



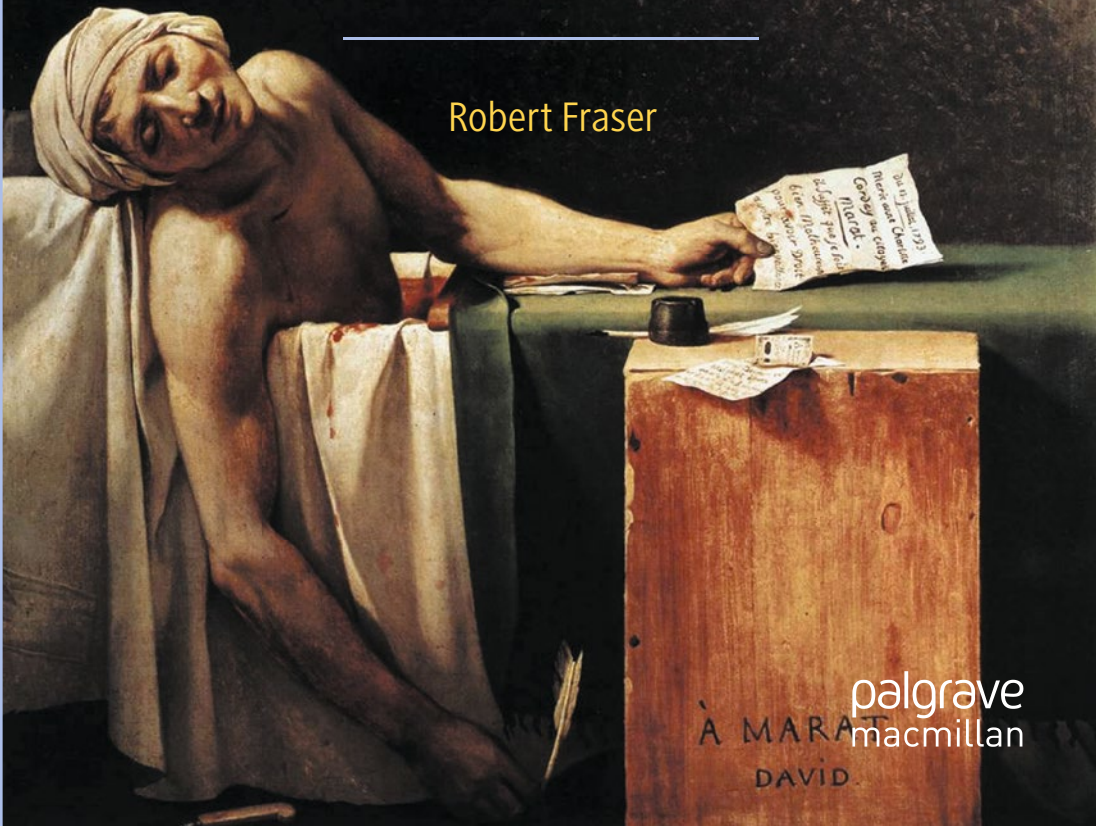
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After Ancient Biography

Modern Types and Classical Archetypes

Robert Fraser



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Modern Types and Classical Archetypes

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To Brigid Allen

PREFACE

BIOGRAPHY ANCIENT AND MODERN: THE SHOCK OF THE OLD

In the concluding sentence of an incisive essay “on the interpretation of late antique biography”, published in 2006, the Plato scholar John Dillon remarks that, in addressing subjects as these, “we are involved in asking what the real purpose and justification of biography is even now”. His point is well taken. It is hard to contemplate an individual work of biography or the work of an individual biographer, ancient or modern, without broaching far-reaching questions about form, intention and what we now call “genre”. The Greeks had no term for biography as such, and when Plutarch, at the commencement of his thrilling *Life of Alexander*, wishes to tell us what he is about, he says simply “I am not writing history but lives”. His plural noun is *bioi*, and in deploying it Plutarch is conveying a strong conviction concerning what he is doing and what he is not doing. The statement implies a theory of classification, but it also implies a sense of momentum and direction. Having made it, he gets on with the task in hand.

Biography may indeed be a genre, but biographers worth their salt do not proceed generically or not *only* generically. If, from the point of view of the scholar, biography *is* indeed a distinctive form, from the point of view of the biographer it is decidedly an activity, and the ways of tackling it are almost infinite.

The readership for which this book is intended consists primarily of life-writers: that is of practitioners of life-writing such as myself and of students

and scholars of life-writing. Bearing this fact in mind, I have not assumed a mastery on their part of any of the ancient tongues nor indeed any prior acquaintance with the various authors from antiquity whom I selectively discuss. This is not a history of biography in the ancient world; it is a book about craft and the reverberations of craft. More specifically, it is about the opportunities provided by ancient biography for writers and readers of later periods, including the modern era. Its central point, in the broadest of terms, is that ancient biography supplies narrative patterns for later writers. Those among my readers who are classically versed will have to forgive me if in its middle chapters I trawl across what may seem to them familiar ground: it will not always be familiar to many among my intended audience. That said, it is very clear that the reception of ancient biography among professional classicists represents one essential strand in the after-life of these texts, and to it I have therefore devoted one long chapter (Chap. 2). The upshot of its argument is that, taking the long view, classicists and modernist have found themselves addressing the common and fundamental questions implicit in all life-writing, from a vantage point created by a shared cultural climate. For those who wish to delve further I have supplied bibliographies and suggestions for further reading at the end of every chapter, including a list of relevant classical authorities.

In a long and thoughtful essay on the teaching of biography collected in his book *The Long Pursuit*, the self-styled “Romantic biographer” Richard Holmes introduces a suggestive and useful term. “Comparative biography” is what he calls it, and by it he implies two different processes. The first is a comparison between sequential biographies of the same person: a phenomenon that in a late chapter he applies to life studies of the poet John Keats, the subject of quite a few. The second is a comparison between ways of biographical writing prevalent in different ages (say, the neo-classical and the Romantic periods).

The present work aims to be a contribution to the second of these exercises. Life-writing is now a capacious and growing subject endowed with many sub-specialisms and styles of approach, many voices and many ears. Increasingly there has been a move to see across these divisions and draw meaningful comparisons, including those between different “schools” or periods of biography. One advantage of concentrating on life-writing from times far prior to our own is that it opens the subject up along two complementary trajectories. That is, it opens up ancient biography by demonstrating just how far its problems, dilemmas and opportunities mirror those which later biographers have faced, and it opens up modern

biography by exposing it to something one can only call “the shock of the old”. In this book the periods covered are sufficiently far apart as superficially almost to have lost sight of one another. The first stretches from the fifth century BCE to the second century CE and covers Graeco-Roman biography, the Christian gospels and early lives of the saints; the second covers the late eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth (and to a lesser extent twenty-first) centuries. The range is deliberate, since I am endeavouring to think outside the box.

Throughout I have adopted the dual perspectives of an academic critic and an active author of lives: someone who wishes to conduct an argument, but also someone who wishes to tell a story. With an eye to a dramatic opening, the biographer in me has chosen for his narrative curtain raiser a gory assassination in Paris in 1791 so as to demonstrate how one particular passage in a classical author was able to incite political murder fifteen centuries after it was written. Then I lead through a documented discussion of issues raised by ancient life-writing for students of the classics to a sequence of chapters in which I introduce non-classicist readers to Plutarch, Suetonius, Procopius, the Christian evangelists and early writers of saints’ lives. The purpose of these chapters is to inform the non-classicists among my readers who these writers were, when and where they lived, what they wrote, to what extent they can be thought of as biographers and what is the critical consensus concerning them. Having provided this necessary and varied background (which I need to do in some detail, for my reader’s sake), I then turn to the impact of ancient life-writing on nineteenth-, twentieth- and twenty-first-century biography and, in the conclusion, on modern fiction and film. This structure is not entirely conventional, but it is deliberate.

The historical scope involved in this exercise is a mite ambitious but it is necessary and, I hope, salutary. During the modern period (i.e., at least since the end of the First World War and the elegant *coup de foudre* of Lytton Strachey) we have somehow got used to a misleading and foreshortened view of the history of biography. A revealing expression of it may be found in Virginia Woolf’s essay “The Art of Biography” from her posthumously published collection *The Death of A Moth* (1942). “Biography”, Woolf claimed, “compared with the arts of poetry and fiction, is a young art. Interest in ourselves and in other people’s lives is a late development of the human mind. Not until the eighteenth century in England did that curiosity express itself in writing the lives of private

people. Only in the nineteenth century was biography full grown and hugely prolific.”

Wonderful author and critic though Woolf was, her very incisiveness could at times mislead her. Woolf’s generation—which was also the generation of Strachey—was convinced that it had discovered biography anew, an illusion similar to the one which causes generation after generation to believe that it has discovered sex. Her essay was left unrevised at her death; had she lived she might have toned down her generalisations about one of the oldest of literary arts. Curiosity about the twists and turns of individual nature is older than the Parthenon. It is the contention of the present book, moreover, that the history of biographical writing has been extended, continuous and self-referential. There exists a long-standing biographical tradition, though it is not customary to call it by that name. Biographers have for centuries learned from each other, echoed or else reacted against one another: exercised and received what in the consideration of other literary genres is commonly known as “influence”.

Whichever way they approach their task, all biographers possess a common starting line. There exists a shared biographical question, or perhaps set of questions. How exactly does one relate the story of a given life—especially another’s life—with justice, candour, freshness and flair? In what order should a life be told? On whose evidence should one draw? Is “oral” evidence as reliable as written? For whom is one undertaking this task, and to what end? Should recorded lives serve as examples, either encouraging or cautionary, to others? To what extent, to render the life described more vivid or meaningful in the telling, is one entitled to tinker with the facts? What *are* facts in any case? What is truth, and what is falsehood? Should biography reflect all shades of society and opinion, all classes, professions, both (or now all) genders, all religious or political creeds, all types of behaviour? Should one aim to instruct, to amuse or to provoke? These are dilemmas that faced Plutarch and Suetonius in their time as surely as they faced Woolf in hers, and Holmes in his. The challenges involved in biography are perennial, and the answers, if not fixed and finite, are at least recognisably recurrent. If biography from diverse periods can profitably be compared, it is at least partly because its practitioners are all doing the same kind of thing, and facing the same array of problems.

Though there are common challenges, there are and have been various solutions. In my survey of the ancient field I go so far as to suggest a four-fold paradigm: biography as representation (in Chap. 3); biography as censure (in Chap. 4); biography as persuasion (in Chap. 5) and biography

as inner drama (in Chap. 6). I have chosen these four archetypes not only because they seem to me to exhaust the schools of ancient biography addressed but because they recur in later biography, sometimes in combination. Nowadays we seemingly live in an age of censure: as my account of nineteenth-century biography in Chap. 7 shows, it has not always been thus.

The discussion of these problems has, it appears to me, very often been held back by unavailing short cuts. Questions of definition, of course, are inevitable. A recurrent bugbear, however, has been that those who concern themselves with these issues have too often started out with a ready-made rule of thumb, sometimes culled from a dictionary, which they have then attempted to apply lock stock and barrel to the particular biography or group of biographies in which they are interested. What they seem to be looking for is a set of rules which they can then apply to the text or texts in hand to see whether or not they comply. Yet, as Hermione Lee has emphatically demonstrated, while a number of rules are customarily adduced, the principal and overriding rule is that, in very many of the most interesting biographies—ancient or modern—all or most of these are broken. A far more constructive approach is to adjust the rules to the plenitude of examples available and to expand our definitions to suit them. Better to take a close look at the way in which classical or modern biographies, whether of men or women, soldiers, monarchs, saints or sinners, crooks and/or politicians, or of Jesus Christ, recount these lives, and to adjust our notions of biography accordingly.

Age answers to age. Throughout ancient biography moments occur that take us aback with the appearance of what we might call modernity. One such occurs towards the end of an eight-volume life of Apollonius of Tyana, a neo-Pythagorean sage of the first century AD, written in the following century by Lucius Flavius Philostratus, one of the most versatile authors of the Hellenistic world. Apollonius is revisiting Rome several years after an earlier episode in which he niftily escaped the clutches of the emperor Nero. This time his opponent is the new emperor Domitian, an unscrupulous bully with a reputation for persecuting Christians amongst others. Domitian wants Apollonius out of the way, so arraigns him before the court on a trumped-up charge of wizardry. On the morning of the trial, Philostratus invites us to eavesdrop on the tetchy Emperor as he rustles through his papers in preparation for what he hopes will be a definitive and damning case:

Let us now repair to the law court to listen to the sage pleading his cause, for it is already sunrise and the door is open to receive the celebrities. And the companions of the Emperor say that they have taken no food that day because, I imagine, he was so absorbed in examining the documents of the case. For they say that he was holding in his hand a roll of writing of some sort, sometimes reading it with anger, and sometimes more calmly. And we must needs figure him as one who was angry with the law for having invented such a thing as courts of justice.

Here is a sort of verisimilitude, a graphic fly-on-the-wall vividness we might associate with the cinema or with courtroom dramas on television or Netflix (“Cut to the courtroom; subdued hum of voices; judge evidently agitated and distressed”). The apparent familiarity of the scene of course tells us more about ourselves—our hunger for life in the raw, our resentment of authority, our appetite for legal conflict—than it does about Philostratus. Nonetheless, the seeming recognition of a flicker from everyday life demonstrates one of the many ways in which the biographical writings of the ancients appeal to us. Our response is part of the story.

The passage quoted here is quite unlike anything else in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. The use of the present tense, the invitation to the reader to pry into a semi-enclosed world of official procedure and then the turbulent mind of one of the chief actors mark it out as a departure from the chronological and dialectic modes in which the remainder of the narrative is couched. Philostratus is trying out a new trick.

Biography involves a lot of preparatory sweat and toil, straining after elusive facts, but the end result is always an art form. Being art, it is experimental. All biographers, whether ancient or modern, take risks, involve themselves in acts of daring, but so do we when reading them. Biography is not a closed form nor does it succumb easily to definitions. This openness is something we associate with our more adventurous contemporaries, but it is equally a feature of antiquity. This is another reason why it is profitable to consider ancient and modern biography side by side.

Charlbury, UK
Good Friday, 2020

Robert Fraser

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what the Greek classics may mean to a younger generation, and to the Thanasi family in general for their hospitality in Albania and Athens.

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CHAPTER 1

Paris in Parallel: Classical Biography in an Age of Revolution

Who does not know David's painting of Marat in the bath? Done from the life—or rather from the death—it depicts the prolific author, one-time physician (MD, St Andrews) and now revolutionary journalist and self-styled “friend of the people” just a few hours after his assassination by the twenty-four-year-old Charlotte Corday in July 1793. Marat is lying on his side, a towel around his head, a quill in his dangling right hand. (Marat's works included a *Treatise on Light*, *An Essay on Slavery*, and a helpful work on the treatment of gonorrhoea.) Before him is an improvised desk, a cloth-covered board on which he wrote while steeping himself in a medicinal salve of his own concoction. As a qualified and somewhat opinionated doctor he had decided that the skin complaint contracted in the sewers of Paris while hiding from his political opponents necessitated these ablutions for much of the day. In his left hand he holds a letter of introduction that Corday had brought under the pretext of exposing the enemies of the government. His face is so serene that he might be sleeping. There is more than a touch of the Christ from Michelangelo's *Pietà* about him. His skin is smooth and white: no sign of the ravages of skin disease there. The light source is high up to his left and, again, it seems a sort of celestial beam. Here is a fit object for veneration as much as for lament: a martyr to the French Revolution then a mere four years old. A revolutionary icon, no less.

What are the messages implicit in this image? Since, depend on it, Jacques-Louis David, an associate of Robespierre and a vocal member of

the Jacobin Club, intended his work to be didactic, and thus—despite earlier misgivings about this eccentric intellectual entertained by the Jacobin leadership—was it immediately received. That Marat died unjustly, certainly. That he was a thinker, a scholar, a hero probably, a martyr certainly, maybe even a secular saint. But it is the sculptural, clean-limned, neo-classical style of the picture that commands attention just as surely as its subject. Nineteen years earlier, David, then a student at the Académie royale, had won the academy's coveted Prix de Rome with a depiction of a scene from Plutarch's *Life of Demetrius*: "Eristratus Discovering the Causes of Antiochus' Disease". (Antiochus was in love with his mother-in-law, who had already borne him a child.) It had been David's fourth attempt, having failed a third time the previous year with an equally lurid scene from Suetonius's "Life of the Emperor Nero": the suicide of the philosopher Seneca (also featuring a bath, but this time a foot-bath). The authorities at the Académie, naturally, chose the subject prescribed each year. Since 1775, when Louis XVI had appointed Charles-Claude Flahaut de la Billaderie, Comte d'Angeviller as the new director with the instruction to found a new school of historical painting, preference had been given to classical themes.¹ In David's case, this had often involved hunting for suitable sources in ancient biography. His eventual victory would far from exhaust his preoccupation the classics. After spending four years in Rome, he had painted a succession of episodes from Graeco-Roman literature. "The Oath of the Horatii" of 1784 drew on a scene from Livy; "The Dedication of the Eagles" copied images that the young David had observed on Trajan's Column in the Forum. "The Death of Socrates" in 1787 derived its story from Plato, while in 1789, the year of the outbreak of the Revolution, "The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons" had extended a dramatic episode from the life of a founder of the Roman republic who features both in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and in Plutarch's "Life of Poplicola". In 1730 Voltaire had written a play about this particular Brutus, Lucius Junius Brutus, a remote ancestor of the more famous Marcus Brutus, the assassin of Julius Caesar. When revived in 1790, it gave rise to a fanatical wave of Republican enthusiasm and even a hairdo, *la coiffure Brutus*, copied from the curly crop sported by the actor who had played one of the fated sons. When in June 1820 an aspiring young painter asked the mature David how to choose a subject for a new canvas, the

¹ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 171.

veteran master replied in three words “Feuillez votre Plutarque”: “Browse through your Plutarch”.² Understandably so, since it had been the lives of those designated, in Bishop Amyot’s sixteenth-century French translation of Plutarch, “hommes illustres Grecs et Romains” which had provided the most dependable source for his paintings.³ Which brings us back again to Marat and his young murderess Charlotte Corday.

Marie-Anne Charlotte Corday d’Armont had been born in 1768 in the village of Saint-Saturnin-des-Limoges in the commune of Écorches near Caen in Normandy. Her people were decayed gentry, royalist in sympathy, who had seen better days. The playwright Pierre Corneille (1606–1684), as she was only too aware, was a remote ancestor. He had drawn several of his plots from classical sources, frequently highlighting the dynamic role of his women characters. His first tragedy to be staged, *Medée* (1635), had taken its story from Euripides, and it had stressed Medea’s plight and decisiveness. The storyline of *La Mort de Pompée* (1642) showcased the would-be assassin Cornelia: it was derived from Plutarch, who had depicted her as a geometer, philosopher and expert player on the lyre. The plot of *Oedipe*, the Sun King’s favourite among his works, came from Sophocles. One of his last plays *Tite et Bérénice* (1670) drew on the *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius and vividly evoked the desolation of Berenice, the Jewish queen, who was banished from Rome by the Emperor to placate the xenophobia of the populace.⁴

So Corday had grown up beneath an ample shade of literature, much of it ancient and biographical, which she was disposed to read in a proto-feminist light. She had extended this debt to the classics in early adolescence. After her mother and elder sister died, her grief-stricken father had sent her to the convent of L’Abbaye des Dames in Caen, in the library of which she discovered works by Voltaire, Rousseau and Plutarch. Rousseau, as she would have read in his *Confessions*, had enjoyed an enthusiasm for Plutarch’s *Lives* as a young man.⁵ Since there is no evidence that she had been taught Greek, Corday must have read them in the sixteenth-century translation by Bishop Jacques Amyot, rendered from a manuscript in the Vatican. It was an internationally famous version on which even the

² Anita Brookner, *Jacques-Louis David* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1980), 182 and passim.

³ See footnote 19 below.

⁴ Pierre Corneille, *Théâtre Complet* texte préfacé et annoté par Pierre Lièvre; édition complétée par Roger Caillois (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1958), i, 47.

Englishman Sir Thomas North had relied for his translation of 1579–1603. (North knew no more Greek than did Shakespeare who, consequently, had taken all of his Plutarch-derived plots from him.)

Corday had been twenty-one, and still at L'Abbaye des Dames, when the Revolution erupted. Two years afterwards, she left the Convent and lodged with her aunt and cousin in the centre of the town, where she imbibed a local, and distinctively provincial, view of national politics. She had never been to Paris, where the revolution was fast adopting a more extreme course.⁶ The local newspaper covered the whirlpooling events: the Tennis Court Oath, the calling of the Estates-General, the splitting of the Third Estate into factions. Notably among the cliques was La Montagne (The Mountain, thus named since they sat at a high bench) including the vocal Jacobin Club which championed the cause of the urban proletariat and insisted on the guillotining of the King. Against them were ranged the Girondins, provincial based, who counselled less desperate measures. Charlotte was strongly influenced by the Girondins, who were very active in Caen. Her aunt's house where she now lodged overlooked *P'intendance*, their headquarters in town, and she had met some of their ring-leaders, notably Charles Jean-Marie Barbaroux. She was just twenty-two when news arrived of the execution of the King and Queen in the newly renamed Place de la Révolution, previously la Place Louis XV, now and ironically La Place de la Concorde. Though Charlotte had grown up in a royalist family, she now regarded herself as firmly republican. The Girondins offered a middle way, epitomised for her by the wife of one of their leaders, Madame de Roland, born Manon Philipion⁷ whose political education, like Corday's, had owed much to Plutarch. At the age of nine she had carried a copy of his works to Mass each Sunday, and later wrote "It was at that moment that I date the impression of ideas that were to make me a republican".⁸ Both women were very conscious that the balance of power in the Convention in Paris was shifting in favour of Les Montagnards. Robespierre was their ring-leader, Marat their mouthpiece: his newspaper *L'Ami du Peuple* was easily to be acquired in the streets of Caen.

⁶ Michel Corday, *Charlotte Corday* tr. E. F. Buckley (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1931), 103.

⁷ Chantal Thomas, "Les exemples de Charlotte Corday et de Madame Roland", *Po&Sic* 49 (Bicentenaire de, 1789), 1989, 82–91.

⁸ Madame Roland, *Lettres* ed. Claude Perroud (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1802), 512.

The climax to the story is related by Jean Epois in his *L’Affaire Corday/Marat: Prélude à la Terreur*.⁹ In the second week of July 1793 Corday told her widowed father that she was going to pay a visit to England. Instead, on Tuesday 9th, her cousin saw her off on the Paris diligence. As she entered the carriage she held a copy—presumably an octavo, one-volume edition—of the Amyot Plutarch to allay the tedium of the two-day journey. At five o’ clock on the afternoon of the 11th she alighted in the capital. Then she and her Plutarch checked in at the Hôtel de Providence in the Rue des Augustins, where she slept for fifteen solid hours. On Friday morning she composed an Address to the French People, arguing that she was acting in the interests of Res Publica, the Public Thing, la République. She spent the rest of the day, in the words of Jules Michelet, “quietly reading that Bible to personal fortitude, Plutarch’s *Lives*”.¹⁰ The following morning she purchased a 5 inch kitchen knife from a shop near the Palais Royal. She had intended to confront the Friend of the People at the National Assembly. Instead, learning that his skin complaint nowadays confined him to his home in the Cordeliers neighbourhood, she presented herself at his house, only to be turned away by Marat’s sister-in-law, Cathérine. That evening, having sent another note pleading her pure, revolutionary intentions, she turned up again at the flat, whereupon Marat called out that she should be admitted. She handed over to him a list of Girondin contacts in Caen. Marat promised her that these people would promptly be guillotined. Then she drew the knife from her dress and struck him through the chest.

She knew what her punishment would be. The following day she wrote to Barbaroux from the Abbaye prison, stating “Those who disapprove of my actions will be pleased to see me at rest in the Elysian Fields with Brutus and some few of the ancients”.¹¹ Did she mean Brutus the founder of the Roman republic or his notorious descendant, the assassin? Both were Republic icons. In front of the tribunal she defended her actions, reiterating her apologia from her Address, arguing that she had acted in the

⁹Jean Epois, *L’Affaire Corday-Marat: Prélude à la Terreur* (Paris: FeniXX réédition numérique, 1980), passim.

¹⁰Jules Michelet, *Les Femmes de la Révolution* (Paris: Editions Adolphe Delachays, 1854), Chap. 8.

¹¹Letter headed “Charlotte Corday à Barbaroux. Aux prisons de l’Abbaye dans la ci-devant chambre de Brissot, le second jour de la préparation de la paix, quoted in Couet-Gironville, *Charlotte Corday. Décapitée A Paris, Le 17 Juillet 1793 ou Mémoire Pour Servir à l’Histoire de la Vie de Cette Femme Célèbre* (Paris: chez le Citoyen Gilbert, 1796), 140.

interests of the Republic, which she hoped to save from the extremes of bitter men. She was Marcus Brutus, risen against an impish, pock-marked Caesar.

Corday was guillotined on July 17 and ever since has divided opinion. When the tide turned against the Enlightenment during the nineteenth century, the poet Lamartine dubbed her “l’ange de l’assassinat”, the angel of assassination. She became a sort of counter-revolutionary Jeanne d’Arc. In the post-modern twentieth century, her intervention was surrealistically and gruesomely staged in Peter Weiss’s morbid Marat/Sade play in which Danton’s murder was re-enacted by the inmates of a lunatic asylum under the direction of The Marquis de Sade. Filmed under the direction of Peter Brook, it was the perfect illustration of the principles of Theatre of Cruelty as further explained in Brook’s book *The Empty Space*. The result however told one more about the disturbed mind of central Europe in the post-war period than about the French Revolution, the versatile and afflicted Marat, the determined and clear-sighted Corday, or indeed the libertine and masturbatory Marquis. The prevailing impression conveyed by Charlotte Corday’s behaviour at the time remains one of resignation and calm deliberation. She was very conscious of what she was doing and fully prepared to face the consequences. In the hours before the tumbrel arrived to take her to her place of execution, she caused her portrait to be painted, demure and serious beneath her lace cap. Hers was an existential choice made with neo-classical determination and grace (at least, as she perceived these qualities). Her experience had prepared her for this sacrifice. But so, it should be emphasised, had her reading of ancient lives.

THE LAST OF THE ROMANS

Revolutionary assassination was one public parallel to be derived from reading of classical biography; a second was a political model of democracy copied from the Romans, a third was paganism, a fourth was revolutionary suicide. A fifth, eventually, was to be their seeming opposite: counter-revolution.

Paganism was a side-effect of the de-Christianisation, and more specifically de-catholicisation, which the Revolution required in order to purge itself of the remnants of royal and ecclesiastical control. Its prime progenitor and hit-man was Pierre Gaspard Chaumette, the twenty-eight-year-old President of the Commune and a leading opponent of the Girondins, who had changed his apostolic first name to Anaxagoras after the pre-Socratic

philosopher whose views are set out in Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*. Richard Cobb has outlined the effects of the consequent secularisation, which invariably took the form of a substitution of classical, mostly Roman, stereotypes for traditional Catholic forms:

In May 1793 the Commune stopped the payment of clerical salaries and publicly tried to prevent the public exercise of Catholicism. It closed the churches in Paris and forced over 400 priests to abdicate. Chaumette demanded that the former metropolitan church of Notre-Dame be re-consecrated to the cult of Reason. The Convention hastened to comply and on 10 November a civic festival was held in the temple, its façade bearing the words "To Philosophy".¹²

One result of this alienation from—and obliteration of—every vestige of *l'ancien régime* was the institution late in 1793 of the Republican Calendar. It was devised by a committee of three headed by the mathematician Charles-Gilbert Romme, who presented their findings to the Committee of Public Instruction that September. With the help of the head gardener from the Jardin des Plantes, the months were renamed along botanical and meteorological lines, and each month was divided into three weeks of ten days each. The traditional saints' days gave way before commemorations of great men of the past. December 25 became a feast for Newton.

This was the high tide of Jacobinism. By late 1794 the Jacobins were in retreat. Marat's body was disinterred from the Panthéon—where it had replaced Mirabeau's—dragged through the streets and chucked into a common grave. On 29 Priarial of the sixth year of the Revolution (June 17, 1795, according to the old calendar), Romme and two comrade Jacobins, Pierre-Amable Soubrany and Jean-Marie Goujon, were arraigned on the orders of the Dirétoire. Condemned to the guillotine by a revolutionary tribunal, the "last of the Montagnards" as they became known elected instead to take their own lives on their way out of the courtroom. With Victorian distaste, Thomas Carlyle later described the scene in *The French Revolution: A History*: "Hearing the sentence, Goujon drew a knife, struck it into his breast, passed it to his neighbour Romme; and fell dead. Romme did the like; and another all-but did it: Roman dead rushing on there, as in an electric chain, before your Bailiffs could intervene! The

¹²Richard Cobb et al. *The French Revolution: Voices from a momentous epoch 1789–1795* (London: Guild Publishing, 1988), 202.

Guillotine had the rest.” “They”, concludes Carlyle, “were *Ultimi Romanorum*”, the last of the Romans.¹³

Suicide had long been a talking point for the Enlightenment. There were plenty of *exempla* in classical life-writing, especially in Plutarch’s *Lives*. Marcus Brutus and Marcus Antonius, sworn enemies to one another, had both fallen on their swords. The Church had anathemised the practice so, partly for this reason, it had become fashionable action for intellectual freethinkers to defend it. In 1777, in Edinburgh, that “Athens of the North”, David Hume wrote an essay “Of Suicide” that remains in manuscript since its publication was suppressed.¹⁴ His argument is simple, and apparently derived from Christian, or more strictly Deistic, principles. All occurrences are governed by divine law; suicide is an occurrence, and therefore it too is divinely ordained. The cosmos is Lucretian and indifferent; it does not care. It follows that “the life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster”. It appears to have been a matter of no account to Hume that the same argument might be used to exonerate murder.

The philosopher Montesquieu, a few decades previously, had long wrestled with this dilemma. In his *Lettres persanes* (1721) he had imagined a flow of correspondence from two oriental visitors to the Paris of Louis XVI. Writing to associates back in Ispahan, they report on the oddities of western Christian society, among which is an entrenched prejudice against self-destruction. In Letter 76, Usbek, who is writing to his friend Ibben, inveighs against this prejudice, represented by him as a tyrannical imposition on free will: “It appears to me today ... that these statutes are quite unfair. When weighed down with pain, misery or misunderstanding, why do they stop me putting an end to my misfortunes and cruelly rob me of a remedy that lies in my own hands.”¹⁵ As if to illustrate the point, the work ends with the mass suicide, back in Ispahan, of most of the harem. In his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) Montesquieu considers the frequency of suicide in ancient Rome, drawing extensively on Plutarch, specifically the deaths of

¹³Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History* [1837] (Oxford University Press, 1907), ii, 440. In Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, V. iii, the “last of the Romans” are Cassius and Licinius, and the words in English are spoken by Marcus Brutus. In the singular, the Latin phrase had been applied by Julius Caesar to Brutus himself.

¹⁴David Hume, “Of Suicide”, National Library of Scotland Ms. 509.

¹⁵Montesquieu, *Oeuvres de Montesquieu avec Les Remarques des Divers Commentateurs et Les Notes Inédites*. Seul Edition Complète (Paris: D’Antoine Bavaux, 1825), 517.

Brutus and Cato. “Several causes may be adduced for so general a custom among the Romans as this of administering one’s own death”, he remarks, “the progress of Stoicism which encouraged it; the institution of triumphs and slavery, which made a number of great men reluctant to survive a defeat; the advantage gained by those accused through disposing of their own lives rather than submitting to an indictment that would sully their reputation and cause their property to be seized; a subtle point of honour, arguably more reasonable than that which prompts us to eviscerate a friend for a mere gesture or word; lastly a grand pretext enabling each person to complete the role he had played on the world’s stage, each man putting an end to the part he played when and just as he chose”.¹⁶ In *De l’esprit des lois* (1750), he remarks cryptically that, in contrast to the English, who often seemed to top themselves irrationally, the Romans invariably possessed clear-sighted reasons why they thought it appropriate to take their own lives.¹⁷

Suicide then was a socially conditioned act which changed its complexion from one culture to another and between historical periods. Montesquieu remains an outstanding early example of a cultural relativist. By the 1790s, half a century later, when society and its laws were in a state of dangerous flux, the way lay open for parallels with ancient Rome, on which so much, aesthetically and politically, was now being modelled. Brutus and Cato, it could be argued, had destroyed themselves in reaction against the erosion of the Republic and the growing threat of despotism. As in Paris the revolution grew more and more extreme, seemingly eating its own children, eventually giving itself over to the control of a supremely gifted tyrant, analogies with a Rome confronted with the menace of the Caesars became increasingly uncomfortable and compelling. Romme’s last recorded words, before he plunged in the knife, were “I die for the Republic”.¹⁸

¹⁶ Montesquieu (1825), 419.

¹⁷ Montesquieu (1825), 370.

¹⁸ Jules Claretie, *Les Derniers Montagnards: Histoire de l’Insurrection de Prairial An III* D’Après les Documents Originaux et Inédits (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1865). See also Marc de Vissac, *Un Conventionnel du Puy-de-Dôme: Romme le Montagnard* (Clermond-Ferrand: Dilhan-Vivès, 1883) and *Gilbert Romme (1750–1795) et son temps* Jean Ehrard and Albert Soboul eds. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966).

PLUTARCH AS A TEXTBOOK FOR LIFE

Taking one's personal bearing from the writers of ancient lives was already an established habit in France. In *Biography and the Question of Literature in France* (2007), Ann Jefferson alludes to the "pragmatics" of biography, the convention in accordance which early modern readers turned to authors like Plutarch for models as to how to behave. These Greek and Roman lives were held to be exemplary, fit objects for imitation. In support of this view Jefferson quotes Jacques Amyot, Bishop of Auxerre (1513–1593), who had set out his purpose in rendering Plutarch into French in the Preface to the first edition of his translation, published between 1554 and 1560.¹⁹ Plutarch's lives are worth perusing for a variety of readers, Amyot had declared, but principally "because [examples] do not only declare what it to be done but also worke a desire to do it, as well in respect of a certain natural inclination which all men have to follow examples, as also for the beautie of virtue, which is of such power, that wheresoever she is seene, she maketh herself to be loved and liked".²⁰ Two years later, much the same argument was voiced by Crusenius in his Latin translation of 1561. As Jefferson insists, this repeated claim for the beneficial potential of reading the ancient lives was in conformity with what Plutarch himself had twice stated to be his objective: once in his life of Pericles and once in the life of Aemilius. Both of whom, one might add, are distinguished in his accounts by their almost total lack of personal blemish.

So persuasive a view is this that it can blind the modern reader to just how odd, over-determined and in some ways lopsided, a view of the whole run of Plutarch's *Lives* it actually represents. There are fifty lives in all, and many of them are far from exemplary or blameless. These mini-biographies are not self-sufficient entities but paired—one Roman against one Greek. What unites or divides the pairs is just as often the weakness or vices of the individuals concerned as their strengths. Coriolanus and Alcibiades, for example, are combined because, misled by public admiration, they each betrayed their country. Demetrius and Anthony "were insolent in prosperity, and abandoned themselves to luxurious enjoyments". Phocion and

¹⁹ Plutarque de Charonée, *Les vies des hommes illustres Grecs et Romains comparées l'une à l'autre translattées de Grec en François par Monsieur Jacques Amyot Abbé de Bellozane, Eveque d'Auxerre etc.* (Paris: Michel de Vascosan, 1554–1560.)

²⁰ Anne Jefferson, *Biography and The Question of Literature in France* (Oxford University Press), 32.

Cato the Younger were self-willed, stubborn and humourless. Themistocles and Camillus forfeited the trust of their fellow citizens, and both ended in exile or disgrace. In other cases, the burden of the comparison lies in the superiority of one partner over the other. Cato is boastful; Aristides is not. Cato's is profligate and ruins his descendants; Aristides is careful and hands on his wealth. Nicias's fortune was got by honest means, Crassius's was gained through usury. Demosthenes's oratory was direct and unstudied, "not smelling of the lamp", while Cicero's was deliberate and showy. Dion's rebellion against the tyrant Dionysus II was justified, while Brutus's disloyalty to Caesar was peevish: "It was not the same thing for the Sicilians to be freed from Dionysus as for the Romans to be freed from Caesar". And so on and so forth.

From the reader's point of view, the inventory of virtues and vices involved in these parallels is frequently less striking than the continuity between them. In practice, as with Alexander the Great and Caesar, the failings of the individuals concerned often represent the flip-side of their virtues. It is this consistency within disparity, the psychological laws underlying and governing the contradictions of character, that overall seems to interest Plutarch most.

Once he had been translated from the rare Greek manuscripts, this is certainly the impression made by Plutarch on his Renaissance readers. Of no one was this truer than the author who, more than any other, popularised Plutarch among the French. In 1580, a couple of decades after Amyot's influential translation, we find the philosophical writer Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533–1592) lauding its excellences in lavish terms in his Essay "A demain les affaires". Montaigne confesses his ignorance of Greek, but then praises the late Bishop and translator, not simply for the purity and directness of his style (qualities which Montaigne is anxious to emulate) but for opening his eyes to the wisdom to be found in the Lives which he recommends to his own readers as "nostre bréviaire": "Ignorant people like us would have been lost if that book had not brought us up out of the mire: thanks to it, we now dare to live and write—and the ladies teach the dominies; it is our breviary".

Montaigne cites Plutarch no less than five hundred times in the *Essais*; if Sarah Bakewell is right indeed, *The Moralia* may even have suggested the form the *Essais* took. He cites him on the ambivalence of weeping,²¹

²¹ "Comme nous pleurons et rions d'une même chose", *Essais*, Book 1. Ch. xxxviii, citing Plutarch's "Life of Timoleon".

on Latin style²² and on the subjectivity of apprehension.²³ He cites him on the universal obligation of benevolence,²⁴ on the detection of false flattery²⁵ and on overlooking the minor faults of the great.²⁶ He cites him on the necessity of self-discipline,²⁷ on the benefit of experiencing opposite extremes²⁸ and on the obligation to honour the dead.²⁹ He is most sensitive to him when his observations are most paradoxical, most open to the flow and counter-flow of life. Manifestly, Plutarch and Montaigne took to one another: something polymathic, almost polymorphic, in the Greek author's temperament clearly appealed. Montaigne's Plutarch is an author less of precepts than of curiosities, odd insights and off-the-wall observations. In general, he is as interested in Plutarch the psychologist as in Plutarch the moralist.

Take, for example, a theme of some relevance to Corday, Romme and the "last of the Montagnards", and also to the young Napoleon: stoicism. I mean stoicism in the practical sense of the term—fortitude, or patience under duress—rather than in its strictly philosophical sense, of which Plutarch writes more specifically in the *Moralia*. Though Plutarch does not always use the word as such, he often brings the subject up, especially in relation to a clutch of lives depicting eminent men of Sparta. In these cases, Plutarch is writing many centuries after the deaths of those concerned, whom he may in consequence have over-idealised.

It is to Plutarch, more than any other authority, that we owe our idea of Spartan restraint. In *Moralia* he treats such fortitude as a virtue, as when in *De Ira* he praises the emperor Nero for his self-control when learning that an expensive octagonal tent he had ordered has been lost at sea. (Seneca, his tutor, had advised him under such circumstances to

²² "In "Que Philosopher, c'est apprendre a mourir", *Essais*, Book I, Ch xx, citing The Life of Cicero.

²³ "Que le gout des biens et des maux depend en bonne partie d'opinion que nous en avons", *Essais*, Book I, ch. xiv" citing The Life of Brutus.

²⁴ In "De la cruauté", *Essais*, Book 11. Ch, xxxviii, citing Plutarch's "Life of Timoleon".

²⁵ In "Apologie de Raimond Sebond", *Essais*, Book ii, ch xii, citing "Quomodo adulator ab amico. internoscator" ("How to distinguish flattery from friendship") in Plutarch's *Moralia*.

²⁶ From "De plus excellents hommes", *Essais*, Book 11, ch. xxxvi, citing "The Life of Alexander".

²⁷ In "De la vanité", *Essais*, Bk 111, ch. ix, citing "The Life of Solon".

²⁸ In "De l'expérience", *Essais*, Bk 111 ch. xiii, citing "The Life of Philemon".

²⁹ In "De l'expérience", citing "The Life of Pompey" (and quoting Amyot's translation), and "The Life of Julius Caesar".

remain calm.) In the *Lives*, and especially the Spartan lives, by contrast, self-control is more often treated as a form of human behaviour objectively observed, irrespective of moral or didactic comment.

Montaigne mentions two examples of such forbearance in his essay “Défence de Sénèque et de Plutarque”. Here Montaigne is protecting Plutarch’s reputation against criticisms levelled a few years earlier by the jurist Jean Bodin in *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*. Bodin had taken Plutarch to task for his credulity and lack of realism when portraying self-control in others. In the “Life of Lycurgus” Plutarch tells of a Spartan lad who allowed a stolen fox cub he had hidden under his tunic to eviscerate him rather than owning up to his theft. In the same life he mentions another Spartan boy serving as a thurifer at the altar of Diana who refused to cry out when a cinder from the smouldering incense ran down his sleeve and burned his whole forearm.

In reprising these anecdotes, it is clear that Montaigne is far more interested in the reflexes demonstrated by these young stalwarts than in the morality of the tasks they are engaged in. One is a thief, the other a diligent altar boy. In Montaigne’s eyes (and, I would argue in Plutarch’s too), what is most interesting is that they are equally obstinate or brave, these two mental states being akin. Montaigne expands on this point by adducing experiences within his personal knowledge. Some of these involve people who have refused to abjure their religious or political convictions under torture, as on the rack; others are instances of mere petulant cussedness. In Gascony especially it appears, “I have known hundreds of women ... who would rather bite into red-hot iron than abandon an opinion they had conceived in anger”. Bearing in mind the thoughts about the necessity of controlling one’s rage expressed by his mentor Plutarch in *De Ira*, it is doubtful that Montaigne regards the intransigence of these women folk as being in any way exemplary, since ironically their anger is the source of their self-control. They are motivated by pique, where those in his earlier example are supported by faith. For Montaigne, however, they illustrate the same psychological law: whether from pride, from determination or from cussedness, people under stress do not like to give up.

This is the multivalent humanist vision of Plutarch inherited by Shakespeare, who draws on him in all three of his Roman plays and *Timon of Athens*. The protagonists of each of these tense dramas are bitterly torn: Caesar between duty and ambition, Brutus between loyalty and liberty, Antony between discipline and desire, Cleopatra between Egypt and Rome, Coriolanus between fealty and arrogance, Timon between