but originally part of a Siense cycle, from both ancient sources.

The second volume of *Fontes* (3-4, 1999) contains much less of relevance to Plutarch, though a number of contributions are of considerable interest for the *Nachleben* of other classical authors such as Ovid, Valerius Maximus and Apuleius. As is well known, Plutarch's fame in the Middle Ages rested mainly on the counterfeit *Institutio Traiani*. Gigliola Fiaschi, 'Plutarco: Il precettore "medievale" di Traiano. Nell'iconografia esemplare del Rinascimento', identifies Plutarch as the philosophical adviser and instructor in justice at Trajan's side in a number of fifteenth century pictures, thus demonstrating the influence of John of Salisbury's creation. Only little remains of Sodoma's decoration of the Palazzo Chigi in the Via del Casato di Sotto in Siena, and as Lisa Barbagli reminds us in 'Palazzo Chigi al Casato di Sotto. Strutture architettoniche e decorazioni', nothing at all of his cycle of the life of Caesar. However, an epigram belonging to it is extant, and Roberto Guerrini in 'Corpus Titulorum Senensium. *Flevit Caesar*. L'epigramma *In Zophoro* e le perdute *Storie di Cesare* (Sodoma. Palazzo Chigi al Casato di Sotto, Siena)' shows the influence of Plutarch's *Life* on both the Chigi decoration and, one may assume, the lost paintings by Sodoma.

Another recent publication inaugurating a new series provides a good appreciation of the relative weight of Plutarch in the classical tradition of the early modern period. *Intersections. Yearbook for Early Modern Studies* 1, 2001. *Recreating Ancient History. Episodes from the Greek and Roman Past in the Arts and Literatures of the early Modern Period*, edd. Karl Enenkel, Jan L. de Jong, Jeanine de Landtsheer with collaboration of Alicia Montoya, Leiden etc. (Brill), contains seventeen⁹ papers, of which four have Plutarch's *Nachleben* as their central focus,¹⁰ though he features prominently in one or two more and is referred to in other contributions as well.

Paul J. Smith, 'Montaigne, Plutarch and Historiography', deals with an author in whose *Essais* Plutarch (in Amyot's translation) is constantly present, the *Moralia* even more than the *Lives*. The centrepiece of the discussion is the *Défence de Sénèque et de Plutarque*: Plutarch is superior to Seneca, and as *tertium comparationis* Montaigne adduces Cicero, in his view inferior to both his authors. The defence is directed against

⁹ The cover says sixteen. It is perhaps not insignificant that sixteen of the contributions are in English, one in German.

¹⁰ The other subject to arouse similar interest, Justus Lipsius, is explained by the Low Countries provenance of the publication, the editors and most of the contributors.

Jean Bodin's charges that Plutarch writes about things 'incredible and entirely fabulous' and that he prefers the Greeks to the Romans in the *Parallel Lives*.

Bart Westerweel in 'Plutarch's *Lives* and *Coriolanus*: Shakespeare's View of Roman History', stresses the uniqueness of that drama, 'the only one of the history plays, English and Roman, whose protagonist is not the political leader of the state' (199), and throughout he follows T.S. Eliot in his high appreciation of that play. Shakespeare's move from English to Roman subjects signals his 'turning away from a type of history that was chronicle-oriented to plays that were more character-oriented' (195), and this is very much due to his source, since 'for the Roman plays the moral and dramatic patterns were already there in Plutarch' (196). The author also brings out successfully Shakespeare's use of, and reliance on, the text of North.

Far less familiar territory — at least for non-Dutch readers — and thus doubly welcome, is explored by Olga van Marion in 'The Reception of Plutarch in the Netherlands. Octavia and Cleopatra in the Heroic Epistles of J.B. Wellekens (1710)'. Significantly the exchanges of letters composed by that author derived from widely different sources and periods: David and Michal, Achilles and Polyxena, Balduinus Ferreus and Judith, the daughter of Charles the Bold. The pair that interests us is contrived in a more sophisticated manner otherwise unknown in this genre, so that the reply to the letter of Octavia to her husband Mark Anthony is sent by Cleopatra: the source is Plutarch, in a Dutch version based on Amyot.

Schiller the historian rather than the poet — certainly of special interest in the Netherlands, since his most significant historical work is *Geschichte des Abfalls der Vereinigten Niederlande von der spanischen Regierung* — is the subject of Sjaak Onderdelinden's paper, 'The Reception of Plutarch in Friedrich Schiller's Lectures on Solon's and Lycurgus's Legislation'. This is *Nachleben* 'in the best sense of the word: a construction built upon an example in a creative and constructive manner' (251), viz., a peg on which the author is able to hang his political views and ideals. In a sort of double biography and *synkrisis* of the two legislators — Plutarch may have been not only the source, but perhaps also an inspiration for this literary device — Schiller's Enlightenment optimism and idealism find full scope for expression.

Among other contributions, both Jan Bloemendal, 'Tyrant or Stoic Hero? Marc-Antoine Muret's *Julius Caesar*', and Alicia Montoya, 'Caesar the Father in Marie-Anne Barbier's *La mort de César*', treat plays for which Plutarch was the main source (for the latter again in the translation by Amyot), though the modern authors rather than the ancient one are at the centre of the discussion. In sum, it can hardly be devoid of a wider significance that Plutarch is by far the most discussed and cited ancient author in this attractively produced volume.

This survey is far from exhaustive (it ignores, *inter alia*, a great number of relevant papers scattered in a variety of journals), but it nevertheless allows for some general reflexions on *Nachleben* in general, and on that of Plutarch in particular. Departmentalisation, that is to say fragmentation of the humanities, is an evil often complained about, but rarely fought. If classical scholars are aware of the specific harm caused to their subject by its careful containment and quarantine, the remedy all too often applied — namely seeking 'relevance' or 'contemporary relevance' — may turn out to be more dangerous than the malady. Tearing down the artificial boundaries between the classical

world and its *Nachleben* — in other words, western civilisation — has nothing to do with the wish to be, or rather to seem, relevant, and is but a return to what earlier generations perceived as self-evident. Indeed, the very concept of *Nachleben* is proof of the severance between various parts of a single subject. Moreover, it is surprising that an age which gives reception and reception theory such high priority and worships the autonomous text should still confine the Classics to their narrowly defined territory. Not that *Nachleben* is neglected, but as a rule it is compartmentalised far from Classics proper. It is a sign of the departmentalisation of the Humanities that only comparatively few students of Plutarch seem to be aware of a similar interest in their author among students of the Renaissance and of Early Modern History, art historians and literary historians.

This leads us to a concluding consideration. In the present survey I have deliberately refrained from criticising the various contributions. It will be appreciated that a classicist would not have had difficulty finding fault with some of the classical learning exhibited by students from other disciplines, and no doubt similar faults could be found by, say, an art historian. However, we should be concerned with the larger question of specialisation versus wider horizons. Significantly not one of the contributions mentioned here was the result of the joint effort of a classical scholar and a representative of another discipline. Though such cooperation should not be deemed a universal remedy, it is difficult to see its absence as anything other than a sign of the discipline's continued barricading itself behind fortified walls with only occasional sorties into what is seen almost as enemy territory. Is it not time to build wider defences against the no doubt advancing enemies of Western Civilisation?

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem