

REVIEW

PLUTARCHAN VERSATILITY

Jan Opsomer, Geert Roskam, and Frances B. Titchener, edd., *A Versatile Gentleman: Consistency in Plutarch's Writing. Studies offered to Luc Van der Stockt on the Occasion of his Retirement*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016. Pp. 304. Hardback, €69.50. ISBN 978-94-6270-076-5.

The *Festschrift* dedicated to Luc Van der Stockt, Emeritus Professor at KU Leuven, on the occasion of his retirement, explores the seeming paradox between versatility and consistency in Plutarch's works. The terms are apt for Luc Van der Stockt's academic career of over thirty-five years, as much as for Plutarch himself. A scholar who has made an enormous contribution to the interpretation of all aspects of Plutarch's thought (including his views on literature and use of literary quotations, his philosophical erudition, and relationship to Roman power), Van der Stockt has produced especially ground-breaking work on the question of Plutarch's compositional methods. In the course of many important publications he has shown how Plutarch tends to rely on a fixed body of *hypomnemata* (personal notes and/or excerpts from his readings) for the composition of a tremendous variety of writings. He has thus significantly advanced our understanding of how Plutarch's *hypomnemata* serve as building-blocks of thought, opinion, or belief that bind together his varied oeuvre, even as the author can use them in extremely flexible ways, depending on his literary genre and topic. The volume's Introduction by Titchener (1–6) offers an overview of Van der Stockt's rich and productive career, its intellectual 'children' (in the form of publications, research projects, congresses, and supervised PhD theses), and its impact.

The sixteen contributions that comprise the volume, all by established scholars of Plutarch and close friends, colleagues, and former students of Van der Stockt, are organised into four sections, each focusing on versatility across different aspects of Plutarch's writing and thought: his philosophical arguments and positions (Section I: 'Plutarch's Versatile Philosophy'); his literary themes (Section II: 'Literary Versatility'); the biographical universe of the *Lives* (Section III: 'The Versatile World of the *Lives*'); and the complex tapestry of Plutarch's learning and intellectual influences (Section IV: 'A Versatile *Paideia*'). Versatility takes on many different meanings across the individual chapters: it can denote the variety of Plutarch's literary genres and discourses, the flexibility of his argumentative strategies, his selective use of quotations, or his ease in navigating different kinds of source-material. At the same time,

these overlapping senses lead to and seek to address what is a common interpretative problem when dealing with authors as prolific as Plutarch: should we expect their varied oeuvre to be consistent in terms of its aims or the views it expresses?

The first two chapters, by Dillon and Hirsch-Luipold, focus on the arguments that Plutarch utilises against the Stoics. Dillon discusses Plutarch's treatment of the Stoic concept of *apatheia*, observing that he appears to reject its technical sense in philosophical works such as his consolatory writings, while presenting its non-technical meaning of 'impassivity' in a positive light in his *Lives*. Although Dillon does not comment on the motives or intellectual aims that may underpin these differing stances, his observations draw attention to some key points of divergence between Plutarch's philosophical writings and his biographical oeuvre, which call for more systematic study.¹ Hirsch-Luipold's starting-point is also the seeming paradox between Plutarch's adoption or approval of Stoic philosophical positions in certain works and vehement rejection of Stoic philosophy in others. As he consistently shows, it is the Stoics' theological views that Plutarch particularly attacks, and this critical attitude emanates from his Platonism, which, as Hirsch-Luipold underlines (35–6), takes a religious turn from the first century AD onwards. Opsomer offers a detailed defence of the argumentative consistency of the 'hortatory-pedagogical' (40) dialogue *De sera numinis vindicta*. As he points out, the work's aim is to illustrate for readers already convinced about the presence of divine providence in the world that the punishments meted out by the gods are just and effective. It does so mainly by laying emphasis on the preventive, rather than retributive, aspect of punishment—even as there are lingering problems, such as the issue of wrongdoers who never get punished. In the concluding chapter of this section, Volpe Cacciatore offers an overview of Plutarch's conception of the soul, in the context of his Platonic dualism. As she remarks, the Platonic commentators' exegeses are often invaluable in deciphering the Platonic background to Plutarch's views, particularly when it comes to thorny questions such as the origin of the human soul, its essence, and function in works such as the *Platonicae quaestiones* or the *De animae procreatione in Timaeo* (65–7).

In the next section, Bowie's contribution examines Plutarch's quotations from the fifth-century BC melic poet Simonides of Ceos, which are found in their greatest concentration in the *Lives* that treat episodes of the Persian wars, as well as his treatise *De Herodoti malignitate*. As he shows, Plutarch is drawn to Simonides for reasons of style, as well as content: he appreciates the poet's versatility and poetic qualities, uses him as a historical source, and shares his critical attitude to powerful men. Brenk, next, takes a close look at flawed

¹ Cf. A. G. Nikolaidis, ed., *The Unity of Plutarch's Works: Moralia Themes in the Lives, Features of the Lives in the Moralia* (Millennium Studies 19; Berlin and New York, 2008).

characters in some of Plutarch's philosophical dialogues. 'Flawed' in his analysis signifies characters who are intellectually immature and who lack an in-depth understanding of philosophy. According to Brenk, characters like the young Plutarch in dialogues such as the *De E apud Delphos*, Plutarch's brother Lamprias in *De defectu oraculorum*, and Theon in *De Pythiae oraculis* present just such as portrait, as seen in their weak philosophical arguments, and thus invite the reader to share in the 'sense of irony' that pervades Plutarch's dialogues (91). Mossman discusses the haphazard structure of Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*, seeking unity in diversity by tracing the recurrence of references to the sympotic god Dionysus across the dialogues that comprise the work (see esp. her tables on 103–4). As she convincingly demonstrates, Dionysus is present throughout the work in his various functions as god of wine, disruptor of order, but also civiliser. These functions serve as metasymphotic references that link the work's disparate dialogues, by alluding to the different functions and effects of the symposium. Pelling explores the tragic colouring of Plutarch's works, through the lens of the theory of 'generic enrichment' (114–15)—in Harrison's formulation, the process whereby 'generically identifiable texts gain literary depth and texture from detailed confrontation with, and consequent inclusion of elements from, texts which appear to belong to other literary genres'.² Pelling examines the contexts in which the adjective *τραγικός* features in Plutarch's writings, and follows the metaphorical meanings that the term assumes: at times it evokes the sensational and overly sentimental, at other moments it denotes improbable outcomes (things which should not happen, but they do), and on other instances it signals impending disaster at the point when the hero is at the apogee of his pride and ostentation.

In the next section, a well-argued chapter by Beck examines the role of humour in Plutarch's *Lives*, with the *Life of Antony* serving as his key case-study. He rightly stresses that, as in Lucian's *Life of Demonax*, the use of serio-comic discourse in Plutarch's biographies has an intimate link with philosophy. But in Antony's *Life*, the recurrent evocations of images of slavery, together with many comic episodes that punctuate the narrative, suggest that a literary game akin to Bakhtin's notion of 'carnivalised literature'³ may also be in play (145–6). Beneker, next, offers an insightful interpretation of the *Lives of Demosthenes and Cicero*, in light of the emphasis the pair's prologue places on virtue as a quality of the individual (which should be evaluated independently from the community in which the individual acts) and self-knowledge as an attribute that protects the statesman from disastrous choices. In an extensive joint contribution, Roskam and Verdegem take a close look at digressions in Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus*. Tracking the distribution of digressions across the

² See S. J. Harrison, *Generic Enrichment in Vergil and Horace* (Oxford, 2007) 1.

³ See M. Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics*, transl. C. Emerson (Minneapolis, 1984) 61.

entire length of the *Life* (neatly presented in a table, 182–3), and offering a detailed examination of their narrative contexts, sources, and narrative functions, they show that digressions serve a variety of objectives within the *Life*: they can operate as ‘structural markers’ (186), as a form of ‘internal synkrisis’ (188), or, alternatively, as tools for suspending narrative time or rendering events more probable. Last but not least, they reinforce the unity of the pair *Alcibiades–Coriolanus*, in line with Plutarch’s broader pedagogical and philosophical aims. Stadter offers a neat conclusion to this very rich section, by exploring Plutarch’s often problematic integration of Latinisms into the *Lives*. Such linguistic shifts, here termed ‘code-switching’, are observed particularly when Plutarch seeks to exploit the connotations or symbolism of his Roman characters’ names (particularly their *cognomina*) for his own narrative ends. They also add edge to his biographical anecdotes and render crucial historical events (such as Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon) vivid for his readers.

The last section deals with Plutarch’s versatile *paideia*, through examples that showcase his flexible handling of literary, as well as visual sources in his works. Athanassaki offers an intriguing discussion of the famous story of the Athenian Marathon runner in the epideictic oration *De gloria Atheniensium* (347C–D). She adduces a rich set of literary, epigraphical, and archaeological evidence with a view to shedding light on the motives behind Plutarch’s identification of the runner with Eucles (rather than Philippides, or Pheidippides). As she argues, these motives may well have to do with Plutarch’s acquaintance with the father of Herodes Atticus, whose family sought to create links with the battle of Marathon through its distant relative Eucles. In addition, Plutarch’s report may be gesturing to the oration’s immediate visual context, namely, the Stoa Poikile in the agora of Athens, opposite which stood a statue of Eucles. Ingenkamp, next, offers a tongue-in-cheek discussion of the form and logic behind Plutarch’s polemical arguments in his philosophical treatises (such as the *De Herodoti malignitate*), as well as in the *Life of Demosthenes*. As he points out, Plutarch rightfully earns the nickname ‘malicious Plutarch’, when he lets his philosophical allegiance, personal feelings, but also sheer dislike for the politics of some of his characters lead him to excessively harsh criticisms. Leão takes a comparative look at Plutarch’s writings featuring the Athenian lawgiver and statesman Solon. He argues that, while Plutarch remains our most significant and reliable source concerning Solon’s laws, his personal comments and opinions on Solon and his legacy deserve equal attention. As he demonstrates, these reveal a consistent arsenal of arguments and criticism which shed valuable light on the reception of Solon and constitute an important contribution to the history of ancient legal thought. Textual scholarship could not be absent in a volume of this nature. Appropriately, its final section concludes with a contribution by Pérez-Jiménez, who offers critical remarks and textual corrections on Plutarch’s treatise *De facie* (944C).

All in all, this is a well-edited volume, which honours the career of Luc Van der Stockt by illustrating the impact of key research directions in Plutarch studies that he initiated, as well as by showing that they continue to have valuable potential. This is no small feat for a scholar.

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