

Chapter Title: Introduction

Book Title: An Opaque Mirror for Trajan

Book Subtitle: A Literary Analysis and Interpretation of Plutarch's 'Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata'

Book Author(s): LAURENS VAN DER WIEL

Published by: Leuven University Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.4145188.5>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>. Funding is provided by KU Leuven Fund for Fair Open Access.



JSTOR

Leuven University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *An Opaque Mirror for Trajan*

Introduction

Δημήτριος ὁ Φαληρεὺς Πτολεμαίῳ τῷ βασιλεῖ παρῆνει τὰ περὶ βασιλείας καὶ ἡγεμονίας βιβλία κτᾶσθαι καὶ ἀναγινώσκειν· ἅ γὰρ οἱ φίλοι τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν οὐ θαρροῦσι παραινεῖν, ταῦτα ἐν τοῖς βιβλίοις γέγραπται.¹

Demetrius of Phalerum recommended to Ptolemy the king to buy and read the books dealing with the office of king and ruler. “For,” as he said, “those things which the kings’ friends are not bold enough to recommend to them are written in the books.”

It was perhaps for this same reason that Plutarch dedicated *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* to Trajan, well aware as he was of the dangers of flattery at the imperial court.² The collection contains 494 apophthegms of the most famous monarchs, lawgivers, and commanders of antiquity (cf. 172C: τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων παρὰ τε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ παρ’ Ἑλλήσιν ἡγεμόνων καὶ νομοθετῶν καὶ αὐτοκρατόρων), people with whom the Roman emperor could readily identify. The sayings (and, in fact, also some actions) are grouped together according to historical figures, who are, in turn, arranged by people in line with Plutarch’s threefold division of mankind:³ a first and shorter section presents some barbarians (172E–174F: Persians, Egyptians, Thracians, and Scythians), after which a series of Greeks follows (175A–194E: Sicilians, Macedonians, Athenians, Spartans, and Thebans), and a final part describes the Romans (194E–208A). As a consequence, the work covers a major part of ancient history, including apophthegms from, generally speaking, the Persian Wars until the creation of the Roman Principate and the *Pax Romana* established by Caesar Augustus (206F–208A).⁴

One might say that *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* occupy a somewhat peculiar position in the Plutarchan oeuvre.⁵ On the one hand, the work is traditionally presented as belonging to the *Moralia*. This rich part of Plutarch’s oeuvre consists of treatises and dialogues on moral, ethical, metaphysical, or natural philosophical issues; other works reflect

¹ *Demetrius Phalereus* (189D).

² Plutarch discusses the theme of flattery in detail in *De ad. et am.*

³ See esp. Mossman (2010) 145–146 on this aspect in *Reg. et imp. apophth.*

⁴ Only *Cyrus* (172EF), *Peisistratus* (189B–D), and the first Spartans (189D–190A) deal with earlier times.

⁵ On the distinction between *Moralia* and *Lives*, see Geiger (2008).

an interest in literary theories, antiquarian problems (collections such as *Quaestiones Romanae* and *Quaestiones Graecae*), etc. In terms of its format, the apophthegm collection seems to be the closest to works such as *Coniugalia praecepta* and *Mulierum virtutes*:⁶ the former similarly offers a brief compilation, in this case of pieces of advice for the newlyweds Pollianus and Eurydice, former students of Plutarch addressed by a dedicatory letter (138B–D); in the latter Plutarch tells Clea (a friend of his, as appears from the proem, 242E–243E) a series of more lengthy stories on virtuous women.

In other respects, however, the collection's content and goals are also quite close to the *Parallel Lives*, the other half of Plutarch's oeuvre.⁷ The dedicatory letter addressed to Trajan with which the work begins (172B–E), introduces the series of apophthegms (172E–208A) as an abbreviation of the biographical project, written specifically for the busy Roman emperor who has no time to peruse the extensive paired *Lives* of Greeks and Romans. Thanks to the collection, so Plutarch states, he will now have the opportunity to familiarize himself with these characters “as clearly as in a mirror” (172D: ὡσπερ ἐν κατόπτροις καθαρῶς, cf. *Aem.* 1.1) and “quickly” (172E: ἐν βραχέσι), for words are the most convenient instrument for the understanding of character (172C–E, cf. *Alex.* 1.2). The letter, then, in several respects reminds one of the prologues to some biographical pairs, and this is partially confirmed by the close connection between the material included in both the *Parallel Lives* and in the apophthegm collection. Yet this is definitely not a one-to-one ratio: some heroes of the former are absent from the latter, whereas many other famous statesmen or generals are the subject of a section in the collection but do not figure in a *Life*. The same goes for the apophthegms, for not every saying in a section on a protagonist is included in his *Life* and *vice versa*. The dedicatory letter, then, should be read as a programmatic introduction in the first place:⁸ *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* are meant to enable the reader, especially the Roman emperor, to gain insight into and to reach a moral assessment of character, in line with the *Parallel Lives*.⁹

⁶ *Apophth. Lac.* are a different case: they present Plutarch's notes, not meant to be published; see Stadter (2014b).

⁷ Other works of the *Moralia* that are close to the biographical genre are *Dec. or. vit.* (see *infra*, note 987 on the questioned authenticity of the work) and *Parall. Graec. et Rom.* (probably inauthentic; see Pace (2018) 44n1 for secondary literature).

⁸ See Duff (1999) 13–51 on the programmatic proems of the *Parallel Lives*.

⁹ Roskam (2021) 109: “The goal of the collections of sayings, then, is exactly the same as that of the *Parallel Lives*: they are a project of zetetic moralism. But the collections are also presented as a kind of shortcut.”

Yet there is more in this regard. The evident implication of the letter is that a brief acquaintance with the prominent heroes of Greek and Roman history will also *instruct* the emperor and guide him in becoming a better ruler. As such, *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* fit within the genre of *specula principum* and could be the only undeniable proof of Plutarch's attempt as a philosopher to enter into dialogue with a monarch as a Greek advisor¹⁰ in order to improve his reign or perhaps even to transform him into a true philosopher king, an ideal which the author shares with his philosophical *exemplum* Plato.¹¹ The work, then, is an important source for our understanding of the Chaeronean's philosophical-political thinking, for his views on the functions of moral *exempla* and exemplary literature (including the *Parallel Lives*), and perhaps even for his self-understanding regarding his place as a Greek public-spirited philosopher in the Roman Empire.

Scholarship, however, paid little attention to the dedicatory letter to Trajan and the apophthegm collection. From the sixteenth century on, editors and commentators expressed doubt about the authenticity of the two parts of the work.¹² In the nineteenth century Richard Volkmann's harsh assessment, influenced by contemporary views on what good literature should look like, dealt the final blow.¹³ The text was largely ignored until Robert Flacelière cautiously turned the tide in 1976.¹⁴ Today, after the introduction of Fuhrmann's *Budé* edition favouring the genuineness of the work,¹⁵ and especially after Mark Beck's convincing defence of the dedicatory letter 22 years ago,¹⁶ Plutarch's authorship is generally accepted, although some scholars still remain sceptical.¹⁷

Since then some progress has been made. A couple of more recent contributions briefly address the general structure of the collection¹⁸ and the process of composition;¹⁹ others discuss some of its apophthegms or sections – although usually in connection with other accounts of the same or similar stories in Plutarch's oeuvre and other authors²⁰ – and in a PhD thesis defended ten years ago Serena Citro provides a new Italian

¹⁰ Cf. Stadter (2012b) 95 (= (2015) 208).

¹¹ Boulet (2005) and (2014) discusses the philosopher king in Plutarch.

¹² Xylander (1570) 732; later Wyttenbach (1795) CLIX and (1810) 1039–1042.

¹³ Volkmann (1869) 210–234.

¹⁴ Flacelière (1976).

¹⁵ Fuhrmann (1988).

¹⁶ Beck, M. (2002).

¹⁷ E.g. Almagor (2018) 269–280.

¹⁸ Briefly Mossman (2010) 146–147; esp. Stadter (2014b) 674–676.

¹⁹ Pelling (2002) 65–90; Beck, M. (2003); Stadter (2008); Stadter (2014b).

²⁰ Esp. Citro (2019a); (2019b); (2020); (2021).

translation and a commentary of the dedicatory letter and (parts of) some sections of the work.²¹

Though strides have been made lately, previous scholarship has left important questions unanswered. For example, although *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* should serve as a mirror for the emperor (for this is how the dedicatory letter introduces the work, 172D), it is not immediately clear how a series of apparently unconnected apophthegms without much context or authorial comments should instruct a ruler or which lessons are to be drawn from them; nor is it, in line with this first question, obvious how the collection as an exemplary work fits within Plutarch's oeuvre. This book responds to these gaps, providing a first literary analysis of *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* as a whole, that does full justice to the collection as an independent literary work of art, in order to shed light on the internal cohesion and ideas expressed *in the text itself*, on the way in which Plutarch wanted Trajan – or any other reader – to approach the work, and, connected with this, on how its protagonists are to be assessed and how they can serve as *exempla*.

This book consists of three main parts:

[I] **Part I** contains three **preliminary chapters**. (a) The first one not only presents a critical overview of the arguments in support of and against the authenticity of the dedicatory letter to Trajan and the apophthegm collection, but also provides new insights into this *quaestio vexata*. Because none of the claims against authenticity are convincing, and since various stylistic and content-related elements in fact rather prove to support Plutarch's authorship, it will be concluded that *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* (in their entirety) are a genuine work of the Chaeronean. This chapter, then, builds on previous scholarship, but will also present various new, compelling arguments in order to convince the final sceptics. (b) The second chapter attempts to date the work. An absolute dating is difficult to reach, but a few elements from the letter and the collection seem to point towards the end of Trajan's reign. In a next step, it is examined whether this conclusion is supported by the relative chronology of the *Parallel Lives* (a topic that needs reconsideration, cf. Appendix III) and the apophthegm collection. (c) The third chapter briefly discusses Plutarch's views on the functions of the 'genre' of compilations of sayings and anecdotes in general and on the place of *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* in the context of contemporary, early imperial, literature specifically. A comparison with Valerius Maximus

²¹ Citro (2014) discusses the dedicatory letter (172B–E) and *Agathocles* (176EF), *Antipater* (183EF), *Aristeides* (186A–C), *Alcibiades* (186D–F), *Iphicrates* (186F–187B), *Timotheus* (187BC), *Phocion* (187F, 188B, 188CD), *Teleclus* (190A), *Lysander* (190D–F), and *Pelopidas* (194C–E).

will point out that the Chaeronean truly wrote the collection as a kind of shortcut to the *Parallel Lives* with (an) emperor(s) as its target audience in mind: the work, then, belongs to the ‘genre’ of ‘mirrors of princes’ in the first place, and is closely related to biography.

[2] **Part II**, the core of this book, presents a **literary analysis** of the entire work. It opens with a close reading of the dedicatory letter (172B–E), which has repercussions for the remaining chapters on the collection. (a) It will be argued, indeed, that the letter provides clues about the general structure of the work. This will be followed by a systematic analysis of the collection itself, dividing it into three main parts: a section on monarchs (172E–184F: barbarians, Sicilians, and Macedonians), on the Greeks of the mainland (184F–194E: Athenians, Spartans, and Thebans), and on the Romans (194E–208A). (b) The letter requires a critical and participatory attitude from its readers, who are expected to look for striking tensions inviting them to re-evaluate the characters described at the outset, and this is in line with how the following compilation of apophthegms is to be read. As a consequence, the analysis focuses on the structure and internal cohesion of (the different sections of) the collection in every detail, in order to define how Plutarch depicts the protagonists and to point out that he carefully structured the work to this end.

The literary analysis, then, examines *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* as a text which has a meaning on its own. Other works by Plutarch (or by other authors) are therefore only briefly addressed when they shed light on the plausibility of the interpretation proposed by the analysis, but never on the assumption that the apophthegm collection primarily takes its meaning from other texts.

[3] **Part III** builds on the analysis of Part II and addresses how *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* function as exemplary literature – as ‘a **guide for the emperor**’, so to speak – and how this fits within Plutarch’s overall thinking about *exempla*. It consists of three main chapters that each concern a specific level of interpretation, all of which are again announced by the dedicatory letter (172B–E). Each of these levels reflects a different application of role models. (a) The first chapter discusses the functions of famous individuals (cf. 172C: τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων) as role models and strongly depends on insights about character depiction in the collection (cf. II). (b) The second deals with groups of people or peoples as *exempla* (cf. 172C: παρά τε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ παρ’ Ἑλλήσιν), in line with the more general and less nuanced image of ethnicities (cf. II): this different application of models also serves different goals. (c) The third examines mankind and human history in its entirety (cf. 172C: the notion of σύνταγμα) as a mirror for moral behaviour.

In contrast to Part II, a comparison with other works of Plutarch is of central importance in Part III. I will discuss especially the *Parallel Lives*: Plutarch’s techniques of characterization, the importance of (different

types of) *synkrisis*, the relevance of his tripartite division of mankind and his views on the ethnic background of historical figures for assessing their moral and political virtue, and his ideas about world history and the dynamics behind historical evolutions are all important aspects that remind one of the biographical project and play a central role in the apophthegm collection as well. Yet, when relevant, I will also address texts of the *Moralia*, such as *De profectibus in virtute* and *Ad principem ineruditum*: the Chaeronean's exemplary thinking as reconstructed from his oeuvre as a whole, on the one hand, clarifies aspects of *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* as a manual for good rulership; the collection, on the other, deepens our insights into his exemplary thinking and tells us a lot about how he wanted his other works to be read.

In this way I hope to show that *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* are not a poorly composed and incoherent patchwork of sayings and anecdotes, as scholars have long assumed: instead, the text reveals a well-thought-out organization that steers the interpretation of the readers towards conclusions that are often reminiscent of other parts of Plutarch's oeuvre. It also shows that the author practised what he preached as a Platonist writer, trying to be a supportive teacher for a ruler in his pursuit of becoming the best possible monarch. In short, Plutarch's *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* are a well-considered and thought-provoking work that should not only activate its readers – in the first place sole rulers – to reflect on moral behaviour of the past, but is also meant to guide them in their personal progress towards virtue.