

BOOK REVIEW

Ethical Education in Plutarch. Moralising Agents and Contexts. By SOPHIA XENOPHONTOS. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017. Pp. ix + 266. Hardcover, \$140.00. ISBN 978311035036-4.

Ranging widely over the immense and bifurcated Plutarchan corpus of *Bioi* and *Moralia*, Xenophontos examines the “how” of Plutarchan moralizing. How does he embed and embody the principles of living better in the long-lasting education, formal and informal, of youngsters and adults in the two pedagogically distinct corpora? She calls this “a systematic investigation of the notion of moral education in Plutarch” (12). For example, Plutarch appears less aggressive in criticizing his protagonists than Herodotus (and presumably Thucydides) or Plato; Plutarch also observes character degeneration in many of his Lives, as power increases. The moralist concludes that achieving moral excellence is a lifelong exercise, one that Alcibiades never tried, and Demetrius, Sulla, Sertorius, Antony (e.g.) tired of—an uphill battle, at best.

Section 1.3 (really 0.3) and 7.7 outline the contents. First, Xenophontos considers Plutarch’s philosophical antecedents, especially Plato. A good nature does not suffice; virtuous nurture must complement it throughout life to shape and maintain admirable character. Aristotle inclined him to the idea that long-term habituation shapes one’s ethos. As he shifts betwixt protreptic philosopher and biographer, Plutarch veers (28) between mutability (e.g. improvement, *epanorthosis*) and immutability of character. Like Tacitus, Plutarch presents the emergence of a biographee’s true colors more as disclosure than change. Or perhaps, different audiences require different arguments. Many of the *Moralia*’s essays are directed at a younger demographic.

Then, Xenophontos turns to the education of children through mother’s speech and silence and through father’s modeling. Some primitive child psychology engages his moralizing program, but he rarely distinguishes Roman from Greek realities (58n.63). Mothering in Plutarch’s oeuvres is subordinated to paternal influence, both prescriptive and descriptive divisions; the widow Volumnia, mother of “submissive” Coriolanus, is exceptionally significant, but Coriolanus’ fatherlessness forced her hand (61-7).

Chapter 3 explores two teachers in action, Socrates and Plato, Plutarch's predecessors in the inculcation of moral excellence. Plutarch, although a Platonist, in two essays ("metatextually interwoven") defends the use of poetry with the young and of lectures with the adolescent. His biographies endorse emulation of certain paragons. Do the teachers succeed in Alcibiades and Dion? In a word, no. Admittedly, the students Alcibiades, Dion, and Dionysios posed peculiar, even threatening, problems to their pedagogues (e.g. Alc. 7.1). In general, however, Plutarch's references to teachers in the Lives are few and surprisingly unimpressive (107).

Chapters 4 through 7 concern the acculturation of adults, a process requiring more self-analytical capacity. Women here also teach, e.g. Fulvia and Cleopatra, but only in crisis situations with a morally obtuse student, but their examples in the Lives discourage emulation: "wives in the Lives" instruct more in vice than virtue (19, 123–5).

Despite his generous interpreter's sympathy for *Moralia*, Plutarch's exposition of women's roles does strike readers today as dull, sententious, condescending, and patriarchal (118). His advice on marriage ignores Platonic and Stoic suggestions of equality and endorses a near invisibility for wives with their cognitive infirmities—Porcia providing a striking exception (Brut. 23). His admonitory tone for women erases agency beyond choosing silence, modesty, and obedience (113). Even the best women are but models, not philosophical instructors. A recommended lifelong apprenticeship for intelligent wives restricts, when it does not abort, untoward ideas, plans, and emotion (Con. *praec* 145D-E).

Chapter 5 focuses on the statesman, how he is to be educated and then educate others—again a lifelong process. Xenophontos scants the Lives for elucidation of the *Moralia*, but including both corpora marks progress. She might develop her provocative point that Plutarch distorts the historicity—"reshaping the sources"—of the *Bioi* to point his moral exempla. Plutarchan biography entertains as it instructs, honeys the bitter pedagogical pill (*Quaest. Conv.* 614A-B). "History acquires a didactic role," as announced in the programmatic *Aem.* 1. She finds more contemporary relevance than others will to Plutarch's epoch in his episodes and quotations (e.g. Homeric tags or *philotimia*). How to acquire and exercise political power was not the problem that most of Plutarch's readers faced in his time, or later. Trajan, when anxious about senators or Parthians, was unlikely to ask "What would Plutarch do?" Despite references to contemporary contexts, political tensions and historical events rarely find mention. Imitation of the ancestors (Kimon, Epaminondas, Alexander?) was not practical for Hellenes in Domitian's realm (cf. 148).

Xenophontos' sixth chapter engages military leadership. As with political activity, given the Roman boot pressing on the Hellenic head (*Praec. Ger.* 813E, quoted), Plutarch stresses ethical decisions, not calls to action or revolution. Aemilius Paullus' Hellenic *paideia* exalts him, as Timoleon's lack of that philosophical training hobbles him in comparison (161; more of such comparisons would be welcome, e.g., *Phokion* and *Cato*). The final chapter 7 discusses the sometimes tedious *Symposiasts' Problems*, specifically "the symposium as educational space."

Plutarch's interest in educational settings reinforces his emphasis on the practical life, the ethical attitudes necessary for success in towns like Khaironeia. Xenophontos believes that this focus releases him from "the dull, conservative moralist we used to think of" (20). These essays allow him to present himself as tactfully dominating dialogic investigations (187), to promote himself as "an experimental moralist" (196).

An impressive bibliography, and indexes of names, topics, and passages noticed in Plutarch and other authors end the volume, one that in its excessive signposting sometimes betrays its origin as a dissertation (Oxford 2011). Moralism in prose authors from Herodotus to Diodorus is a topic attracting increased scrutiny, not least the granular study of disapproved behaviors.¹ Plutarch marks a significant, Imperial intersection of theory and practice, philosophy and history/ biography, Greeks and Romans. Xenophontos demonstrates that Plutarch was one of the "philosophic amalgamator[s] of the two cultures" in an age of cultural anxieties (172).

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¹ In the footsteps of K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1974, 2nd ed. Indianapolis / Cambridge 1994; R. K. Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens*. Princeton 2001; M. Christ, *The Bad Citizen in Classical Athens*, Cambridge 2006; E. Occhipinti, *The Hellenica Oxyrhynchia and Historiography: New Research Perspectives*. Leiden/ Boston 2016; L. I. Hau, *Moral History from Herodotus to Diodorus*. Edinburgh 2016.