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The Changing World of Plutarch

The paper is in two parts. Part one examines Plutarch as a Greek and a Roman. Plutarch's career coincides with the Greek renaissance of the High Roman Empire, the period known in modern scholarship as the "second sophistic," a name which derives from the third century biographer and belletrist, Flavius Philostratus. Should Plutarch be included in it? His persona as a philosopher excluded him from Philostratus' biographies. Nevertheless it would be unhelpful not to make him part of the second sophistic. Perhaps the most obvious feature of this movement was an intensified awareness among the Greek elites of their Hellenic culture and origins. For Plutarch this inheritance was most important in general cultural and political conduct, and particularly in his religious and philosophical life, where he believed that the philosophy of Plato and its vision of the divine were the desirable goals of human existence, goals applicable both to Greeks and non-Greeks. Plutarch's role as the bridge between Greece and Rome makes it easy to forget that his favorable attitude to Rome should always be seen in his faith in Greece. In the real world Plutarch's attitudes in both areas were subject to compromise and accommodation.

Part two examines some modern approaches to Plutarch and sets these against trends in the interpretation of the ancient world. One of the most beneficial of these has been prosopography, which has shed light on the interconnections of his world, especially its links with the ruling power. Scholars increasingly find the prosopographical approach too crude, and question conclusions which are often based on a view of human relations informed by the dynamics of the nation state. With regard to Plutarch, prosopography has given us a picture of a fairly unquestioning contentment with Roman rule, perhaps as a result of a too narrow concentration on a particular tranche of the evidence.

With an author of such broad interests we can hardly ignore routes of historical inquiry which take us to the heart of his thought. Disciplines like the history of sexuality of sociolinguistics may show the way. The first is now firmly ensconced in classical studies. It is history through texts and their meaning. Sociolinguistics is perhaps as yet less influential in classical studies, though not unknown. But in the world of the High Roman Empire, where linguistic self-awareness in both Greek and Latin and bilinguism are exceptionally important historical phenomena, it has a valuable role to play. With regard to Plutarch, there is much profit in investigating his interest in the modalities of social and political communication which are central to human progress in the world. Additionally, a text-driven historical interpretation of this kind has the effect of "returning" Plutarch to Greece, which is where he belongs in political culture. Work in this area is still at an early stage. But progress in it is the key to unlocking Plutarch's changing world.