

BOOK REVIEW

The Passionate Statesman: Erōs and Politics in Plutarch's Lives. By JEFFREY BENEKER. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 258. Hardcover, £55.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-969590-4.

In twenty-first-century politics, erotic passion is typically connected with scandalous stories of the private lives of well-known politicians. But when it comes to Plutarch's statesmen of the Graeco-Roman past, *erōs*, or erotic desire, does not always denigrate their moral character and political careers. In his stimulating and well-argued book, Beneker explores the interplay between passion and politics in the *Parallel Lives* on the basis of three biographical pairs, the *Alexander–Caesar*, *Demetrius–Antony*, and *Agésilas–Pompey*. These cases offer different perspectives in the way Plutarch represents *erōs*: sometimes it rewards the hero, at other times it destroys him; still, Plutarch's ethical message may be unified in his focus on self-control as the mean between sexual lavishness and total abstention.

The book comprises a short Introduction and five main Chapters. The lack of a separate conclusion is compensated for by the brief summaries Beneker gives towards the end of each Chapter; these work most effectively in reminding readers of the main premises and leading them securely in new interpretative directions. Furthermore, the lucidity in exposition and diligent analysis of relevant passages make the book easily accessible.

Beneker argues that Plutarch introduced the element of *erōs* in his biographies as a response to previous accounts that failed to interpret properly certain historical events. In creating thus his ethical biography, Plutarch attributed the public success of a hero to the control of his erotic impulses in his private life. This argumentative strand is not totally new—one need only refer to the pioneering work of Pelling and Swain, who have explained the heroes' uncontrollable emotions as resulting from their insufficient education. Beneker, however, casts light on the modulation not of any kind of passion (anger, ambition, envy), but of erotic desire in particular, and not on the causes of *pathos* but on its consequences.

In Chapter 1, Beneker explores the philosophical background to Plutarch's notion of *erōs*, by delving carefully into Platonic psychology (division of the soul) and Aristotelian ethics (concept of friendship, *philia*). In light of the *Amatorius*, Beneker suggests that an ideal marital relationship is the product of mutual love of both soul and body; and he then applies these theoretical views to the case studies of Brutus and Porcia and of Pericles and Aspasia. In describing the way that Ismenodora develops the character of younger Bacchon in the *Amatorius* (31–9) or how Pericles becomes an ethical model to the Athenians in rational response to passions (43–54), he rightly makes his case by employing the vocabulary of “piloting” and “government” of which Plutarch is so fond. I wonder whether Beneker here could have pondered moral guidance in Plutarch as an alternative form of power. That would make sense in light of Plutarch's role as a dedicated moralist, who differs from his contemporary sophistic setting which assesses power as political or social imposition. It would also fit Beneker's emphasis in the rest of the book, and especially his extensive discussion of Antony's relation to dominating women in Chapter 4 (173–94). In commenting on the influence that Fulvia and Cleopatra exercise over Antony and the relevant deterioration of the hero's character, Plutarch uses the intense language of power, e.g. *Ant.* 10.4–7: κρατεῖν, ἄρχειν, στρατηγεῖν, and most significantly γυναικοκρατία (female domination of men). Similar overtones occur with Demetrius' submission to Lamia (*Demetr.* 16.6) and Antony's manipulation by Curio (*Ant.* 2.4), all of them cases of ethical imposition.

In Chapter 2, Beneker establishes the term “historical-ethical reconstruction,” which refers to Plutarch's technique of transforming history through the lens of ethics. I particularly enjoyed the discussion of the precise meaning of παραλόγως in the proem to *Pelopidas–Marcellus* (2.8–9) (66–9), which not only encourages sensitivity in translation for modern readers, but also affirms Plutarch's sophisticated language and often ambiguous expression. In this Chapter, Beneker is insightful in associating Plutarch's system of characterization with larger philosophical contexts of human psychology. In at least two cases (84 and 101; cf. 176) he persuasively refers to Plutarch's depiction of “types” rather than of “individuals,” with particular allusions to Plato's descriptions of the timocratic or the tyrannical man from the *Republic*. Such distinctions not only improve upon the existing discussion of “character” and “personality” in Plutarch; they additionally offer new ways of evaluating the appropriation of Plutarch's Platonic material.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with how eroticism determines the course of a public career: Alexander and Caesar withstand erotic appetites for the benefit of their political and military objectives, but are later on undone by their *erōs* for glory. Demetrius and Antony succumb to carnal pleasures, so that *erōs* eventually brings on their catastrophe. Chapter 5 revisits the notion of self-restraint in Plutarch's ethics by welding together the four previous chapters. One of Beneker's contributions to the understanding of Plutarch's theory of passions is his analysis of the gradations of *sophrōsyne* in *Alexander*. That helps him to argue that Xenophon is an important, though less known, philosophical model for Plutarch's conception of erotic desire. With the examples of Agesilaus and Pompey, Beneker concludes that acting ethically shows a person's ability for a successful performance of his public duties.

I recommend Beneker's book as an excellent resource not just for scholars and students of Plutarch, but for anyone interested in Greek politics and ethics.

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