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## Review of Sophia Xenophontos and Katerina Oikonomopoulou: *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch*

Brill (Leiden 2019) (= Brill's Companions  
to Classical Reception 20), 693 pages, 2 figures.  
ISBN: 978-90-04-28040-3, € 198

Anyone considering the reception of Plutarch will presumably be initially reminded of Shakespeare's Roman Plays, or Montaigne's Essais, or Cavafy's famous poem The God leaving Antony, and will thus immediately understand that a Companion to the Reception of Plutarch cannot but be a big book on an important topic. And indeed, with its nearly 700 pages, the Brill volume is both laudably ambitious and a bit daunting for a single reviewer who can hardly be an expert in all the fields covered. This review tries to provide an opinion from the point of view of a Classicist with an interest in Plutarch,

who is not versed in all of the many facets of Plutarch's reception in their specific cultural and historical contexts.

To begin with a blanket judgment: This book is certainly worth the attention of anyone interested in Plutarch whose reception is a fascinating topic, as many of the contributors bring out in often excellent and well-informed chapters. That said, some doubts could be raised as to the editorial approach of the project. I will address these while also providing an overview according to the sections of the book. The length of this review obviously does not allow for in-depth assessment of all individual

chapters; suffice it to say that on the whole all chapters are informative. Some are more accomplished and address complex issues insightfully while others veer more towards the enumeration of instances without providing any compelling analysis.

The volume is divided into five subsections (totalling 37 chapters) which treat the reception of Plutarch in the following periods: Antiquity (1: The Early Fame), 2: Late Antiquity and Byzantium, 3: Other Medieval Cultures, 4: Renaissance, and 5: Enlightenment and the Modern Age.

The editors provide a rather brief introduction (6 pages) which gives a perfunctory nod to reception theory and lists some examples of the 'uses' of Plutarch's works throughout history, before giving a run-through of all following chapters. This is something of a missed opportunity; more deeply probing questions could and perhaps should have been asked, such as: What exactly should we consider the 'uses' or indeed 'reception' of Plutarch to be? As noted, the editors gesture towards an answer by invoking the works of Hardwick and Stray in the footnotes (6–7) and mentioning 'a dynamic process of engagement with Plutarch's oeuvre and thought, one that calls attention not just to the circulation and variant interpretations of Plutarch's works themselves in later times, but also to the new literary genres and intellectual traditions that Plutarch inspired

and which claimed him as their forebear.' (6) All the same, there is no real reflection on what this means: In what ways is a Renaissance translation different in cultural significance from a stray mention of Plutarch in a late antique commentary on Plato, or how does Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra relate to the near-identification with the authorial persona of Plutarch which Montaigne evokes in his essays? Is all of this plain 'reception' or should we perhaps differentiate between more passive forms versus more dynamic forms of 'creative' reception? In other words, what binds these forms of reception together, apart from the figure of the author Plutarch, or what makes them different from each other, or even unique? And, even more interesting: What can they reveal about Plutarch and his works, according to the theoretical principle that the ancient work not only influences the later reception, but vice versa as well, the reception necessarily influences our reading of the ancient work, too? A little more reflection and the drawing of some thematic outlines would have been welcome; this is now left almost entirely to the reader (the only chapter explicitly raising this last issue is the last one by Almagor, on Plutarch in modern Hebrew literature.)

The first part of the volume demonstrates how exceptional Plutarch's fame was already in antiquity, discussing the references to his works in close contemporaries such as Gellius and Apuleius

(ch. 2, Oikonomopoulou) and the dissemination of his works on papyrus datable close to his own lifetime (ch. 5 Schmidt). What becomes clear from this section is that Plutarch is not only a by-word for mild sagacity and polymathy, but also an exceptional author in the sense that his own multiple interests (in biography on the one hand and in a platonically infused philosophical approach to ethics, religion, and the natural world on the other) sparked a multitude of receptions across various genres.

Part 2 and 3 together make up almost half of the book, which means that the focus is very much on the Medieval, and of course particularly Byzantine, reception of Plutarch. The editors acknowledge this in their introduction and point out that this is an area that so far has not been sufficiently covered in scholarship (5), a fact for which they wish to make up by dedicating no less than 15 chapters to the Byzantine reception of the Sage from Chaeronea. As noted at the outset of this review, the Byzantine era is not the first to come to mind when considering the reception of Plutarch, and thus it is indeed a welcome addition to existing scholarship. However, the heavy focus is the symptom of an unbalance throughout the book. Nobody will deny the importance of Michael Psellos for Byzantine letters, but to devote two separate lengthy chapters to him (Delli, *The Reception of Plutarch in Michael Psellos' Philosophical, Theological and Rhetorical Works: An Elec-*

*tive Affinity*, 12 and Reinsch, *Plutarch in Michael Psellos' Chronographia*, 13) while e.g. all of the Spanish literary reception of Plutarch (1200 to present) receives one single brief chapter (Pérez Jiménez, *Plutarch's Fortune in Spain*, 36) does strike this reviewer as somewhat strange, even if the chapters mentioned are interesting and informative in themselves. A further example of such unbalance is even formulated explicitly in chapter 9 (Roskam: *On Donkeys, Weasels and New-Born Babies, or What Damaskios Learned from Plutarch*): 'Plutarch was of minor importance for a correct understanding of Damaskios' philosophy.' (p. 168). Indeed, as the author admits, it seems that Plutarch is mainly important in connection with this head of the faltering Neo-Platonic Academy in Athens in the 5th century AD because he was 'part and parcel of the venerable pagan tradition that was menaced in Damaskios' day.' (p. 168). Doubtless, but does that mean that Damaskios merits a chapter in a *Companion to the Reception of Plutarch*, while so many other authors who engage much more deeply with Plutarch are being only superficially addressed, or not at all? These quibbles apart, there is much to be learned from many of these chapters, and it is especially to be praised that all of them provide the reader with some background on their author or period.

The two chapters (part 3) on Plutarch's reception in 'other' Medieval

traditions provide an overview of Syriac and Arabic translations of (para-) Plutarchan writings. These chapters are both somewhat narrow in their approach to issues of translation, explaining which choices were made to adapt Plutarch to a Syriac Christian or an early Islamic context (e.g. by leaving out all mentions of the pagan gods or fate). They thus offer a starting point for anyone interested in the topic, but not much more than that. It is a missed chance that the tantalising and important subject of para- and pseudo-Plutarchan writings, mentioned in chapter 22 (Das and Koetschet), is not explored thoroughly, but only receives piecemeal treatment in individual chapters.

Part 4, the Renaissance covers a rather broad field historically and culturally. It starts with the transmission of Plutarch's works by Byzantine scholars to the Latin West ca. 1400, with excellent chapters on Leonardo Bruni (ch. 23 Pade) and Poliziano (ch. 24, Stok). Next, it turns to Amyot's French translation of the *Lives* (ch. 25 Frazier and Guerrier), North's English one (ch. 26, Lucchesi) and then backtracks again to Humanist Latin translations of the *Moralia* (ch. 27, Becchi). Here inevitably some of the same ground as in chapters 23 and 24 is covered and it contains page-long enumerations of which Plutarchan works were translated under which titles by which humanists; information that is then repeated in a lengthy table at the end. One gets the feeling that the

table alone would have done the job nicely. The section ends with chapters on Montaigne and Shakespeare (ch. 28, Edelman; ch. 29, Dimitrova) which, like the ones on Bruni and Poliziano (and some others), stand out by their ability to provide a general introduction to their theme while also adding a specific insight or approach to their topic; a quality the enumerative approaches of some other chapters are lacking.

The final section starts with fine assessments of Plutarch reception during the French Enlightenment (ch. 30, Manzini), by Goethe (ch. 31, Bishop), and by Greek enlightenment thinker Adamantios Koraes (ch. 32, Xenophontos). An intriguing paradox, though not one very thoroughly elaborated on, is that Plutarch, while being the champion of (enlightened) monarchy, became the hero of the French revolutionaries who adored his Brutus and Dion, when what in fact was happening in their own times eventually turned out to be more akin to the spirit of the *Lives* of Alexander and Caesar. With chapters on the Victorians (ch. 33, Hurst), Cavafy (ch. 34, Ricks), Emerson and others (ch. 35, Klotz), the Fortune of Plutarch in Spain (ch. 36, Pérez Jiménez) and Plutarch in modern Hebrew literature (ch. 37, Almagor), the rest of the section becomes something of a mixed bag, although what shines through in practically all these chapters is the predominance of the *Lives* over the *Moralia* (a decided change from where the focus

lay in late antiquity and early Christianity).

As this overview shows, the overall choice of the editors has been to treat the reception of Plutarch either in single authors and their works (e.g. ch. 16, Simpson on Niketas Choniates), or in a historical period (e.g. ch. 33 Plutarch and the Victorians). This approach is not carried out in a strictly chronological order, as the editors acknowledge (p. 6), but allows for chronological overlap or even backtracking, and for thematic approaches within the individual chapters covering an 'era'. Questions of what constitutes such an 'era' apart (another under-theorised aspect of the volume), in some ways this approach works quite well. After reading all chapters on the Byzantine authors, one has a reasonably complete idea of the ways in which Plutarch was appropriated as a morally enlightened pagan forerunner of Christian ethics and theological issues, admired as an exemplarily mild and moral chronicler of the Lives of great men, and avidly mined as a general repository of prestigious knowledge about all things ancient by the Byzantine intellectuals.

Moreover, reading all chapters one after the other (although surely not the way in which the book is going to be read) also gives the pleasant sense of considering a good part of Western-European cultural history along the lines of the reception of Plutarch's works. However, at times the backtracking gets repetitive, and sometimes the thematic

approaches really call out for a broader, more focused treatment. Several times, for instance, the feminist interest in Plutarch turns up (e.g. ch. 30, Manzini: Plutarch from Voltaire to Stendhal; ch. 35 Klotz, Plutarch in American Literature: Emerson and Other Authors), but the references, though tantalising, are too brief to provide the reader with a clear idea of this intriguing strand in Plutarch reception. Something similar applies, as noted above, to the important theme of pseudo-Plutarchan writings. All in all, despite its many fascinating and high quality contributions, the volume lacks a more solid theoretical base. A more elaborate introduction to the volume or an epilogue, drawing thematic strands together, pointing out parallels, contradictions, and paradoxes, highlighting focal points and remarkable blank spaces in the reception of Plutarch, would have been welcome.

## Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Figures

Table of Latin Abbreviations of Titles  
of Plutarch's *Moralia* with English  
Translation

Notes on Editors and Contributors

Note to the Reader

Introduction

Katerina Oikonomopoulou and  
Sophia Xenophontos

**part 1: The Early Fame**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Plutarch in Macrobius and Athenaeus<br/>Maria Vamvouri Ruffy</p> <p>2 Plutarch in Gellius and Apuleius<br/>Katerina Oikonomopoulou</p> <p>3 Plutarch's Reception in Imperial<br/>Graeco-Roman Philosophy<br/>Mauro Bonazzi</p> <p>4 Plutarch and Atticism: Herodian,<br/>Phrynichus, Philostratus<br/>Katarzyna Jażdżewska</p> <p>5 Plutarch and the Papyrological<br/>Evidence<br/>Thomas Schmidt</p> | <p>10 Plutarch in Stobaeus<br/>Michele Curnis</p> <p>11 The Reception of Plutarch in<br/>Constantinople in the Ninth and<br/>Tenth Centuries<br/>András Németh</p> <p>12 The Reception of Plutarch in Michael<br/>Psellos' Philosophical, Theological<br/>and Rhetorical Works: an Elective<br/>Affinity<br/>Eudoxia Delli</p> <p>13 Plutarch in Michael Psellos'<br/>Chronographia<br/>Diether Roderich Reinsch</p> <p>14 Plutarch and Zonaras: from<br/>Biography to a Chronicle with<br/>a Political Leaning<br/>Theofili Kampianaki</p> |
| <b>part 2: Late Antiquity and Byzantium</b>   |   |
| <p>6 Plutarch and Early Christian<br/>Theologians<br/>Arkadiy Avdokhin</p> <p>7 Plutarch in Christian Apologetics<br/>(Eusebius, Cyril, Theodoretus)<br/>Sébastien Morlet</p> <p>8 Plutarch and the Neoplatonists:<br/>Porphyry, Proclus, Simplicius<br/>Elsa Giovanna Simonetti</p> <p>9 On Donkeys, Weasels and New-Born<br/>Babies, or What Damascius Learned<br/>from Plutarch<br/>Geert Roskam</p>     | <p>15 Plutarch in Twelfth-Century Learned<br/>Culture<br/>Michael Grünbart</p> <p>16 Precepts, Paradigms and Evaluations:<br/>Niketas Choniates' Use of Plutarch<br/>Alicia Simpson</p> <p>17 Maximos Planoudes and the<br/>Transmission of Plutarch's Moralia<br/>Inmaculada Pérez Martín</p> <p>18 Plutarch and Theodore Metochites<br/>Sophia Xenophontos</p>  |



- 19 Plutarch's Reception in the Work of Nikephoros Xanthopoulos  
Stephanos Efthymiadis
- 20 Plutarch and Late Byzantine Intellectuals (c. 1350–1460)  
Florin Leonte
- part 3: Other Medieval Cultures**
- 21 Plutarch in the Syriac Tradition: a Preliminary Overview  
Alberto Rigolio
- 22 Para-Plutarchan Traditions in the Medieval Islamic World  
Aileen Das and Pauline Koetschet
- part 4: Renaissance**
- 23 Leonardo Bruni and Plutarch  
Marianne Pade
- 24 Plutarch and Poliziano  
Fabio Stok
- 25 Plutarch's French Translation by Amyot  
Françoise Frazier and Olivier Guerrier
- 26 The First Editions of Plutarch's Works, and the Translation by Thomas North  
Michele Lucchesi
- 27 Humanist Latin Translations of the Moralia  
Francesco Becchi
- 28 Plutarch and Montaigne  
Christopher Edelman
- 29 Taking Centre Stage: Plutarch and Shakespeare  
Mirvana Dimitrova
- part 5: Enlightenment and the Modern Age**
- 30 Plutarch from Voltaire to Stendhal  
Francesco Manzini
- 31 Plutarch and Goethe  
Paul Bishop
- 32 Plutarch and Adamantios Koraes  
Sophia Xenophontos
- 33 Plutarch and the Victorians  
Isobel Hurst
- 34 Plutarch and Cavafy  
David Ricks
- 35 Plutarch in American Literature: Emerson and Other Authors  
Frieda Klotz
- 36 Plutarch's Fortune in Spain  
Aurelio Pérez Jiménez

37 A Sage and a Kibbutznik: Plutarch  
in Modern Hebrew Literature and  
Culture

Eran Almagor

Index Rerum et Nominum

Index Locorum

Preview of the book at: <https://brill.com/view/title/26685>; table of contents listed below.

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