BMCR
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2020.06.21

Plutarch. How to be a leader: an ancient guide to wise leadership

Jeffrey Beneker, *Plutarch. How to be a leader: an ancient guide to wise leadership. Ancient wisdom for modern readers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. 416 p.. ISBN 9780691192116 $16.95.

Review by

Thierry Oppeneer, Ghent University. thierry.oppeneer@ugent.be

Preview

This book is part of the *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers* series of Princeton University Press, which aims to make the practical wisdom of the ancient world available to modern readers through lively, new translations of classical thinkers. In the present instalment, Jeffrey Beneker turns to Plutarch of Chaeronea as an ancient expert on wise leadership. This is an excellent choice given Plutarch's profound engagement with the subject, not only in his massive biographical project, the *Parallel Lives*, but also in his *Moralia*. In *How to Be a Leader*, Beneker provides fresh translations of Plutarch's three most important political essays: *To an Uneducated Ruler* (Πρὸς ἡγεμόνα ἀπαίδευτον), *Precepts of Statecraft* (Πολιτικὰπαραγγέλματα) and *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs* (Εἰ πρεσβυτέρῳ πολιτευτέον). The book offers the Greek text, taken from the Loeb Classical Library, and a facing translation in English. Each text is accompanied by a short introduction and a section with explanatory notes.

In the introduction (pp. ix-xix), Beneker briefly sets out the historical context in which Plutarch operated. He succinctly describes what it meant to be a leader in a Greek city under Rome. Emphasis is rightly drawn to the competitive nature of local politics and the dynamic interplay between civic leaders, their communities and the Roman authorities. The basic principle of Plutarch's political thought, and the common thread to the works translated, is aptly summarised as 'city before self' (p. x).

The first and shortest essay is *To an Uneducated Leader*. In this treatise, Plutarch explains how moral philosophy can make us better leaders. Good leadership, he argues, is inextricably linked to the leader's moral state and development. Above all else, a leader should ground his actions in reason. Without reason as a firm foundation, there is no hope of controlling your emotions and impulses. Although, in Plutarch's view, a lack of reason would be a bad thing for anyone, it is particularly harmful in people who are in a position of leadership and whose actions have an impact on the entire community. As Beneker rightly observes, *To an Uneducated Leader* gives us the essence of Plutarch's political thinking and thus serves as a convenient introduction to the other two treatises included in the volume. Of the three essays, it is clearly the most

'philosophical.' For Plutarch, however, moral philosophy is not a theoretical system that is opposed to, or divorced from, practice. In *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs*, we can read, for example, that practicing philosophy is not "a matter of conducting dialogues from a chair and reciting lectures from books" (p. 325), but rather "the continuous practice of both politics and philosophy, which may be observed on a daily basis in deeds and in actions" (p. 327). In *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs* and *Precepts of Statecraft*, these deeds and actions take centre stage.

In *Precepts of Statecraft*, translated by Beneker as *How to Be a Good Leader*, Plutarch sets out his instructions on local politics for the benefit of the aspiring politician. After defining reason as the only proper motivation for a political career, a concept already familiar to the reader from *To an Uneducated Leader*, Plutarch considers how one should prepare for a life in politics. The topics he treats are diverse: from the power of speech and knowing your place and strengths to political rivalries and the uses and dangers of friends in politics. Many of these topics will resonate with the contemporary reader. Public image, self-fashioning and knowing your audience are as important to the leaders of today as they were to their ancient counterparts. Although Plutarch's instructions are aimed at political leaders, his advice frequently touches on topics that are relevant for leadership more broadly conceived. His instructions on how to prevent or mitigate the envy that results from personal success, for example, can be applied to any field that is marked by strong competition, and he has much to say about how to cooperate effectively with superiors, peers and subordinates. Plutarch's *Precepts of Statecraft* thus has much to offer to modern-day leaders, in politics or other contexts.

The third and final translation Beneker offers his readers is of *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs*. Whereas *Precepts of Statecraft* was aimed at political newcomers, this work is addressed to the older, more experienced politician. This difference in perspective allows Plutarch to shed some new light on many of the topics already treated in *Precepts of Statecraft*. In the first part of the text, Plutarch aims to answer the question of whether or not old people should still engage in politics (The Value of the Senior Politician, pp. 197-289). According to Plutarch, older people have much to offer, not only on account of their years of experience, but also because they are less prone than their younger colleagues to give in to their passions. Older people, he argues, are more reasonable in their judgements and less inclined to impulsiveness than young people. Having answered the question whether old people should engage in politics with a decisive 'yes', the second part of the treatise discusses how they can be of use (The Role of the Senior Politician, pp. 291-339). For Plutarch, the primary function of senior politicians was to teach their younger colleagues in both word and deed. He instructs his readers, for example, on how to support young leaders and how to correct them without giving offense or creating hostility. In this way, older politicians could pass on their wisdom and experience to the next generation of leaders.

At the end of the volume, Beneker includes a section on 'Important Persons and Terms' that provides information on the political figures and terminology that feature in Plutarch's texts. This is followed by a section with notes (pp. 365-384) in which Beneker clarifies those passages that would otherwise puzzle the present-day reader. When Plutarch employs the language of contemporary athletics, for example, to warn his

readers not ‘to strip for’ (ἀποδύω) every position of leadership (p. 133), Beneker usefully explains: “[w]e would say “suit up,” but the Greeks competed naked in athletic contests, and so they stripped for action” (p. 372n33).

Beneker’s book delivers on its promises. With regard to its aim—making the practical wisdom of the ancient world accessible for modern life—the book is a success. Beneker offers to the broader public a lively, fresh translation that opens up several key texts of an ancient expert on leadership. For *To an Uneducated Ruler* and *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affair*, this volume presents the first English translations since those of Fowler in the Loeb Classical Library almost a century ago.[1] Whereas the Loeb edition is often hard on the modern ear, Beneker’s translation is elegant and easy to digest.[2] It successfully renders Plutarch’s long and often convoluted sentences in clear, accessible English. The text is edited very well and mistakes are virtually absent.[3] Given the evident quality of the translations, it would have been nice if the editors had included the traditional Stephanus page numbers in addition to the chapter numbers from the Loeb edition. Without these it is difficult to consult Beneker’s translation with a specific passage in mind. This is especially the case for *How to be a Good Leader* where, in contrast to the other two treatises, the Loeb chapter numbers are also absent. The reason for this probably is that a considerable part of the essay has been cut out.[4] Although this may be a defensible editorial choice given the book’s intended audience, readers should have been made aware that what they have in front of them is not the entire essay. This does not detract, however, from the overall success of the volume. Beneker has produced a valuable resource. His work has succeeded in making the practical wisdom of the ancient world available to the modern reader and that at a very reasonable price. The book successfully conveys the essence of wise leadership according to an ancient expert on the subject. The practical orientation of Plutarch’s advice is most evident in *Precepts of Statecraft* and *Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs*, where his instructions on wise leadership are firmly grounded in the experiences, successes, and failures of the great leaders of the past.[5] These examples of effective as well as ineffective leadership provide the reader, both ancient and modern, with positive models for emulation and negative models to avoid. Although few present-day readers of Plutarch are likely to entertain the hope of becoming the next Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar, they can strive to apply the principles of good leadership illustrated by these *exempla* to their own lives. By turning these historical figures into examples of leadership that can be imitated and learned from, Plutarch aimed to unlock the educational potential of the past. Beneker’s volume now continues this pedagogical project by making his works accessible to the modern reader.

Notes

[1] Harold N. Fowler, *Plutarch. Moralia, Volume X* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). For a more recent translation of *Precepts of Statecraft*, see Donald Russell, *Plutarch, Selected Essays and Dialogues* (Oxford, 1993).

[2] E.g.: “The noise o’ the barrier’s fall was in his ears” (Loeb, 804e) vs. “the sound of the race’s start filled his ears” (p. 91).

[3] I have spotted only a few: note 11 on p. 217 is slightly out of place; 'distributions ~~of land~~' (p. 235); "when ~~a~~ punished by" (p. 273). A final observation concerns the nautical simile that concludes Plutarch's discussion of φιλοτιμία (820c). Beneker translates (pp. 185-187): "Just as the person who sails past Syrtis but then capsizes crossing the sea has done nothing great or noble, so the politician who has supervised the treasury and public revenue but then fails to measure up in the presidency or the town hall (περὶτὴν προεδρίαν ἢ τὸ πρυτανεῖον) not only strikes against a high promontory but likewise ends up sinking." Beneker takes this simile to mean that "honors should not be awarded too early in a politician's career for doing well in minor offices" (375n55). Yet, what Plutarch refers to with προεδρία and πρυτανεῖον are the prestigious honours of the right to reserved seats in the front rows of the theatre and dinner at public expense in the Prytaneion. The simile thus intends to make clear that φιλοτιμία can be just as detrimental to the politician's career as φιλοκέρδεια. Cf. Antonio Caiazza, *Plutarco. Precetti politici* (Napoli, 1993) 271.

[4] Left out: 802a-c; 802e-804b; 805b-e; 807e-809b; 810a-811a; 811e-812b; 812f-813a; 815d-816a; 816f-819b; 820d-e; 820f-825f.

[5] The works translated by Beneker have been included among Plutarch's practical ethics, a group of texts that were meant to provide the reader with philosophically inspired but practically oriented instructions on how to be successful within society. See Lieve Van Hoof, *Plutarch's Practical Ethics: The Social Dynamics of Philosophy* (Oxford, 2010).