

Plutarch and Athens

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Periclean Athens, a city raised by one man's will to its cultural and military zenith, is a concept that owes much of its vitality to Plutarch.¹

This topic suggested itself to me by a passage in the *Life of Aristeides*. Struck by the largesse of the Athenian people to a descendant of Aristeides and Aristogeiton's grand-daughter, Plutarch remarks: "We need not be surprised to hear that the people took such care of families living in Athens The city of Athens has given many such examples of humanity and goodness of heart (φιλανθρωπίας και χρηστότητος . . . δείγματα) even in my own day, and for this she is justly praised and admired."² I asked myself, what kind of practical effect did this favorable impression made by Athens have on Plutarch's work? How often, in fact, does he allude to Athenian customs, institutions, cults and monuments? What kinds of things does he record about ancient Athens? What particularly has stuck in his mind, so that he singles it out for mention?

A preliminary word about method. Research for this paper was done with the *TLG* laser disc and an Ibycus computer at the University of Washington, Seattle; I am grateful to the Classics department and especially Professors L. Bliquez, J. Clauss and M. Langdon for their courteous assistance. I have left out of account those treatises marked doubtful or spurious by D. A. Russell.³

One obvious yardstick of Plutarch's interest in Athens is the number of Athenian subjects of his biographies: 10 out of the 23 Greek *Lives* (3 Spartan, 2 Theban and the rest "other").⁴ But within the *Lives* themselves and scattered throughout the *Moralia* there are numerous references to Athenian cults, customs and institutions. In addition, there are certain treatises that are devoted to Athenian topics, either wholly, such as *De gloria Atheniensium*, or in part, such as *De malignitate Herodoti*; or that

¹ C. P. Jones, "Plutarch," in T. J. Luce, ed., *Ancient Writers, Greece and Rome* (New York 1982) II. 979.

² *Arist.* 27. 6-7, trans. Scott-Kilvert; cf. *Mor.* 558C for honors paid to Cimon's descendants.

³ *Plutarch* (London 1973) 164-72.

⁴ Cf. R. H. Barrow, *Plutarch and His Times* (London 1967) 53.

have an Athenian setting, e.g., certain books of the *Quaestiones convivales*; or which almost of necessity (because of the subject matter) draw their examples largely from Athenian history, like *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae*.

Of course, Plutarch had ample opportunity to become familiar with Athens and her monuments and to learn about her history. Born sometime between 40 and 45 A.D. he was a pupil of the philosopher Ammonios at Athens in about 65, is known to have been there in about 80 and was present at the celebration of the City Dionysia of 96–97.⁵ At some point in his career he was made an honorary Athenian citizen of the tribe Leontis.⁶ At the end of *Themistocles* Plutarch reveals that some of the information about the descendants of the fifth-century statesman came from a later Themistocles, whom Plutarch describes as “a friend and fellow-student of mine in the school of Ammonios the philosopher” (*Them.* 32. 6, trans. Scott-Kilvert). He has special information about the tribe Aiantis (*Arist.* 19. 6, *Mor.* 628A–E), which suggests that he was on close terms with someone from that tribe, or at least that he took special care to seek out information about it. He relates an incident towards the end of *Demosthenes* that he says occurred “a little while before I moved to Athens” (*Dem.* 31. 1). Athens was, as Plutarch reminds his friend the poet Serapion, who had the cultural advantages offered by residency there, a “great city” (*Mor.* 384E). In Plutarch’s view there was something permanent, unchanging, but utterly characteristic of Athens and her people. “One could recognize Athens [Plutarch remarks] on seeing it after a lapse of thirty years, and the present traits and moods, games and graver interests, favoritisms and angers of the δῆμος are like those of old” (*Mor.* 559B).

To return to the passage at the end of *Aristeides*. The qualities which Plutarch commends in the Athenian nation are φιλανθρωπία and χρηστότης. As a small but telling example of this φιλανθρωπία Plutarch twice cites the refusal of the Athenians to break the seal in the letter sent by Philip of Macedon to his wife Olympias when the Athenians had intercepted Philip’s messengers and read all the other letters they had seized (*Demet.* 22. 2, *Mor.* 799E). There is another, rather frivolous, example in the *De sollertia animalium*. Plutarch tells two animal stories, the first of which he says occurred “when our fathers were studying at Athens.” A dog relentlessly pursued a robber whom it had seen stealing treasures from the temple of Asclepius. Finally the culprit was apprehended and punished, whereupon the dog was rewarded with a public ration of food and entrusted to the care of the temple priests (*Mor.* 969F–970A). This reminds Plutarch of another incident illustrative of the Athenians’ φιλανθρωπεία: a mule

⁵ Plutarch and Ammonios at the time of Nero’s visit to Greece: *Mor.* 385B, C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971) 16–17; “in Athens in the early 80s,” Jones 22 with n. 16; Dionysia of 96–97, Jones 27 n. 52.

⁶ Jones (preceding n.) 21, 109.

that because of age and infirmity had been retired from its task of hauling stones for the Parthenon nevertheless voluntarily accompanied the other draught-animals, “turning back with them and trotting along by their aide, as though to encourage and cheer them on” (Helmbold’s trans.). As with the dog, the Athenians rewarded the enterprising beast with maintenance at public expense (*Mor.* 970A–B and *Cat. mai.* 5. 3).

This quality of gentle and civilized self-restraint (“philanthropy”) clearly made a strong impression on Plutarch. The characteristic is mentioned, but is not the only quality to be included in a list of items that, for Plutarch, mark the Athenian character. In the *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* he comments at length on the necessity that the statesman, ὁ πολιτικός, be versatile, adaptable and ready to mould himself to the ever-changing populace he is trying to lead. “For the Athenian δῆμος,” Plutarch comments, “is easily moved to anger, easily turned to pity, more willing to suspect quickly than to be informed at leisure; as they are readier to help humble persons of no reputation, so they welcome and especially esteem facetious and amusing speeches; while they take most delight in those who praise them, they are least inclined to be angry with those who make fun of them; they are terrible even to their chief magistrates, then kindly [the word Plutarch uses is again φιλάνθρωπος] even to their enemies” (*Mor.* 799C, trans. Fowler).

At the end of the *Life of Dion*, Plutarch reports that Dion’s slayer, the Athenian Callipus, sent a letter back to Athens, an outrageous act from which he should have been deterred by “reverence and fear of that city, only second to the gods,” after committing such a sacrilege. “But it seems [Plutarch remarks] that it is truly said of Athens that she produces good men who are the best in virtue and bad men who are worst in vice, just as the Athenian soil grows the sweetest honey and the deadliest hemlock” (*Dion* 58. 1).

There are other allusions to this theme. “Cimon’s liberality surpassed even the ancient hospitality and φιλανθρωπία of the Athenians” (*Cim.* 10. 6). Nicias pleaded with his captor, Gylippus, to return like for like, saying “when the Athenians were successful, they dealt moderately and gently (μετρίως . . . καὶ πρώως) with you” (*Nic.* 27. 5). When the pro-Spartan Thebans fled to Athens after the capture of the Cadmeia in 382 B.C., Sparta actually demanded that they be handed over. The Athenians refused, both, Plutarch says, in repayment of the favor shown by the Thebans, who declined to join in overthrowing the democracy in 403 B.C., and also “in accord with the philanthropy which was ancestral and natural to them” (*Pelop.* 6. 4–5). A less attractive, perhaps even dangerous aspect of this mildness or leniency (πραότης) of the Athenians was their willingness to gloss over Alcibiades’ flagrant misbehavior, calling it mere “playfulness and ambition” (*Alc.* 16. 4). Plutarch is troubled by the reaction at Athens to news of Philip’s death. The Athenians “leapt upon and sang Paeans over his

corpse," even though, when Athens herself was down, "Philip had treated her ἡμέρως καὶ φιλανθρώπως" (*Dem.* 23. 4).

In the short, rather strange treatise *De gloria Atheniensium*, the paradoxical position is maintained that Athens' most lasting and significant achievements were those of her military commanders, not of her tragedians, historians or orators (this is a bias that manifests itself elsewhere in Plutarch's work, as, e.g., at the beginning of *Pericles*). Plutarch singles out for special commendation the bravery of the exhausted and outnumbered Athenians who faced Epaminondas at Mantinea in 362 B.C. (*Mor.* 346B ff.), and in a rhetorically effective passage he contrasts various orators' accounts of Athens' accomplishments with the glorious events themselves: Aristides at Plataea, the deposition of the "Thirty Tyrants," Phocion's expedition to Byzantium in 339 B.C. (*Mor.* 350B-C). Plutarch had a deep and genuine admiration for what Athens had achieved in the military and political spheres. In the *De exilio* (604D-E) he conflates two passages from Euripides (frs. 360. 7-10 and 981 Nauck), referring to the lines as the "Encomium on Athens."⁷ The quality praised by Euripides' character in the first passage is autochthony (. . . λεῶς οὐκ ἐπακτὸς ἄλλοθεν, αὐτόχθονες δ' ἔφουμεν) in contrast with other cities, whose populaces had had to be imported (εἰσαγώγμοι). (A contrast between Athens and Rome in this respect may have been in the back of Plutarch's mind as he cited the lines; he contrasts the two cities elsewhere in his work.) The second Euripidean citation praises Athens' climate, οὐρανὸν . . . εὐ κεκραμένον, neither too hot nor too cold, with a variety of natural products (or perhaps imported foods). Several times, in fact, Plutarch remarks on certain natural and topographical features of the city. Athens and Syracuse are about the same size (*Nic.* 17. 2). The Academy (which Sulla ravaged) was the most wooded of Athens' suburbs (*Sulla* 12. 3), and during the siege by Sulla the Heptachalcon (near the Peiraic gate⁸ and an area which was regularly left unguarded) proved to be the weak spot in the city's defenses, for it was through this that Sulla led his troops and took control of the city. During Sulla's invasion the Cerameicus "ran with blood" (*Mor.* 505B).

Athens and Rome

Given Plutarch's career, the comparison with Rome seems often very near the surface in his remarks about Athens, and occasionally it breaks out into the open. At the beginning of the *Life of Theseus* Plutarch explains why he has gone back to this subject after publishing his *Lycurgus* and *Numa*: "I decided [he writes] to make the founder of lovely and famous (τῶν καλῶν καὶ ἀοιδίμων) Athens stand against the founder of invincible and glorious

⁷ This suggests (although it does not prove) that Plutarch found the lines already anthologized.

⁸ Cf. Judeich, *Topographie von Athen*, 2nd ed., 368 n. 8.

(τῆς ἀνίκητου καὶ μεγαλοδόξου) Rome." In chapter two he comes back to his reasons for pairing Romulus and Theseus: "Of the most outstanding (τῶν ἐπιφανεστάτων) cities, Romulus founded one and Theseus synoecized the other" (*Thes.* 2. 2). Plutarch is of course aware that Rome's comparability to Athens is of relatively recent date. "By the side of the great public works, the temples, and the stately edifices, with which Pericles adorned Athens, all Rome's attempts at splendor down to the times of the Caesars, taken together, are not worthy to be considered; nay, the one had a towering pre-eminence above the other, both in grandeur of design and grandeur of execution, which precludes comparison" (*Comp. Per. et Fab.* 3. 7, trans. B. Perrin). At *Cat. mai.* 23. 2-3 he observes that Cato was wrong when he said Rome would lose her empire when she became filled with Greek learning; "when Rome was at its greatest height," Plutarch remarks, "she naturalized (ἔσχεν οἰκείως) every form of Greek learning and culture." From Cato's perspective the contrast could work to Greece's disadvantage. Plutarch refutes the story that, while in Athens, Cato delivered a speech in Greek before the Athenian δῆμος in which he alleged that he admired the ἀρετὴ of the ancient Athenians and was pleased to be an admiring observer (θεατής) of the city's beauty and size. Plutarch finds this story difficult to accept in view of the acid comment made by Cato who, while in Athens, availed himself of the services of an interpreter; ". . . the Athenians were astonished at the speed and pungency (ὀξύτης) of his discourse. For what [Cato] himself set forth with brevity, the interpreter would repeat to them at great length and with many words; and on the whole [Cato] thought the words of the Greeks were born on their lips, but those of the Romans in their hearts" (*Cat. mai.* 12. 7, trans. B. Perrin). There is a similar criticism, this time by Plutarch himself, implied in the observation of the different relationships between Nicias and Marcus Crassus and their respective cities. The former held back when the Athenians were enflamed with martial ardor for the conquest of Sicily, whereas Crassus' φιλαρχία and φιλοτιμία coerced the Romans into undertaking war with the Parthians against their better judgement; "the Athenians sent an unwilling Nicias to war, but it was the Romans who were unwilling when Crassus led them out" (*Comp. Nic. et Crass.* 3. 8). One further explicit comparison made by Plutarch may be noted. In the *Fortuna Romanorum* he remarks that the μέγας δαίμων of Rome blew upon the city not just by sea (ἐνάλιος), as that of Athens did, but "from its first creation [it] grew in maturity, in might, and in polity together with the city, and remained constant to it on land and sea, in war and in peace, against foreigners, against Greeks" (*Mor.* 324B, trans. F. C. Babbitt). In other words, Rome's successes were far more varied and enduring than those of other powers, among them Athens, with which Rome might in principle be compared.

Dates

Since Plutarch has in mind an international audience, which he must have hoped would include literate Athenians, he frequently mentions equivalent Athenian dates. (He also had a special interest in dates and wrote a treatise *περὶ ἡμερῶν*⁹.) Hekatombaion is Boeotian Hippodromios (*Cam.* 19. 4). Syracusan Cameios is equivalent to Metageitnion (*Nic.* 28. 2; Plutarch dates the Syracusan festival Asinaria, created to celebrate Nicias' capture, on the 26th of that month; Metageitnion is also mentioned in passing at *Mor.* 601B). The second day of Boedromion is unlucky and regularly omitted from the Athenian calendar because of Poseidon's quarrel with Athena on that day (*Mor.* 489B; cf. *Quaest. conv.* IX. 6, 741 ff.). The battle of Plataea occurred on 4th Boedromion (*Arist.* 19. 8); he dates the battle of Gaugamela by an eclipse in Boedromion, "just about the beginning of the mysteries in Athens." The Athenians label one of their months from seeding-time, Pyanepsion (*Mor.* 378E). Roman January is equivalent to Poseideon (*Caes.* 37. 3). Athenian Lenaion (i.e., Gamelion) has no Boeotian homonym (fr. 71a). Athenian Anthesterion is equivalent to Boeotian Prostatarios (*Mor.* 655E) and Macedonian Daisios (*Arat.* 53. 5; Plutarch remarks that Aratus "freed the city [Sicyon] from tyranny" on the 5th, which is kept as a feast day).

Monuments

Naturally, Plutarch's residence at Athens allowed him time for sight-seeing, and many of her buildings and civic monuments (such as statues and other works of art) made a special impression on him. In a glowing passage in *Pericles* he describes the spiritual exhilaration he derives from contemplating these memorials to Athens' past greatness. Each of the buildings, he remarks, "possessed a beauty which seemed venerable the moment it was born, and at the same time a youthful vigor which makes them appear to this day—μέχρι νῦν—as if they were newly built. A bloom of eternal freshness hovers over these works of [Pericles] and preserves them from the touch of time, as if some unfading spirit of youth, some ageless vitality had been breathed into them" (*Per.* 13. 5, trans. Scott-Kilvert). Elsewhere, Plutarch links the Olympieion with Plato's *Critias* as "beautiful fragments."¹⁰ He is shocked by Demetrius Poliorcetes' misbehavior on the Acropolis (*Demet.* 24. 1 and *Comp. Demet. et Ant.* 4. 2), even though the goddess Athena herself had allegedly entertained Demetrius in the Opisthodomos of the Parthenon. Plutarch says it would "not be becoming to the city" to tell the sordid details.

⁹ Fr. 142, from *Cam.* 19.

¹⁰ *Sol.* 32. 2. The temple was completed by Hadrian in 131/2.

Various other buildings are mentioned as enduring to Plutarch's own time (μέχρι or ἔτι νῦν, καθ' ἡμᾶς). At Gargettus there was an ἀρατήριον or shrine which commemorated Theseus' cursing of his ungrateful countrymen (*Thes.* 35. 5). He mentions a μνημεῖον Ἴνδοῦ which marked the spot where an Indian grandee in Augustus' train lay down on his own funeral pyre (*Alex.* 69. 8). He notes the tomb of the εταίρα Pythionice, built for her by her husband Harpalus, which was still there to be seen in Hermus, on the road from Athens to Eleusis (*Phoc.* 22. 2; cf. Paus. 1. 37. 5). Plutarch describes Nicias' dedications which included a Palladion that had lost its gilding and a temple surmounted by his choregic tripod in the precinct of Dionysus (*Nic.* 3. 3). He alludes to Pheidias' statue of Athena with its attendant snake (*Mor.* 381D; Sulla let Athena's lamp go out for want of oil, *Sulla* 13. 3–4), the statue of Athena Hygieia dedicated by Pericles (*Per.* 13. 3), and the wooden statue of Athena Polias preserved to his own time (fr. 158. 5). He is not quite sure whether the altar of Peace which the Athenians showed him really was a commemoration of the "Peace of Callias," as they maintained (*Cim.* 13. 5). He says that he saw at Athens the pillars that were to be removed to Rome by Domitian, which were recut for the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus (*Publ.* 9. 3). Everyone, he says, venerates the Theseion along with the Parthenon and Eleusinion, even though Theseus had to go into exile (*Mor.* 607A). He mentions the temple of Asclepius (*Mor.* 969E), and a temple or precinct known as the Iakcheion (*Arist.* 27. 4). He recounts how the statue of Dionysus in the Gigantomachy near the south wall of the Acropolis (dedicated by Attalos of Pergamum, according to Paus. 1. 25. 2) was dislodged by strong winds, along with colossal statues of Eumenes and Attalos himself, and blown down to the theater below (*Ant.* 60. 4). He explains the significance of the bronze tongueless lioness at the Acropolis gates (*Mor.* 505E–F).

Cults

Plutarch has an abiding interest in cults and religious observances (which is not surprising, in view of his own career). He notices the following Athenian festivals, ordered by Attic month as in Athens' "Festkalender" (Dübner): [Hekatombaion] Kronia (*Mor.* 477D), Panathenaia (*Thes.* 24. 3; *Demet.* 12. 3, peplos *Mor.* 477D ~ cf. fr. 212, where Theodoret credits Plutarch with the statement that the Panathenaia, Dionysia, Thesmophoria and Eleusinian mysteries were brought to Athens by Orpheus); [Boedromion] thanks for Plataea (*Mor.* 349E), Artemis Agrotera (*Mor.* 862B, also 862A procession to Agrae, 1099E Marathon feast ἄχρι νῦν), Boedromia (*Thes.* 27. 3), Greater Mysteries (*Phoc.* 6. 7, *Alex.* 31. 8, *Demet.* 26. 1, *Mor.* 604C; cf. *Lyc.* 30. 6 the Spartan Stratonikos' comment that "the Athenians should conduct mysteries and processions, since that's what they excel at"); [Metageitnion] Metageitnia (*Mor.* 601B); [Pyanepsion] Theseia (*Thes.* 4. 1, 36; Cychreus 10. 3; Theseus' appearance at Marathon

35. 8 with Paus. 1. 15. 4), Thesmophoria (*Dem.* 30. 5; *Mor.* 378E fast by women sitting on the ground on the second day, the Nesteia; cf. fr. 212), Oschophoria (*Thes.* 22); [Gamelion] Lenaia (fr. 71A) and Theogamia (fr. 165. 18 near conjunction of the sun and moon); [Anthesterion] Anthesteria (Pithoigia *Mor.* 655D–E, cf. 735D–E; Choes on the second day *Ant.* 70. 3), Lesser Mysteries, or Mysteries in Agrai (*Demet.* 26. 1), Diasia (*Mor.* 477D); [Elaphebolion] City Dionysia (*Demet.* 12 festival renamed “Demetria”; Menander *Mor.* 347E; cf. 604C, fr. 212); [Munichion] “Munichia” victory at Salamis (*Mor.* 349E ff.), Olympieia (*Phoc.* 37. 1 hippeis’ procession to Zeus); [Thargelion] Thargelia (*Demet.* 8. 5; Plato born during festival *Mor.* 717D), Plynteria (*Alc.* 34. 2); [not securely datable] Adonia (*Nic.* 13. 11, *Alc.* 18. 5 with Dover’s n. in *Comm. on Thuc.* vol. IV, p. 271).

Besides these official cults of Athens Plutarch alludes to other matters of a cultic nature. He notes the special sacrifice offered by the Aiantid tribe after Plataea (*Arist.* 19. 6). There are perpetual fires at Delphi and Athens—the latter the lamp before Athena’s statue in the Parthenon—which have to be relighted with mirrors whenever they are allowed to go out (as, for example, by Sulla) (*Num.* 9. 5). He describes three sacred ploughings, at Skiron, at Raria near Eleusis, and the Bouzygian one at the base of the Acropolis (*Mor.* 144B). At *Mor.* 291A (cf. fr. 157. 28) he reports that no ivy is allowed inside Hera’s temple at Athens, but it is used in the Dionysiac festivals of Agrionia (cf. 299F, 717A) and Nuktelia (cf. 364F). Zeus Meilichios is called by the Athenians Maimaktes (*Mor.* 458B). The festival of Metageitnia is celebrated by former residents of Melite who moved to Diomeia (*Mor.* 601B–C). A “Muse festival,” perhaps private to members of the Academy, is given as the setting of Book IX of the *Quaest. conv.* (*Mor.* 736C). The Athenians hold the seventh of every month sacred as being the day on which Apollo was born; they carry laurel branches and deck the basket with garlands and hymn the god on that day (fr. 103. 10 dubium). At *Demet.* 40. 8 Plutarch reports that Demetrius personally conducted the Pythian Games at Athens, saying that Apollo was the founder of the Athenian race.

Myths

Plutarch notices the following myths directly or indirectly concerned with Athens. Castor and Pollux are called “Anakes” there (*Numa* 13. 6). The story of the contest between Poseidon and Athena for possession of the territory was invented by the kings of Athens in order to turn the Athenians away from seafaring to tillage of the soil (*Them.* 19. 3: Themistocles had to counteract this; the story is alluded to also at *Mor.* 489B and 740F). It was Celeus of Eleusis who first established a diurnal σύνοδος called “Prytaneion” (*Mor.* 667D). There is a passing reference to Ion at *Mor.* 1125D.

Legal Institutions

Plutarch says he saw remains of Solon’s ἄξονες preserved in the Prytaneion (*Sol.* 25. 1). He knows that the ephebes take their oath in the sanctuary of Agraulos (*Alc.* 15. 7). In several places he alludes to the procedure of ostracism and twice he describes it in detail (*Them.* 22. 5, *Arist.* 7. 5–6). He knows of the ancestral (πάτριον) custom of selecting archons and thesmothetai by lot (*Per.* 9. 4, *Demet.* 46. 2; cf. *Mor.* 340C). He alludes to the law forbidding χορηγοί (who were allotted from the tribes: *Alex.* 29. 2) to use foreign χορευταί, and Demades’ flouting of it (*Phoc.* 30. 6). He mentions the law prohibiting the cutting out of a sacred olive (*Mor.* 703C). He makes passing reference to the Prytaneion and Thesmotheteion (*Mor.* 714B; *Sol.* 25. 1 for the Prytaneion), and to presidency of the Areopagus and membership in the Amphictyonic Council, for which he says even old men were eligible (*Mor.* 749B). He remarks that Demosthenes’ fine could not simply be remitted, “for it was unconstitutional for the people to abolish a penalty by an act of grace” (*Dem.* 27. 8). He notes the importance in his time of the στρατηγία, which was held three times by his teacher Ammonios (*Mor.* 813D). He tells his readers that members of the Areopagus were forbidden to write poetry (*Mor.* 348B). Large numbers of spectators were enabled to attend the theater even in Plutarch’s day through distribution of the θεωρικόν (*Mor.* 122D–E). The Athenians buried their war-dead in δημόσια ταφαί (*Mor.* 350C).

Athenian democracy comes in for special notice. He reports Solon’s eulogy of the Athenian system of government, in which the people “hearken to one herald and one archon, law” (*Mor.* 152D). In his essay on the three forms of government (of which Plutarchan authorship has been questioned, in my opinion wrongly) he singles out Athens as an example of a nation that has reached the apogee of her power and dominion over others under an “autonomous and unmixed democracy” (*Mor.* 826F). On the other hand he disapproves of senseless chauvinism and finds laughable the attitude that “there is a better moon at Athens than at Corinth” (*Mor.* 601C, from *De exilio*); the various local officials such as archons, διοικηταί and πρυτάνεις have to be forgone in exile, or transcended in a “cosmic” world-view like that of Socrates (601A). He notes that Antony was made an Athenian citizen and that he held the office of gymnasiarch (*Ant.* 33. 7). He names Anytus son of Anthemion as the man who reputedly first bribed a jury (*Cor.* 14. 6).

Plutarch devotes one of the *Greek Questions* to a discussion of why the girls of Botiaea shout, as they dance, “Let’s go to Athens!” (*Mor.* 298F–299A; cf. *Thes.* 16. 3). In olden times, he remarks, the Athenians called their dead “Demetrians” (*Mor.* 943B). From of old Athenians were the natural enemies of wolves, because they were pastors and not farmers (*Sol.* 23. 4; cf. *Dem.* 23. 6). They were not originally natural seafarers (*Thes.* 17. 6). They have an ancestral custom of dividing their days into “good,”

"bad," and "intermediate" (fr. 101. 5), and regularly choose a day near the conjunction of the sun and moon for marriages (fr. 105. 18; cf. the doubtful fr. 1 from *Alexandrian Proverbs*). Their gymnasium is consecrated to Apollo (*Mor.* 724C). Bitches were debarred from the Acropolis because they copulated openly (*Comp. Demet. et Ant.* 4. 2; cf. 290B from *Aitia Romana*).

The Theater at Athens

Plutarch was present at the Great Dionysia in the winter of 96–97; he says he attended the victory celebration (ἐπινίκια) when his friend Serapion won the dithyrambic competitions for the tribe Leontis.¹¹ At *De exilio* 604C he comments (with a tone of some disapproval) that the exile is too busy to Διονυσίοις ἐν ἄστει [sc. Athens] πανηγυρίζειν. At 710F he quotes an anonymous Spartan's remark about the extravagant costs of mounting theater productions and the excessive competitiveness of the actors and poets: "it was senseless of the Athenians [the Spartan remarked acidly] to sport in such earnest." There is another, similar disparagement from an unnamed Spartan at *glor. Athen.* 348F: "the Athenians erred greatly in expending such zeal (σπουδήν) on mere play,¹² i.e., wasting on the theater money that could have supported major embassies and campaigns." There are dismissive remarks to a similar effect elsewhere in the *Moralia*. At *apoph. Lac.* 230B Nicander is reported to have said to an anonymous Athenian who charged him with being "too opposed to leisure," "you're right, we don't σπουδάζομεν about casual matters or waste our σπουδή."¹³ At 477D Plutarch heaps scorn on οἱ πολλοί who eagerly await the Kronia, Diasia and Panathenaia and pay money to laugh at mimes and dancers. He remarks that on Cyprus the kings act as χορηγοί, whereas at Athens they are allotted from the tribes (*Alex.* 29. 2). He alludes to an Athenian law forbidding foreigners to be χορευταί and Demades' showy flouting of it by bringing into the theater the 1000-dr. fine for each foreigner he employed.¹⁴ At *Phoc.* 19. 1–2 he describes an occasion on which a χορηγός refused to accede to an actor's request for an extravagant retinue which the actor considered appropriate for the role he was playing. Elsewhere, he makes remarks of a more general kind on the nature of acting and "impersonation." Although they are not necessarily to be connected to specific performances, they suggest that Plutarch was a fairly frequent visitor to the theater. At

¹¹ *Mor.* 628A; see n. 5 above.

¹² Compare the anecdote Plutarch reports of how Solon chided Thespiis after a performance for "telling such lies before so many people." When Thespiis tried to defend himself on grounds that this was just "play," Solon silenced him by remarking that there was a risk that this "play" would be carried over into serious political business (*Sol.* 29).

¹³ Compare the Athenian stranger's statement at Plato, *Laws* 803C–D: "serious matters deserve our serious attention, but trivialities do not" (trans. T. J. Saunders).

¹⁴ *Phoc.* 30. 6; cf. p. 239 above.

Dem. 22. 5 he comments on actors who play kings or tyrants: "these men do not weep or laugh as their feelings dictate, but as the subject of the drama demands" (trans. Scott-Kilvert). In the *glor. Athen.* he makes a passing reference to actors "exhibiting the deeds of generals and kings, and merging themselves with their characters as tradition records them" (*Mor.* 345E, trans. F. C. Babbitt; in section 5 he expresses the view that tragedians like Sophocles did not do as much for Athens as the city's great generals).

Criticism of Athenian Democracy

Plutarch saw some dangers inherent in the Athenian system, particularly the evils of demagogy. His clever formulation of the changeable and impressionable nature of the Athenian δῆμος has already been cited.¹⁵ They were likely to be swept along and to overrule the more measured advice of a cautious general like Nicias (*Comp. Nic. et Crass.* 3). Nicias knew how ferocious the Athenian people could be to an unsuccessful commander, for Plutarch reports him as saying, after his defeat in Sicily, that he would rather risk death at the hands of his enemies than have to face his fellow-citizens (*Nic.* 22. 2–3; cf. *Thuc.* 7. 48. 4). Their willingness to follow—even blindly—a forceful leader like Themistocles is implied by the story of Themistocles' remark to his son who, Themistocles said, held greatest power over the Greeks: the Athenians gave orders to the Greeks, Themistocles gave orders to the Athenians, Themistocles' wife gave orders to him, and the boy gave orders to his mother (*Them.* 18. 7, *Cat. mai.* 8. 5, the doubtful *Mor.* 67C). Plutarch cites Solon's quip that he gave the Athenians not the best laws, but "the best that they would accept" (*Sol.* 15. 1–2). The following story may be unhistorical, but it is useful for pointing the moral which Plutarch wishes to draw. Aristides sought re-election to some magistracy, but his motive was to demonstrate to the Athenians how gullible they could be. He was purposely lax in not making some public officials give an accounting of their tenure of office. He then went before the people with the public rebuke: "it brings a man more reputation in your eyes if he gratifies criminals than if he protects public property" (*Arist.* 4; a similar remark attributed to Lycurgus at *Mor.* 541F and cf. 842A–B). Another story to illustrate how easily the wool could be pulled over the eyes of the Athenian δῆμος is told in the *Life of Alcibiades*. Pericles had been worrying about "handing in his accounts" after holding an office (by implication, the ἐπιμέλεια of the Parthenos-statue), and Alcibiades advised him to seek a way instead of not having to give an accounting to the people (*Alc.* 7. 3).

The Athenian *Lives* contain a fairly large number of anecdotes whose point is the fickleness and basic lack of common sense of the Athenian

¹⁵ *Mor.* 799C; see above p. 233.

electorate. For example, Phocion is reported to have rebuked the tiro orator Pytheas for pandering to the people and thus playing their νεώνητος, "new slave" (*Phoc.* 21. 1). Phocion was noted for his simplicity of life and a kind of showy abstemiousness that annoyed the Athenians; it was, Plutarch remarks, as if they considered him a living reprimand to their own extravagant customs, like expensive victory banquets (*Phoc.* 20. 5). Demosthenes castigated the Athenians with the remark, "I will be your adviser if you don't want it, but not your sycophant even if you do" (*Dem.* 14. 4). When in exile Demosthenes asked the goddess Athena with some bitterness how she could take delight in the "three harshest beasts—the owl, the serpent and the Athenian δῆμος" (*Dem.* 26. 6). The Athenians of the classical period arrogantly thought themselves invincible; they couldn't believe the report that their fleet had been destroyed in Sicily (*Nic.* 30. 1 = *Mor.* 509A). At *Mor.* 20C he quotes Melanthius' dictum that the Athenian state was saved by the constant quarrelling of its rhetors. Luckily, they didn't all crowd to the same side of the boat, so someone was always preventing a capsizing by drawing in the opposite direction.

Athens and Her Conquerors

Alexander said he would show the Athenians that he was a great man, not a παῖς or μειράκιον, as Demosthenes had called him (*Alex.* 11. 6), but he absolved Athens of all blame, saying she would have to rule Greece if anything happened to him (*Alex.* 12. 2 = *Phoc.* 17. 8). After the victory at the Granicus he sent three hundred shields to Athens (*Alex.* 16. 17), and at the Hydaspes he cried, "Athenians! Can you believe what danger I am undergoing to win glory in your eyes?" (*Alex.* 60. 6). When Athens sent envoys to Sulla to sue for peace they used various examples from ancient Athenian history, Theseus, Eumolpus and Athens' services in the Persian Wars; Sulla retorted that the Romans sent him not to be taught history (φιλομαθήσων) but to subdue the rebels (*Sul.* 13. 4). Pompey gave Athens fifty talents and was specially munificent to her philosophers (*Pomp.* 42. 5). Antony was dubbed "philathenaios" (*Ant.* 23. 2) and, as was noted above, held the office of gymnasiarch; the Athenians were especially fond of his wife Octavia.

Athens and Sparta

When Alcibiades was in the western Peloponnese urging that Patras build long walls to the sea, a native of the place remarked that it appeared they were to be swallowed up by the Athenians; Alcibiades replied, "Yes, but it will be little by little and starting at the feet, whereas the Spartans will swallow you whole and at one gulp" (*Alc.* 15. 6). Erasistratus son of Phaiax commented that the Spartans were better in public, the Athenians in private life (*Ages.* 15. 5). An Athenian was boasting to Antalcidas that his

countrymen had often driven the Spartans from the river Cephissus; Antalcidas remarked wryly that the Spartans had never driven the Athenians from the Eurotas (*Ages.* 31. 5 = *Mor.* 810F). Pleistoanax son of Pausanias said, in retort to a charge that the Spartans were ἀμαθεῖς, "we are the only Greeks who have learnt no evil from you Athenians" (*Lyc.* 20. 4).

*

Plutarch's admiration for Athens and appreciation of her achievements, which it has been my purpose to document, was not entirely unmitigated. He was sensitive to the snooty superiority shown by the Athenians to his fellow-countrymen and he seems pained to have to report that the Athenians "used to call us Boeotians 'thick and insensitive and stupid'" (*Mor.* 995E). Athenian citizenship might be a much-sought-for prize, and one awarded only rarely in the earlier period of her history, but some, at any rate, could keep it in perspective. Plutarch shows a certain delight in telling how the Stoic philosophers Zeno and Cleanthes refused the award, explaining that they might seem to be injuring their own cities were they to become Athenians (*Mor.* 1034A), and Panaetius of Rhodes refused a similar grant with the remark that "one city was enough for a sensible man" (fr. 86. 11).¹⁶

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¹⁶ I am grateful to members of the audience at the Athens Conference, especially Mrs. Judith Binder, for encouraging comments.



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