Plutarch’s Worth

Sources for the ancient world are far different than modern sources for a multitude of reasons, chiefly that there is no real way to determine the validity of them outside of the physical evidence that has been preserved and cross referencing with other possibly unreliable sources. Many sources are distrusted because they often are known to have ulterior motives, or simply did not care about historical accuracy. A particularly popular source of controversy over historical accuracy was the Greek and Roman author and historian Plutarch, who even being given the title of historian is quite controversial. While Plutarch is a subject of controversy to many historians and may not be a perfectly reliable source, he does have some use for in providing a moral context to the periods he is writing about, but more so the one that he lived in.

While there is some debate in regards to the truthfulness of Plutarch’s works, there is absolutely no doubt that he was biased in a few different ways. The most important of which is his value of creating examples of good morals for Roman Citizens to follow over historical accuracy. Plutarch writes in *The Life Of Alexander* “For it is not Histories I am writing, but Lives” (Plutarch 225). Plutarch himself admitting that he cares more about the morals of his stories presents some problems in using his sources, the first of which is that there is no way to be certain of when he is presenting facts and when he is completely making things up to fit his narrative. There is generally some amount of truth to his works, otherwise there would be no use for them at all, but the inconsistency makes it difficult to use as an academic source in a purely historical context. In the same work Plutarch compares himself to a painter focusing on the expression of the eyes instead of the main body parts, choosing to focus on the “soul in men” (Plutarch 225). This also showcases the main problem that many historians have with using Plutarch as a historical source; he simply does not value historical accuracy as much as writing an entertaining story that can teach himself and other Romans good morals. In *The Life of Timoleon* Plutarch states “I began the writing of my "Lives" for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavoring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein
depicted” (Plutarch 261). This is another example clearly showing how much Plutarch valued the presence of morals in his works, but this source brings a new dynamic to how Plutarch’s works can be seen. First of all he refers to his works as history, which is directly contradictory to the previous statement from *The Life of Alexander* where he says he does not write histories. Plutarch also mentions the idea of history as a mirror here, showing that he sees the reflection of the time period he lived in. This means that modern historians could use his works to not only look at the periods he wrote about, but what it reflects about the time he lived in. This is especially true of the moral beliefs and lessons of Plutarch’s time, while his works may have been padded with falsities, the moral messages that were so important to him certainly were not. While it may not be a perfect representation of what every Roman citizen believed at that time, it provides a good lens to look at other documents, events, and people of that time if used correctly.

According to Edward Bispham in *A Companion to the Roman Republic* Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* “were not meant to be comprehensive historical accounts, and often relate incidents with no real clue as to when or why they took place” (Rosenstein and Morstein-Marx 40). Bispham’s perspective is a relatively harsh one, seeing Plutarch as an author of anecdotes with no real historical value, but this is not a particularly rare opinion, as Lewis and Reinhold discuss Plutarch’s sources in *Roman Civilization* “one must not expect to find in them thorough compilations of factual data or evidences of critical research” (Lewis and Reinhold 25). These statements show the skepticism of Plutarch that many academics hold, using the moral motives behind his works and self-admitted lack of absolute accuracy to discredit them. While this would certainly be a valid argument to discredit an argument or author in modern times with current academic standards, this is a much muddier process when dealing with ancient history, where there is a much smaller pool of available sources, sometimes only having one source for a particular time period or event. This can mean that there is no other option than to use sources that may not be totally reliable, for there is a different standard when dealing with ancient sources. Lewis and Reinhold recognize this, for despite calling Plutarch’s sources “…anecdotal, antiquarian, dramatic, and digressive…” they are still used and even valued “Nevertheless, Plutarch’s *Lives* have preserved much valuable material on phases of Roman society, institutions, and history…” (Lewis and Reinhold 25). If there were more reliable sources available, they would surely be used instead of Plutarch, but the reality of ancient history is that sometimes you have to use what you have, which is sometimes an unfortunately small amount. However, this does not mean that Plutarch’s every word should
be believed, or even entertained, it is possible to use untrustworthy sources, which some would argue Plutarch is, without taking them as undeniable truth. Bispham believes that people are not doing a good enough job of this with Plutarch, stating “…modern historians often pressgang Plutarch into a more historical role than that which he envisaged himself” (Rosenstein and Morstein-Marx 40). This is where some disagreement occurs between these two, in the sense that Lewis and Reinhold seem to find considerably more historical value in Plutarch than Bispham does, when even they do not hold him in very high esteem. An example of someone who sees Plutarch in much higher esteem is George W.M. Harrison, who instead of focusing on the historical merit of his actual works focuses on the writing and rhetoric of Plutarch and how it could be used other than just gaining pure factual accounts. Harrison has much higher praise for Plutarch than the other sources, stating “The claim, then, for the validity of Plutarch’s Lives should not be proper historical method, but rhetoric, and one’s assessment then should be on the writing. On both counts Plutarch earns maximum marks” (Harrison 278). This is a much different perspective than the other two sources, so it makes sense that they would see Plutarch differently, however that does not make Harrison’s argument any less valid. While Bispham as well as Lewis and Reinhold all focus only on how factually accurate Plutarch’s sources were about the periods he was writing about, they did not consider the rhetoric and information that could be deduced about the time period in which Plutarch lived. While it is important to look at the accuracy of a source, just because it may not be completely correct does not mean it can not be used to find out important information based on other factors such as author’s bias, which is incredibly important in Plutarch’s case.

It is true that Plutarch is not the most accurate or most informative of sources, but he was one of the most prolific and successful writers in Roman history, and that cannot just be cast aside, especially when so much of his work has survived while others have not. While his work was certainly sensationalized and more concerned with laying out examples of good morals that good Roman citizens, and he himself, should follow, his works are not completely without use. There are some pieces of information that he presents in his works that were true and were genuinely useful as a historical fact, otherwise Bispham, and Lewis and Reinhold would have no use for him whatsoever. However Plutarch’s usefulness truly shines when he is being used to look at morals and the way of life of the early Roman Empire, because he and his sources had a direct affect on it. So while he was source for information on the Roman Republic that had to be taken with a grain of salt,
he was a great source for information about the Roman Empire in which he lived.

Works Cited


