

Most scholars agree today that Plutarch is telling the truth when, at the beginning of the *Life of Demosthenes*, he informs the reader that he has attained a working knowledge of the Latin language, though he is not able to grasp the fine points of Latin style.

In several passages, however, Plutarch does express his views concerning the peculiarities of Latin as a tool and vehicle of expression – in the very passage of the *Life of Demosthenes* in which he avows his inability to assess the Latin style, he mentions conciseness (*tachos*) as the peculiar hallmark of Latin.

As can easily be gathered from several passages in his *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch accepts the idea that individual style mirrors the writer's personality. The idea that languages possess peculiarities corresponding to the national character of the peoples speaking them is a natural extension of this principle, found both in the I century writers and rhetoricians and in Plutarch. Basically, his assessment of Latin coincides with the statements of Roman authors such as Quintilian and Seneca, who speaks of the "power" (*potentia*) of Latin as opposed to the "gracefulness" (*gratia*) of Greek; according to Plutarch, in fact, Latin's other characteristic, besides conciseness, is "sharpness" (*oxytes*).

Interestingly enough, this idea is developed in a passage (*Cato mai.* 12.7) in which Cato's ideas on the two languages are reported. Though Plutarch cannot of course agree with Cato's disparagement of the Greeks apparent in this passage, his own judgment on the peculiarities of Latin as a means of expression does not basically differ from Cato's.

In all probability Plutarch felt all the more enabled to pass judgments on the language of Rome due to the widespread conviction that Latin was ultimately derived from the Greek. But when he offers etymologies of Latin words – or of words belonging to other languages – he puts foreign languages on a par with Greek, in as much as this supposes their being governed by rational rules, which permits to understand and reconstruct their inner structure. In this Plutarch is the rightful heir of Hellenistic thinking, which had progressed a long way beyond the theories found in Plato's *Cratylus*, where Socrates repeatedly states that no etymology can be found for words coming from 'barbaric' languages.

The famous passage on Caesar's celebrated *veni vidi vici* (*Caes.* 50.3-4), while reaffirming the conciseness of Latin, confirms both that Plutarch considered that language an effective vehicle of expression in his own right and that, however, his knowledge of it was limited (he seems not to know that all Latin perfects end in *-i*). It also confirms his avowed inability to grasp the fine points of Latin style (as a Greek, whose language shows no particular predilection for such a phonic device, he does not notice the alliteration linking Caesar's three verbs) – a further proof that, though Plutarch's working knowledge of Latin can hardly be denied, his assessment of it must be understood in the light of the wider cultural framework sketched above rather than by assuming a personal, first-hand appreciation of language, texts, and authors.