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BOOK REVIEW

Plutarch's Pragmatic Biographies: Lessons for Statesmen and Generals in the Parallel Lives, by SUSAN G. JACOBS. Amsterdam, NL and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018. Pp. xvi + 471. Paperback, $138.00. ISBN: 978-9004276604

Jacobs surveys the vast breadth of Plutarch's fifty *Lives* and explores them with the aid of about six of the seventy-eight *Moral Essays*. Her thesis argues that the Chaeronean portraitist wishes "to provide pragmatic advice in how to handle specific practical challenges" (1). She rejects the current consensus that perceives his purpose in a vaguer promotion of core values in young men and philosophical moral improvement. Instead, she advances a non-refutable claim that he desired to assist Greek men publicly active in limited provincial politics, city services and military affairs. The "programmatic prologues" of his pairs (*Per-Fab, Aem-Tim, Dtr-Ant, Nic-Cras, Alex-Caes*) promise moral lessons of a sort that never materializes (3). But the ideological product seems the better for modern sensibilities that prefer characters mixed in moral faults and achievements to unvarying paragons of virtue (or even vice). In Chapter 3, Jacobs points out that the concluding *synkriseis* can offer more on statesmanship and military skills than on their subjects' moral qualities. Philosophers may delineate the good man, but by writing his *Lives* Plutarch the accommodationist serves imperial and leisured but career-uncertain Academy post-graduates. His new kind of biography hopes to guide good men in the real-world practicalities of messy politics and in serving their communities, not only themselves or abstract precepts (7, e.g., *Cato Min.*). What is good for Socrates may not benefit his polis, Athens. Jacobs terms this approach to the "realities of exercising authority in the Roman Empire" "pragmatic biography." She deems Sosius Senecio, the dedicatee of many *Treatises* and *Lives*, to be the ideal intended student-reader rather than a high-profile endorser. Descriptive moralism drenches the *Moralia* and the *Lives*, but may not be the goal of the latter.

The book has three stages. The first ranges widely in Plutarch's intellectual training and published views. The second examines six *Lives* for pragmatic lessons and advice for managing large armies, alliances and dealing with rivals. One may ask *cui bono*? and to what practical end under the iron rods of Rome (cf. *Mor.* 813E-

F)? The third stage examines six other *Lives* on the specific issue of ruling and being ruled—different lessons for Emperors and provincial Roman governors on the one hand, and on the other for local city leaders sub-serving under Roman authority and trying "to keep Rome at bay" (10). Each pair of *Lives* spotlights "a different set of challenges" (430).

Most *Lives* sketch statesmen and scoundrels active long before the advent of the Emperors. Success and failure often appear irrelevant to morality (19), but not to critical judgment. Philosophers gain mention but with underwhelming effect (e.g., Socrates' influence on Alcibiades). Jacobs usefully compares contemporary advice literature, such as Seneca's essays and Dio's orations.

Jacobs insists that the political and military challenges that faced nabobs--such as Pericles, Alexander, Scipio, and Antony--are parallel and relevant to the challenges facing minor or even high-up functionaries and near nobodies of the High Empire. His friend, patron and frequent dedicatee, Sosius Senecio, twice consul under Trajan, was important, but his friend Polycrates of Sicyon (dedicatee of the *Aratus*) was nearly invisible. Elite Greekling Plutarch himself offers a puzzling *apologia pro vita et vico suo* for having remained in his humble hometown, Chaeronea (*Dem.* 1-2). Syrian, Hispanic and Egyptian city and provincial administrators ("political" careers open to his contemporaries) had little to learn from the legendary careers of Lycurgus or Numa, or the disastrous campaigns of Nicias or Crassus. The leisured slave-owners reading Plutarch in Balkan, Ionic and western Hellas lived not from imperial revenues, but from agricultural and cultural heritage revenues, recalling the half-millennium-old glories of their yore. In typical comparisons, Plutarch's chosen Hellene bests the Roman (e.g., *Phocion-Cato, Agesilaus-Pompey*), which is not irrelevant given his majority-Greek readership.

Chapter 2 surveys Latin "pragmatic literature" from Cicero through Seneca (instructing the refractory Nero) and beyond, including Pliny and Suetonius as well as Greek authorities such as Polybius and Dio. Multi-tasking Plutarch repeats examples in his essays employed in his biographies to illustrate central precepts for success in the public arena (49). Political necessity sometimes jostles aside virtuous choices. Authors encrypted advice for officials of the Imperial Age in essays that distorted (Jacobs writes "depicted") the careers of historical figures to teach lessons (54 n.53, notably evident in Chapter 6, e.g., 255). Pericles, Phocion, Epaminondas (*Life* lost) and Cato Maior provide favored paradigms (69 n.122). Governing Rome's Greek political entities while minimizing Roman interference constitutes a principal task of Plutarch's entire oeuvre (71). Since Trajan might veto even a fire department, because such organizations have caused the emperor headaches (Plin. *Ep.* 10.34), one could not be too careful in one's patronage and favors (*Pol. Praec.* 813E).

Agesilaus and Pompey exemplify destructive ambition (a Plutarchan obsession) and suffer catastrophic defeats. Jacobs' "paradigm of pragmatic biography" (229) explains Plutarch's inclusion and exclusion of their data as a result of his shoehorning them into certain pigeon-holes developed in *Political Precepts* (*Mor.* 798A ff., an already privileged earlier text). One box is labeled *dysôpia,* here puzzlingly translated "compliance." Spartan Agesilaus is an odd choice for a commander paradigm (*Mor.* 85a), given the many faults he also exemplifies in war and peace as well as his royal status in a peculiar polity. The pair, having mentored superior generals, slid from success to repeated failures, outmaneuvered at home and abroad. Jacobs strives to find suitable parallels to contemporary situations facing Roman imperial magistrates and generals. Plutarch never specifies actual comparables (e.g., 243, 248), even justifying Agesilaus' unprecedented executions of Spartiates without trial (*Ages.* 32.4-5). Both men receive more censure than praise, in part, Jacobs argues, because of Plutarch's carefully crafted embellishment of cherry-picked incidents that illustrate their flaws and his selected "specific [deterrent] lessons" (249, 266). But one man's praise will be highlighted by his counterpart's blame (421). As a result, departures from historical "accuracy" (her quotes) should be "recognized as an unavoidable consequence of Plutarch's project and method of pairing *Lives*" (429).

Plutarch's *Life of Themistocles, a fortiori* the pair *Phocion-Cato Minor,* provides, however, little useful direction for young Hellenes seeking posts under no-nonsense Nerva. Jacobs' "road-maps" (79) and "contemporary resonance[s]" (89, 367) seem smudged by the passing of centuries and the replacement of manpower-poor Sparta by the populous Mediterranean colossus, Rome. Chapter 9 claims that the careers of haughty if not unbending Phocion and Cato in the "shipwrecked" (*Phoc.* 1.1) twilight of their popular governments "paralleled those confronted by Plutarch's readers" (367). Their adherence to principal proved ineffective and injurious to their states (370), because they did not balance integrity against expedient compromise,[1] they did not mediate between hegemons above and crowds below to benefit their compromised communities. Despite noble behavior working in corrupt and depraved environments, this pair serves the professor as deterrent models, fruits out of season (*Phoc.*3.1-2), philosophers mired in foul company, as Cicero noted of Cato more than once.[2] Both admirable men make serious political mistakes, in both their harsh manners and rejection of posts, leaving a legacy of more harm than good (402). The epigraph for their syzygy might read "How to be a Political Failure." No Socrates for ruler in Plutarch's republic. It seems *a priori* unlikely that Caesar's modes of outsmarting Pompey will assist Plutarch's post-political imperial contemporaries (266, 417).

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[1] Translating *phronimôtaton* as "best practical judgment" (*Phoc.* 8.2, p. 379) seems tendentious and contrary to Jacobs' argument. Likewise, *neôteristai,* bleached out here as "innovators," were Phocion's revolutionaries (385).

The 470 page monograph, originally a Columbia University dissertation, could be shorter. Jacobs sometimes reviews material that none would question. She shows prodigious reading in Plutarchan studies and generously cites her intellectual mentors, among them, not least and not surprisingly, Philip Stadter, Christopher Pelling, Joseph Geiger and Tim Duff. Jacobs' suggestion for a different lens by which to read the *Lives* assists in explaining certain thorny issues of Plutarch's pairing and emphasis on unexpected but illuminating incidents. Thus, she enriches Classicists' reading of a perennial favorite.

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[2] Zadorojnyi, A. V. 2007. "Cato's Suicide in Plutarch," *CQ* 57: 216-230 presents a much less flattering view of Cato's ostentatious suicide. Plutarch found himself uncomfortable with Cato's self-proclaimed self-presentation as a role model (e.g., *Cato* 9.2, 12.4, 38.3, etc.).