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‘This thing is bigger than both of us’:
Plutarch’s tale of two cities?

Scholarship of the last thirty years has concentrated on the way in which the important literary unit is the pair rather than the individual *Life*: in the last fifteen years the question has increasingly been raised whether there is a wider *synkrisis* as well, one to which the whole series contributes. Can we see Plutarch’s project as one of constructing a picture of *all* Rome and *all* Greece, or at least of a comparison of Rome with the crucial cities of Athens and Sparta, and doing so through the medium of individual *Lives*? Some aspects certainly tell that way: one can see, for instance, points of thematic contact between *Theseus* and the fifth century *Lives*, especially *Pericles* and *Alcibiades*, and also between *Romulus* and *Caesar*. In each case the founders are building elements of strength, which in a way characteristic of Greek, ‘organic’ conceptualisation also contribute eventually to the states’ or the constitutions’ decline later in the life-cycle. In other ways too there may be a *synkrisis* not merely with an individual hero but with a whole city: *Fabius* looks across implicitly to the demagogic and faction-ridden decline of Athens after Pericles as well as to Pericles himself. One *Life* may also be economical in detail on a particular phase because it is being treated more fully elsewhere (*Antony* on Philippi, *Aristides* on Salamis, *Flaminius* on the war with Nabis), even though of course overlapping is allowed when a sequence is crucial to more than one *Life*. The opposite is also true – more space is given to a topic or a figure when it/he is not going to figure in another *Life*, as with *Solon* on Peisistratus. The paper will also trace ways in which characteristics of the cities as a whole are traced through *Lives*, just as they are sketched more succinctly (and crudely!) in the *Political Precepts*.

There are also limitations to this globalising approach. It is not just a tale of two cities, nor even three: the Sicilian, Macedonian, and Theban *Lives* have to be taken into account, as well as *Philopoemen* and *Pyrrhus*. If it is to be seen as a contrast of all Greece with Rome, it is rather the gaps that are a difficulty – Corinth, Argos, Samos, Pherae... Nor does there seem to be an attempt to build a sustained history of either city: a more comprehensive treatment of Sparta would find room for Cleomenes and Pausanias and the other Agis; sixth-century and early fourth-century Athens are under-covered; Sicily would have required Hermocrates and Dionysius I, and Rome is patchy too. Other considerations mattered more than comprehensiveness.

A more nuanced view needs to be developed, one that brings out not only that history is being done *through* biography, but that history matters *for* biography: the reader needs to bear in mind the historical texture against which a life is played out to make a full moral judgement on that life. That may also illuminate why the characterisation of cities is not always consistent: in *Pericles* Athens is big-spirited and proud, in *Themistocles* quarrelsome and ambitious, in *Aristides* it has a sense of natural justice, in *Cimon* it has an old-fashioned gentlemanliness and, in *Nicias* it is grim and threatening, in *Alcibiades* it is enterprising and risk-taking, in *Phocion* it is a real shambles. Not, then, a clear, linear, comprehensive picture, but one that brings out that history is complicated, with different perspectives, and different perspectives matter in different *Lives*. And, just as statesmen in history needed to mould their activity to the texture of their states, those dealing with Rome should still be aware what sort of state they were dealing with, even if multiple perspectives were possible there as well. One needed to know that in order to gauge wise political conduct; one needed to know it too to guide one’s moral evaluation of the conduct of others.