

Plutarch wrote the *Parallel Lives* in the beginning of the 2nd century AD as a set of biographies meant to be read by prominent Roman and Grecian statesmen of the time. These biographies covered the major Greek and Roman historical figures, and were written in pairs, one Greek and one Roman whose lives Plutarch saw as parallel. Plutarch's intention was that these biographies would act as a mirror – that in reading the lives of others, his readers might see part of themselves in a particular character. Then, by viewing the outcomes of a character's actions or personality, Plutarch's readers could rationally evaluate their own actions and traits with some idea of the consequences. For this purpose, it was important that Plutarch was writing about real men to whom Plutarch's audience could relate. Rather than just being told about the ideal consequences or outcome of ideal behaviors, biography allowed Plutarch to bring his readers much closer to real observation. Still, this does not mean that Plutarch kept strictly to historical fact, nor does it mean he didn't shape his subjects' lives to suit his purpose. His main goal was to show character and its connection to the rest of a person's life and not to simply write history. These priorities are revealed in the lives of Lycurgus and Solon through the use of stories and anecdotes of questionable historic accuracy, and the inclusion or exclusion of information in order to portray a character that fit Plutarch's design. In reading Plutarch for historical reasons, one must keep Plutarch's purpose in mind. The story and interpretation must be set aside as simply that, but the society and political ideas and systems of early Athens and Sparta are portrayed, and this is valuable to a reader of history.

In *Lycurgus* and *Solon*, much of the text is stories, which serve well to illustrate the individual character and personality of each man, but may have had more value as parables than history. Many of these stories were likely passed on orally from generation to generation. Thus at the time Plutarch knew them, hundreds of years later, they probably could not have been considered historically accurate. Yet Plutarch not only

includes these stories, he comments on them and interprets how each story shows some aspect of his subject's character. For example, he does not simply tell the story of Lycurgus' eye, he uses it to comment on Lycurgus character. Plutarch describes Lycurgus as "uniquely gentle and even tempered," with his "self-possession and high-mindedness, his ascetic lifestyle, and his inexhaustible capacity for hard work" (Plut., *Lycurgus* 11). In this way, Plutarch creates a character that fits well with the Lycurgan reforms. In *Solon*, the story of Croesus is included to build Solon's character as a philosopher, and in this case Plutarch even admits that many people think the story is untrue. Plutarch, however, felt that since it was "so much in keeping with Solon's character and worthy of self-assurance" (Plut., *Solon* 27), he must not reject the story. He proceeds to tell the story of Solon's meeting with Croesus and indeed it does portray Solon as a wise and honest man. Many other stories are similarly used to indicate the personalities of Solon or Lycurgus. The story of Lycurgus making sure the rightful heir to the throne would be born attested to his righteousness. The stories about Solon's capture of Salamis show his leadership qualities and clever thinking, and the stories of Solon's interactions with other sages and philosophers of the time establish Solon as a philosopher himself. In using stories such as these, especially the Croesus story which is likely untrue, Plutarch reveals that he is not concerned with relating the exact history of Solon or Lycurgus, but with creating character. It doesn't really matter whether either story of Salamis' capture is right or not, and Plutarch includes both of them. The importance is that they serve to fill in the character of Solon.

As well as using stories to create his subject's character, Plutarch also excludes or discredits stories which do not fit his design. The *krypteia*, an institution where young Spartans were sent out with daggers to kill promising helots, is something Plutarch claims was not part of Lycurgus' reforms. He states, "I myself would be reluctant to attribute to Lycurgus a disgusting institution like the *krypteia*. I base this judgment of his character on his equitability and fairness in other respects" (Plut., *Lycurgus* 28). Plutarch "selects only those elements which fit his purpose" (Stadter (1998) p. 7), Stadter says, for Xenophon's account of the Spartans includes much more about the military, but Plutarch does not include this information.

It is important to Plutarch that the stories he includes create a character that is consistent with their history and politics. If Plutarch can argue that a certain battle or piece of legislation rationally follows from a person's character, then the biography has more value as a philosophical mirror. Talking about a law of Solon's, Plutarch writes, "there is a saying of Solon's that has come down to us which is consistent with this piece of legislation" (Plut., *Solon* 18) and then gives the saying. This saying of Solon's was probably not related to the law, but Plutarch makes the connection between them to show a similarity between character and political action.

In some cases, Plutarch fits his subject's character to political actions, but in others, he fits the political actions to the character. Plutarch attributes a great number of laws and political changes to Solon and Lycurgus which may be more accurately seen as changes made by many men over a longer time period. Solon, at least, is seen as a real historical figure but there is no information in writings, such as his poems, which gives detail of the laws. For this, Plutarch had to go to the written record of the laws himself, perhaps the ones inscribed in wooden tablets, fragments of which Plutarch says "have survived right up to modern times in the City Hall" (Plut., *Solon* 25). Yet it is not certain whether Plutarch would have been able to know with certainty that Solon actually was responsible for all the laws he claims. In his introduction to *Solon*, Stadter writes that "there is the possibility that some provisions ascribed to Solon in fact reflect later changes" (Stadter (1998) p. 42). It is possible that for a time after Solon, the laws were all recorded on the wooden tablets and later just referred to as Solon's laws even though some were created by others.

Lycurgus, on the other hand, is not even a definite historical figure. Plutarch admits that this is the case and that "there are divergent accounts" of "precisely what he achieved with regard to the laws and the constitution" (Plut., *Lycurgus* 1). Certainly the sense of a man Lycurgus existing is similar to that of Homer, where it is debatable as to whether or not Homer wrote the poems or even existed. In the same sense, as Stadter puts it, "we must remain in doubt whether a single major legislator existed, or whether in later times a pattern of unwritten traditions was ascribed to this semi-legendary figure" (Stadter (1998) p. 4). Still it suited Plutarch's purpose to sum up the Spartan system and tell it as Lycurgus' creation, pulling it together to make a neat little biography.

Attributing a set of reforms to one man both in *Solon* and *Lycurgus*, again allows Plutarch to connect character and moral value to the political sphere. It allows Plutarch to portray a man of good virtue and character and then show how that leads to a whole set of positive reforms and actions.

Writing biographies which compared a Greek and Roman figure also shows how Plutarch connected similar characters and actions. Certainly, by writing lives in parallel, Plutarch was directly showing that two different men of similar character could end up leading similar lives. This further supports Plutarch's belief that his readers could compare their own lives to his biographies in order to gain insight. To write these parallel lives, it is likely that Plutarch had to stretch his characters' lives to make them fit. Solon, for instance, is paired with the Roman Publicola, who "took decisive action against attempts to reinstitute tyranny" (Stadter (1998) p. 44) and was a founder of the Roman republic. Because of this pairing, it's possible to imagine that Plutarch overemphasized Solon's rejection of and outspokenness against tyranny, and his role as the founder of democracy.

Plutarch's belief in Greek education and philosophy influenced his writing in many ways. Plutarch himself was greatly influenced by Aristotle and Plato and frequently cites them in both lives. He believed in the philosophy that people could progress in virtue, and that observation of a fault and its affects in others was important in realizing its affects in one's own life. The *Lives* show this belief, as they give their readers a way to observe traits and affects in statesmen of the past. Other indications of Plutarch's background as a philosopher are evident at various times throughout *Lycurgus* and *Solon*. In telling about Lycurgus' laws, Plutarch goes into great depth about the philosophy behind the reforms. He explains how the revoking of money solved many problems. For, "who would set out to embezzle, or accept as a bribe, or rob, or steal something which was impossible to conceal, which no one particularly wanted to have, and which could not even be profitably cut up" (Plut., *Lycurgus* 9), Plutarch reasons. He talks of the whole system as being quite ideal, based on simplicity and moderation and an eye to the public good. Stadter sums it up, stating that "*Lycurgus* is not just history, but a statement of the value of the simple, disciplined, communitarian life against the individualist pursuit of pleasure" (Stadter (1998) p. 7). There is a philosophical element

to Solon as well, with his stance on money and wealth. Plutarch includes excerpts from Solon's poetry in which one verse equates the happiness of a man rich in silver and a man who has "only enough to keep belly, body and feet in comfort, and to enjoy the youthful bloom of woman and boy..." (Plut., *Solon* 2). Plutarch's inclusion of the Croesus story further adds to the philosophical content.

In one instance, Plutarch directly goes off on a philosophical tangent about marriage. All of chapter 7 from *Solon* is a philosophical digression about Thales' refusal to marry, and he goes on about how "it is strange and churlish behaviour to be so afraid of losing things that one forgoes what one ought to have" (Plut., *Lycurgus* 7). With a philosophical slant to much of the description of the political systems in Athens and Sparta, one must refrain from believing that historically these political systems worked exactly as they were described. Plutarch describes the *ideal* system, but in reality, the situation was probably somewhat less than ideal in both city-states. For example, in Athens, Solon's laws were against tyranny, but soon after he created them, a tyranny was instituted.

Overall, the lives of Solon and Lycurgus do give a good impression of early Athens and Sparta, respectively. Plutarch's life of Lycurgus is a great account of the whole Spartan system, which was certainly a historical reality, albeit an ideal version. The council of elders, the redistribution of land, and the abolishment of money were three important parts of Spartan history, whether due to Lycurgus or not. The entire social and public system described is also of great historical value. The system of common messes, barracks, and the education system were quite unique to Sparta and important to any understanding of ancient Greece. The system described in Solon for Athens is equally useful historically. The council of 400, the 'alleviation' of debt, the creation of new property classes, and the right of appeal to a popular court were all an integral part of the history of Athens. The social and public laws described in *Solon* as well give an even more in depth understanding of the city's structure. Certainly the truth of these things can be doubted, but their truth is certainly more evident than the truth of stories of one event or person. The system of government and the social system were systems in place for long periods of time and affected a whole group of people. In the case of Solon's laws, many were written down directly. Thus while the details such as when some of

these reforms took place, or who they should be attributed to, may not be clear, the results certainly are much more grounded. Plutarch himself was well educated and well read, taking much of his information from historical sources that are not available to historians today.

As with any piece of literature to be read for historical value, whether reading Herodotus, Thucydides, Aeschylus, or Homer, the works by Plutarch must be read with knowledge of his purpose and background. Who was the author and when was he writing? Was he writing about events he would have witnessed? Was the goal entertainment, or perhaps persuasion? Who was the audience? These are all important questions in determining how to evaluate a work's historical value.

Thucydides, for example, was an Athenian general who lived through the Peloponnesian War and was writing, he claims, an objective account of the war for the sake of history. He claims to have only included those accounts which are the most accurate, but in the same way that Plutarch may include or exclude information to create his character, Thucydides' own personal opinions and bias towards different people in his history may have influenced what he chose to write and not to write. On the other hand, Homer's work is mainly fictional and must be read as such. Any historical value derived from Homer must be inferred through his depiction of social structure, custom, and motivation, and cannot be connected to actual times, events or places, but can only be used as a general idea of the society at some point in history before Homer.

Plutarch was writing biography for the sake of observing character and the outcome of a given person. In the case of *Lycurgus* and *Solon*, Plutarch was writing hundreds of years after their deaths and thus was not writing about his contemporaries, as Thucydides would have been. Neither are his accounts purely fiction or written for purely entertainment purposes. Plutarch, rather, is somewhere in between fiction and historical fact, and while *Solon* and *Lycurgus* may not be the most accurate sources of actual events, people and places, the depiction of the structure of society in early Athens and Sparta in these two respective works is invaluable.