

## Chapter 7

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### **Plutarch’s Imaginary Sparta: Hybridity and Identity in a Paradoxical Community**

The importance of Sparta for Plutarch’s sense of identity has been amplified recently by Hugh Liebert’s claims that “Lycurgus is Plutarch’s literary alter ego”, and that Sparta should be placed at the centre of Plutarch’s political theorizing since Lycurgus’ Sparta was for Plutarch “the city *par excellence*”.<sup>1</sup> These are intriguing claims and if true would require a shift in some of our thinking on Plutarch and how he envisioned himself and his literary project. In particular, identity politics is at play here: does Plutarch of Chaironeia, who is also at some stage awarded Roman citizenship, actually really identify more closely with not just Sparta, but a philosophical idea of a Sparta, than anywhere else? Or to put it another way, if Sparta is “the city *par excellence*”, is Plutarch aiming Lycurgus-like to mould his hometown, Chaironeia – a place he explicitly says he chose to stay in so that it might not be diminished (*Dem.* 2.2) – in the image of Sparta? Such a suggestion complicates the question of how Plutarch identified himself, something which itself is, in fact, not completely agreed upon by scholars. What follows here, therefore, will be an interrogation of Liebert’s contentions situated within the broader question of Plutarch’s identity politics, and I will

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<sup>1</sup> Liebert 2016 (with the quotations from pages 8 and 4 respectively).

start with the question of Plutarch’s relationship with Rome before moving to his identification – or not, as this paper will argue – with Sparta.<sup>2</sup>

To help to frame this interrogation, I am going to make loose use of two points of comparison: (1) Julia Kristeva’s concept of the paradoxical community, first articulated in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991) – revised and reinterpreted since then by, among others, Homi Bhabha<sup>3</sup> – which in essence is her term for a community made up of foreigners reconciled to their foreignness, but in which there is not necessarily a merging of cultures; and (2) recent Indigenous criticisms of settler colonialism in Canada<sup>4</sup> and the politics of recognition. Neither point of comparison is meant to, nor does, provide anywhere near an exact parallel to the world of Greece under Rome – indeed Indigenous responses provide salutary critiques of the post-colonial theorizing of critics like Bhabha<sup>5</sup> – but aspects of both viewpoints together allow useful jumping off points to interrogate Plutarch in the complex, hybrid world of the Roman Empire.

### **Greek Plutarch versus Roman Plutarch**

Kristeva articulated what she termed the “problem of the foreigner” as follows:<sup>6</sup>

A paradoxical community is emerging, made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners... In France, at the end of the twentieth century each is fated to remain the same *and*

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2 I would like to express warm thanks to Chandra Giroux for the invitation to speak at the workshop from which this volume sprang, to those on the ground in Münster for their wonderful hospitality, to Marc Sidwell for introducing me to the concept of preference falsification, and to Jeffrey Beneker and Keith Sidwell for close reading and pushing me towards greater clarity of argument.

3 Bhabha 2011.

4 These criticisms have been rightly kept at the front of public consciousness in the light of the recent (2021) discoveries of unmarked graves at sites of former residential schools (schools which were used as tools of assimilation, by separating young Indigenous children from their families and culture). Knowledge of the abuses carried out in these schools was made clear during the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2007–2015) though no concrete action was taken in response. Reports can be accessed on the official website for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation: <https://nctr.ca>.

5 See, for example, the recent critique of Bhabha’s theory of hybridity and the third space by Acheraiou 2011. A key aspect of Acheraiou’s work is his insistence on the importance of a diachronic approach and so he has an interesting overview of the complex relationship Rome had with Greek on the cultural level: “the tension between admiration and resistance, adoption and rejection of Hellenism within learned circles in Rome indicates how far the Roman politics of identity and the process of hybridization which informed it were politically, ideologically and emotionally charged issues” (2011: 30).

6 Kristeva 1991: 194–195.

the other – without forgetting his original culture but putting it in perspective to the extent of having it not only exist side by side but also alternate with others’ culture.

Though Kristeva is discussing a specific time and place here – France at the end of the twentieth century – she does discuss these ideas more broadly, including in the ancient world, though she does not actually touch upon or apply her observations to the period of the early Roman Empire. Nevertheless I think this articulation is a very useful one to keep in mind as a touchstone when examining how Plutarch presents cultural practice in his own connected world. For, if we adapt the above quotation slightly, Plutarch can be viewed as: a foreigner in the world of Rome, who is reconciled with himself to the extent that he recognizes himself as a foreigner, i.e., is both same and other, and puts his own Greek culture in perspective to the extent of having it not only exist side by side but also alternate with the culture of Rome.

Such an articulation of identity holds, I would argue, whatever view is then taken on the extent to which he embraced Rome, politically and culturally, in reality and in his writings. This question – of how Plutarch regards his own relationship with Rome – has been explored many times before and from many different angles. In a recent reappraisal of the situation Philip Stadter approached the issue by examining whether or not Plutarch regarded the Romans he was connected with as friends or patrons. Stadter concluded that Plutarch was able to view them as both, and that (1) “Plutarch accepted Rome’s hegemony and Greece’s subordinate status”, (2) that “he was willing to accept the patronage of highly placed friends” (whatever shadowy benefit this brought – unseen to us now) but that he “maintained a strict sense of dignity, independence and his own worth” (the framing of this point bearing some resemblance to Kristeva’s definition of the paradox of being a foreigner), and (3) “as part of a goodwill response that a hierarchical inferior might make to the *hégemones*”, he aimed “to educate thoughtful, moral leaders for these cities and the empire”.<sup>7</sup>

Not everyone of course agrees with this. Theories about why Plutarch wrote *parallel* lives matching and comparing a prominent Greek figure with a Roman, for example, range across a wide spectrum. Some certainly accept a position such as the one that Stadter

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<sup>7</sup> Stadter 2015: 21–44, with the quoted phrases coming from his concluding section on pp. 43–44. See now Giroux 2021, who develops this line of thinking further to suggest that Plutarch aimed to educate the upper echelons of Roman society too, even as far as the emperor himself.

suggests, i.e., that the *Parallel Lives* were written in a spirit of conciliation and with acceptance of hegemony but in a dignified manner. So, for example, D.A. Russell suggests that they were to demonstrate the weight of the Greek past to the Romans, K. Ziegler that they were to show to the Greeks that the Romans were civilized.<sup>8</sup> More on the middle of this spectrum, perhaps, is the suggestion of A. Barigazzi that this literary project shows that the two cultures together are better than each alone, or Jeff Tatum’s assessment that it represents an “assertion of Hellenic values within a safe Roman space” or Simon Swain’s overall suggestion that “Plutarch did not in any way chafe at Roman rule... and yet was at heart a non-integrationist”.<sup>9</sup> Equally, however, the *Parallel Lives* have been read more strongly by T.E. Duff as a “statement of cultural resistance” and a reversing of the political hegemony in literature at least, by the depiction of Roman history through a Greek perspective.<sup>10</sup> This paper does not aspire to resolve these differences but it will add a few more arguments which lean towards the latter end of the spectrum of views, i.e., that Plutarch’s writing is, on some level, a form of resistance.

Applying modern theoretical approaches such as postcolonial theory to try to see if we can resolve this issue about where Plutarch stands vis-à-vis hegemonic Rome is a useful exercise if done with care but has the potential to further distort things if not. Judith Mossman has argued, for example, that modern post-colonial theorizing which focusses often on the importance of decolonizing language does not always sit so easily when applied to the ancient world where Greek, not Latin, appears to have been the language of cultural power, that is, Plutarch was not constrained to write in the language of the political hegemon.<sup>11</sup> But of course from our own – and here I would include broadly speaking most European and North American scholars – position as cultural and political hegemon it is easy for us to imagine that this levels the playing field when dealing with colonizers and colonized. The matter is, however, not that tidy or easily resolved. Even if we were to agree that some Romans themselves generally acknowledged Greek cultural supremacy in some areas, pedestalizing Greek culture was certainly not practiced or encouraged by all Romans (for every Hadrian there was a Cato the Elder). Further, Roman appropriation of Greek cultural prestige was put to use to validate Romanness and from there to validate subjugating others

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8 See Russell 1966: 141, and Ziegler 1949: 260.

9 See Barigazzi 1984; Tatum 2010: 17-18; Swain 1996: 185.

10 Duff 1999: 287-309.

11 Mossman 2005: 500.

to Roman will.<sup>12</sup> Most importantly, the hegemonic political culture of the Romans was in control of the recognition of this Greek cultural supremacy and in control of what the parameters of this recognition were.

The inequities inherent in the “politics of recognition” are perhaps easier to see with a contemporary example, such as the current attempts at reconciliation between colonial-settler Canada and what is left of the Indigenous population inhabiting the same land. As prominent Indigenous activist-scholars, such as Glenn Coulthard, point out, it is the oppressor who sets the terms of recognition, hence perpetuating the colonial hierarchy even as they congratulate themselves for being open-minded and inclusive.<sup>13</sup> Coulthard particularly argues against the position that claims that the best way to undermine colonialism is to find a way to do so from within the colonial system,<sup>14</sup> on the grounds that the line between interpellation – the internalization of the colonizing culture – and interpolation – the changing from within of the colonizing culture – is thin and requires a level playing field politically, economically, and militarily, a thing which does not, in practice, exist in colonial contexts.<sup>15</sup>

Plutarch certainly explicitly acknowledged in his *Political Praecepts* that there was no level playing field in his contemporary world. He seems to express such inequality quite clearly in a number of places in the work, for example (*Praec. ger. reip.* 814e-f):<sup>16</sup>

Ποιοῦντα μέντοι καὶ παρέχοντα τοῖς κρατοῦσιν εὐπειθῆ τὴν πατρίδα δεῖ μὴ προσεκταπεινοῦν, μηδὲ τοῦ σκέλους δεδεμένου προσυποβάλλειν καὶ τὸν τράχηλον, ὥσπερ ἔνιοι, καὶ μικρὰ καὶ μείζω φέροντες ἐπὶ τοὺς ἡγεμόνας ἐξονειδίζουσι τὴν δουλείαν, μᾶλλον δ’ ὅλως τὴν πολιτείαν ἀναιροῦσι, καταπλήγα καὶ περιδεᾶ καὶ πάντων ἄκυρον ποιοῦντες.

However, it is necessary also that the one who makes his state obedient to those in power and hands it over to them should not degrade it further, nor, after its

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<sup>12</sup> See the overview in Acheraïou 2011: 28–31.

<sup>13</sup> Coulthard 2014 is an important analysis of the complexities of the “politics of recognition” in the Canadian Indigenous context. His chapter 2 (“The politics of recognition in colonial contexts”) clearly lays out the problems.

<sup>14</sup> A position taken by Turner 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Coulthard 2014: 45–49. Giroux 2021 does not express it is this way but leans towards arguing for Plutarch aiming for interpolation.

<sup>16</sup> All translations are my own.

leg has been fettered, also submit its neck to be yoked, as some do, who by putting things both small and great directly to the leaders, bring on the reproach of slavery, or rather completely destroy their politeia, making it dazed, excessively timid and powerless in all matters.

Yet even here interpretation is not uniform. Some read the *Political Praecepts* as accepting and/or conciliatory, others as a warning to fellow Greeks interested in local politics that Rome hovers threateningly over them at every turn and so their job is to promote internal harmony, i.e., as Plutarch writing pragmatically certainly, but not passively or accepting of the status quo.<sup>17</sup> The fact that the examples in the *Political Praecepts* come from the past, not from the present, may not indicate anything more than that the composition of this work likely belongs to the same period in which he was working on the *Parallel Lives*.<sup>18</sup> However, arguments that the temporal disjunction of the examples indicates a dissatisfaction with the present state of political life in Greece under Rome and thus imparts a stronger urgency to the advice are compelling.<sup>19</sup> Brad Cook, for example, persuasively argues that the five obscure (and so not necessarily instantly recognizable to Roman readers) examples at 814b constitute very strong, pragmatic and quietist advice.<sup>20</sup> So I do not think that the fact that Plutarch writes in his native language can be dismissed as evidence of cultural resistance so easily.

While I do not want to disappear down a rabbit hole here, it is also important to remember that we cannot be certain that Plutarch’s carefully crafted literary persona is necessarily the

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17 See, for example, Schiffman 2008 for the former view and Duff 1999: 293–298 for the latter. Support of the latter view can be gained, in an oblique fashion, by looking at the circumstances in which Plutarch is writing through a different kind of modern theoretical lens. Kuran 1997 argues that “preference falsification” (i.e., “misrepresenting one’s wants under perceived social pressure”) not only distorts public opinion, but also shapes collective decision-making and orients structural changes, that is, that it both *is* and *affects* cultural practice. If Plutarch is writing in Greek as a form of cultural resistance, he will, on some level, also be careful of what he is saying, because there are lines drawn in the sand by the hegemonic power beyond which it is just not possible to cross (i.e., that the politics of recognition extend only so far). Even though, therefore, we have no way of knowing how far his public literary persona matches his private thoughts, we end up trying – to use Kuran’s terminology – to infer his private “truths” from what are possibly his public “lies”.

18 And so that these examples from the past were in his mind for other reasons, i.e., for his biographical project, on which see Pelling 2014: 154.

19 Preston 2001: 117, looking at the *Roman Questions* and *Greek Questions*, argues, by contrast, that the continual focus on the past undermines Greek cultural confidence.

20 Cook 2004. See also de Blois 2004, who argues that though Plutarch, “knew the risks of complete polis autonomy and counted the blessings of Roman imperial authority (*Praec.* 824c)” (2004: 63), he also clearly points in this work to the real and present dangers Roman soldiers posed to Greek poleis at the very basic level of taxation and requisitioning.

same as his private persona,<sup>21</sup> though we can be certain that his literary works and the advice contained in them did have the potential to affect cultural practice whether or not they truly represented his inner thinking and whether or not they represent passive acceptance or active resistance of the status quo. He may not appear to be chafing at Roman rule in his writings because it was, quite simply, expedient not to do so. And it is partly the fact that we cannot be certain, combined with our own cultural baggage, both on an individual level and collectively,<sup>22</sup> that creates space for the wide range of views.

The differences, however, between understanding Plutarch as conciliator or as resister are significant and unbridgeable and whichever way one leans will result in a different interpretation of his presentation of his own cultural identity and cultural practices more generally on every level. Is he truly accepting of the homogenizing power of Rome or simply accepting of the fact that it exists but aware that it must be negotiated in order to preserve some idea of Greekness? Is he accepting of political hegemony but not of cultural hegemony?<sup>23</sup> What is he actually trying to instill a sense of belonging in? A contemporary Greek world, which is not quite free but always negotiating with the hegemonic power in some way? A Greek world that exists side by side with the Roman world but still alternative to it? A connected Romanized Greek world of some sort? Is it a lost Greek past that he longs for a return to? Does he locate the ideal of Greekness in some utopian reconstruction of Sparta? Liebert’s answer to the last three questions is yes,<sup>24</sup> but I think his attempt to give Sparta a place of privilege in Plutarch’s thought is problematic.

### **Chaironeian Plutarch versus Spartan Plutarch**

However Plutarch viewed the co-existence of Greek and Roman culture, within the Roman world, and however he viewed himself, both politically and culturally, vis-à-vis the imperial power, this co-existence – or paradoxical community, to return to Kristeva’s terminology – is a fact. Ought we to be seeing his Greek identity also as complexly hybrid? His contemporary polis identity is Chaironeian and he appears to have spent most of his life in

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21 In fact, in the *Political Praecepts*, he makes a point of emphasizing how important it is to tailor one's rhetoric for one's audience (*Praec. ger. reip.* 799b–e), on which passage see briefly Pelling 2014: 156. See also n. 17 above.

22 For although the majority of Classics scholars are broadly speaking colonizers, there are complex hierarchies and levels of colonization within even this small group as well.

23 The view put forth in Beneker, in this volume.

24 Succinctly summarized in the last paragraph of his book (Liebert 2016: 218).

Chaironeia, where he participated in polis politics (serving on embassies to proconsuls, overseeing building projects, etc.).<sup>25</sup> So on the surface of things, at least, it would be perverse not to see him self-identifying on this local front, even as he also holds citizenship in imperial Rome – a fact which is absent from his extant writings.<sup>26</sup> But Liebert wants, if not to displace that identity,<sup>27</sup> then to overlay it with another by suggesting that Plutarch actually identified with the Spartan lawgiver Lycurgus and that he regarded Sparta as the city *par excellence*, and, further, in the ways that were open to him, tried to introduce archaic “Spartan” ideals into contemporary Chaironeian life. We can, thus, again reframe the opening quote from Kristeva to capture Liebert’s view thus: [Plutarch is] a foreigner in the world of Roman Chaironeia, who is reconciled with himself to the extent that he recognizes himself as a foreigner, i.e., is both same and other, and puts his own identification with Lycurgan Spartan culture in perspective to the extent of having it not only exist side by side but also alternate with the culture of Roman Chaironeia. This suggests, among other things, that Plutarch has a wistful nostalgia not just for the Greek past in general – a nostalgia that has been rejected by Pelling, among others<sup>28</sup> – but for a very specific aspect of the Greek past: the idealised world of Lycurgan Sparta, which if true, would also have to be able to be accommodated in the Roman present. This is a bold but problematic claim. Evidence for it is built up in a number of ways but there are cracks in the foundations.

First, Plutarch would be an outlier among Greek political thinkers if he held this view. This is not impossible or, indeed, implausible, and indeed Liebert argues for this, by highlighting how Plutarch rejects various Platonic and Aristotelian criticisms of Spartan practices.<sup>29</sup> It is certainly true that Plutarch vigorously and explicitly rejects some of Plato’s and Aristotle’s criticisms of Sparta at various points in the *Lycurgus*,<sup>30</sup> but he certainly does not reject all aspects of Plato’s vision in particular, and even at times imports elements from Plato’s city-

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25 Briefly see Beck (2014: 3), who notes that Plutarch’s hometown “elegantly represents the stimulating intersection of history, topography, and memory”. Much more comprehensively, see now Giroux 2021.

26 Because we have lost a considerable amount of Plutarch’s corpus (see, e.g., Humble forthcoming), it is difficult to make definitive use of the fact that he does not himself mention his acquisition of Roman citizenship, but it is nonetheless interesting that had not the base for a statue of Hadrian survived (*SIG*<sup>3</sup> 829a), we would be in ignorance of this fact.

27 He does note it, in passing: e.g., Liebert 2016: 42 (where he says Plutarch is both Chaironeian and Roman), 44, and 88.

28 Pelling 2014: 159. See now also Beneker, in this volume.

29 Liebert 2016: 109–110.

30 Liebert 2016: 110, gives as examples Aristotle on women (*Pol.* 1269b13–1270a7; cf. *Lyc.* 14) and inequality (*Pol.* 1270a14–b5; cf. *Lyc.* 8–10, 13.4–7) and Plato’s criticism of Spartan homosexuality (*Laws* 1.636a–e; cf. *Lyc.* 17.1, 18.8–9).



in-speech in the *Republic* into his own description of Sparta.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, he does not entirely dispatch “his most distinguished predecessors and pioneer his own path to Sparta”.

The same goes for Plutarch’s use of Xenophon. Because Liebert regards Xenophon as taking a stance on Lycurgus which is similar to that taken by Plutarch, he has to find some way to downplay this likely line of influence to uphold his theory of Plutarch striking out on his own. He does so by trying to suggest, through a series of questions, that Xenophon does not confront the central problems Sparta posed. As is so often the case, Xenophon is criticized for apparently not addressing criticisms which other authors had about Sparta.<sup>32</sup> This line of attack, however, shows some inattention to what Xenophon is saying in his *Lacedaimoniôn Politeia*. Liebert criticizes Xenophon, for example, for suggesting Lycurgus manages to educate for “all the virtues”, whereas Plato’s Socrates had argued that a regime focused on *philotimia* only bothered practicing virtue in public. Yet he does not consider what Xenophon might mean by “all the virtues” or the fact that the whole of Xenophon’s treatise shows that attending only to ensure that virtue was practiced in public is precisely what he regards Lycurgus as having done.<sup>33</sup> Further, Xenophon does not give any suggestion that Leuctra revealed the flaws of Lycurgus’ laws because, like Plato, he recognizes that Lycurgan laws were already inherently flawed.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Xenophon does indeed confront the central problems Sparta posed, and no less than Plato (and other first generation Socratics such as Antisthenes and Aeschines) and Aristotle, he othered Sparta and was critical of many aspects of its otherness. Further, he would be no more likely than any of them to have considered Lycurgus his alter ego or Sparta the best city and his spiritual home. Rather, while he may have thought favourably about certain aspects of the Spartan *politeia* (such as the idea of public education), like his contemporary political theorists, he agreed that the Spartan implementation of these practices was deeply flawed.<sup>35</sup> So not only does Xenophon agree with Plato in particular about the particular failings of Lycurgan Sparta, he also criticizes the Lycurgan practices themselves. This reading of Xenophon’s

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31 E.g., his discussion about children being the property of the state (*Lyc.* 15.14–16), on which see Humble 2022b: 231–235.

32 Liebert 2016: 107–108 (Xenophon’s promotion of Lycurgus), 110–111 (Liebert’s attempt to suggest that Xenophon evades the central problems of Lycurgan Sparta).

33 See Humble 2021: 157–162 on *Lac.* 10.4–8.

34 Liebert 2016: 107 and 110 for this specific criticism of Xenophon. See Humble 2021: 249–275 for a discussion of Plato’s and Xenophon’s agreement on the flaws in Lycurgan practices.

35 See Humble 2021 and 2022a.

*Lacedaimoniôn Politeia*, therefore, would have actually worked in favour of Liebert’s contention that Plutarch’s broke new ground in his analysis of Sparta.

Equally problematic for Liebert’s understanding of Plutarch’s nostalgia for Spartan ways, however, is his own recognition that Plutarch provides a more ambivalent portrait of Sparta across the other Spartan lives.<sup>36</sup> He is therefore constrained to explain this by arguing that they are not written in a “theoretical register” and need to be viewed separately from the ideal of Sparta in Plutarch’s mind as shown in the *Lycurgus*. It is not so clear, however, how Plutarch might have guided his readers to follow such a reading. Michele Lucchesi, by contrast, sees continuity across the Spartan lives which together form a macrotext explaining Sparta’s rise and fall.<sup>37</sup> In exploring the life cycle of the state in this way, Plutarch is actually broadly following in the paths of Xenophon and Plato, even if he does it in an entirely different medium. Still, these problems do not necessarily mean that within the “protected space of the past”<sup>38</sup> Plutarch is not engaging in a type of cultural hybridization which is different from what his philosophical mentors of the classical period were doing. He is, after all, living centuries after the collapse of the imaginary community he is setting forth in the *Lycurgus*, in a Greek world firmly under Roman control. That very fact alone suggests that he is going to bring a different perspective to things, but Liebert has not made anywhere near a watertight case for this.

Secondly, we also need to consider how Plutarch’s audience would view this Spartan overlay (i.e., this desire to cross-fertilize politico-cultural practices in his Roman Chaironeian present with the politico-cultural practices of Lycurgan Sparta), given that Sparta at this period of time was very much on the level of a Chaironeia, a provincial Greek town,<sup>39</sup> whose wealthy elite sent their sons abroad for education and for whom Lycurgan practices were in a far distant past,<sup>40</sup> even if, as in other Greek poleis, they adhered to some form of archaism in certain practices, which linked them to their more glorious and more free past, but in a circumscribed way.<sup>41</sup> Liebert acknowledges that the Sparta of Plutarch’s day bore very little resemblance to the Sparta even of the Classical period but does not seem to me to consider

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36 Liebert 2016: 124–146.

37 Lucchesi 2014.

38 The formulation is that of Duff 1999: 298.

39 Cartledge & Spawforth 1992: 190.

40 Cartledge & Spawforth 1992: 176–189.

41 The classic example here, as far as Sparta is concerned, is the flagellation contest, described by Plutarch at *Inst. Lac.* 239c–d and elsewhere (see Kennell 1995: 149–161 for other Roman-era testimony), which bears only slight resemblance to practices in Sparta in the Classical period (e.g., cf. Xen. *Lac.* 2.9).

fully what effect this might have on his contention. If Plutarch was aiming at giving beneficial advice to deal with contemporary political life, what use would cross-fertilization with the archaic practices of a state which imploded on itself be, and how seriously would such suggestions be taken?<sup>42</sup>

Thirdly, Liebert’s starting point for the argument that Lycurgus is Plutarch’s alter ego is his own drawing of a parallel between Plutarch’s writing of parallel lives and Plutarch’s first comment about Lycurgus’ political theorizing in the *Lycurgus* 4.4.<sup>43</sup>

ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Κρήτης ὁ Λυκοῦργος ἐπὶ Ἀσίαν ἔπλευσε, βουλόμενος, ὡς λέγεται, ταῖς Κρητικαῖς διαίταις, εὐτελέσιν οὔσαις καὶ αὐστηραῖς, τὰς Ἴωνικὰς πολυτελείας καὶ τρυφάς, ὥσπερ ἰατρὸς σώμασιν ὑγιεινοῖς ὑπουλα καὶ νοσώδη, παραβαλὼν ἀποθεωρῆσαι τὴν διαφορὰν τῶν βίων καὶ τῶν πολιτειῶν.

From Crete, Lycurgus sailed to Asia, wishing, as it is said, by comparing with the Cretan way of life, which was frugal and austere, that of the Ionians, which was inclined to extravagance and luxury, to examine the differences in their modes of living and their *politeiai*, just as a doctor compares with healthy bodies those which are festering and disease-ridden.

Thus, for Liebert, just as Lycurgus compared the Cretans and Ionians so Plutarch compares the Romans and Greeks, in such a way that both he (i.e., Plutarch) and his reader can contemplate the relationship between the heroes’ lives and their regimes.<sup>44</sup> It seems to me, however, that the very structure of the *Parallel Lives* on its own does that without any need for a forced parallel with one sentence in the *Lycurgus*. Further, the parallel drawn above does not, strictly speaking, work: Lycurgus is neither Cretan nor Ionian, whereas Plutarch is both Greek and Roman. And it further relies on being abstracted from the rest of Lycurgus’ travels, which, tradition claims, took him to Egypt, Libya, Spain and India, and so does not take sufficient account of the general *topos* of lawgivers travelling to compare the practices of others before settling on their own.<sup>45</sup> Although Plutarch expresses a bit of increasing skepticism about these later travels, his narrative about what Lycurgus is said to

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42 Not to mention the fact that earlier, in the time of Philopoemen, Sparta was ruled by a tyrant (*Phil.* 10).

43 Liebert 2016: 199–200.

44 This is a point Shiffman (2017: 712) highlights in his review of Liebert’s volume.

45 Szegedy-Maszak 1978: 202.

have learnt from the Egyptians highlights the importance of the Egyptian model. We might also wonder why, if Lycurgus were the most important figure for Plutarch, the *Lycurgus-Numa* was not the first pair in the broader project.

Fourthly, Liebert’s reading of the *Lycurgus* focuses on how Lycurgus, through his legislation, privileged *philotimia* (“love of honour”) and competition, and claims that this constant contestation is a type of philosophizing.<sup>46</sup> From this he argues that Plutarch wants to reintroduce a “love of honour” in his contemporary fellow-Greeks, inspiring them by the *Lives* to contest with one another for honour (and hence for the benefit of their souls). In following this path, I think Liebert assigns too great a role to *philotimia* in Plutarch’s own philosophy and also assigns it too positive a value, not adequately reconciling his theory with Plutarch’s discussions of *philotimia* elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> For example, *philotimia* might have led Flamininus to the glorious end of “freeing Greece”,<sup>48</sup> but it is also this quality that led him to drive Hannibal unjustly to suicide, for which Plutarch rebukes him (*Flam.* 20–21), and Plutarch’s message in the *Political Praecepts* seems rather to argue *against* local contestation and “ambition” in favour of civic cooperation and self-control.<sup>49</sup> Further, Liebert frequently has to acknowledge that *philotimia* was valued more broadly in the Classical Greek world, somewhat undermining his claim that Sparta, and in particular Lycurgus, was for Plutarch the ultimate source of this concept and its political and civic value.<sup>50</sup> For example, in his concluding remarks Liebert does, in the end, admit that Plutarch does not want to “crawl crab-like back into Greece’s glorious past” and “emulate Sparta’s nativism by expelling foreigners”, but he does think that Plutarch wants to reimport<sup>51</sup>

the sorts of contests among prominent individuals ... that once animated Greek poleis and the Roman Republic... to acquaint Plutarch’s contemporaries with the qualities of soul –foremost among them was *philotimia*, in all of its vigor and danger – that such competitions engaged.

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46 Liebert 2016: 201.

47 On *philotimia* in Plutarch see, e.g., Nikolaidis 2012 and Frazier 2014.

48 See Beneker, in this volume, for a positive reading of Flamininus’ *philotimia* “love of honour” against a negative reading of Philopoemen’s *philonikia*. See also Nikolaidis 2012: 24–29 on this example. Both terms are not absolutes and the range of presentation of *philotimia* across Plutarch’s corpus serves to confirm its ambiguous status, as Nikolaidis shows.

49 See, e.g., Cook 2004 and de Blois 2004.

50 And this happens notably both at the start of the monograph (Liebert 2016: 2) and at the end, as the following quotation shows.

51 Liebert 2016: 217.

Here, perhaps inadvertently, though certainly correctly, he ascribes the pursuit of *philotimia* to all Greek poleis (and to the Roman Republic), in which it is, in fact, embedded in multiple ways (in political, religious and cultural contexts).<sup>52</sup>

Why does Liebert privilege *philotimia* in the face of so many others who argue that for Plutarch it is an ambiguous quality, as likely to lead its possessor astray as to lead to glory? He does so because of the starting point for his whole project. When Liebert says that “Plutarch’s thought, understood as an exploration of the honor-loving soul and the city, speaks to a number of concerns of contemporary political theorists”, what he really means is that he is going to read Plutarch’s thought through a particular kind of contemporary political theory. That is to say, he is going to read Plutarch through a brand of modern neo-conservative political theorizing which wants to bring back patriotism and isolationism in the face of increasing internationalization and liberalism. Hence, he reads Plutarch as aiming to bring back polis culture in the face of imperial Rome. This modern theory, which has Straussian affiliations, also places inordinate value on honour. Sparta, therefore, is held up as the best ancient Western model for an honour-loving isolationist state, even if this model itself is an inaccurate representation of Classical Sparta.<sup>53</sup> Liebert is doing, therefore, what many a long line of distinguished intellectual figures before him have done, using an ancient authority to justify and further his own modern view, and it is this, in the end, which leads to the type of special pleading or stretching of evidence I have outlined above.

The modern construction of ancient Greece, which Liebert has retrojected onto Plutarch, was made to serve a modern political agenda and is itself firmly based in longstanding Western colonial attitudes which have founded their authority for millennia on their appropriation of ancient Greek authors. And this brings me back to one of my starting points. Plutarch belongs not to the colonizing culture but to the colonized culture and though the colonizers, the Romans, may have liked to parade Hellenic culture and grant it some form of privilege in their own cultural arena, that does not change the basic

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52 On the importance of (and concurrent danger of *philotimia*) in the polis of Athens, see, e.g., Deene 2013, and in the works of Isocrates and Xenophon, see e.g., Alexiou 2018.

53 Plato’s equation of Sparta with his second best regime, a timocracy (“rule of honour”) in the *Republic* helps to reinforce this notion, but Plato characterizes this regime as possessing both *philonikia* and *philotimia* (*R.* 8.548c); see Humble 2021: 267–268 on this passage.

hierarchical relationship. Again, consider a Canadian example. The Canadian Museum of History is advertised as follows on an Ottawa tourism site:<sup>54</sup>

The Canadian Museum of History is Canada’s most visited museum for good reason – it’s home to the world’s largest indoor collection of totem poles, the largest exhibition about Canadian history, and it highlights the achievements of Indigenous Peoples in the First Peoples Hall.

Colonial Canada celebrates these cultural artifacts, these “achievements”, of the Indigenous people of Canada whom it has systematically oppressed for centuries, at the same time as forty-five Indigenous communities across the country have long-term drinking water advisories in place,<sup>55</sup> with one advisory stretching back to 1995.<sup>56</sup> This in 2021 in one of the richest countries in the world, despite the explicit United Nations declaration – shockingly itself dating only to 2010 – that water and sanitation are basic human rights.<sup>57</sup> In the same way, a Roman assertion that Greek culture trumped Roman culture would hardly, for example, have comforted a small Greek polis whose food supplies were seized by Roman troops while they were carrying out the basic administrative tasks of the Empire.<sup>58</sup> Plutarch’s Roman friends and the care he undoubtedly took as a local figure of authority to work with, not against, Rome – i.e., the type of care he advises be taken in the *Political Praecepts* – likely meant that Chaironeia in his day thrived. But such pragmatic and conciliatory political advice does not rule out a core of resistance.

## Conclusion

I think, therefore, that Liebert’s hypothesis is unsustainable, but it does present an interesting entry point into a discussion of broader issues of cultural cross-fertilization and hybridization, the importation of the cultural past into the cultural present and the rewriting

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54 <https://ottawatourism.ca/en/ottawa-insider/ottawa-s-seven-national-museums>.

55 This figure comes from the government website updated on September 20, 2021: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660>. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/auditor-general-reports-2021-1.5927572>. There are no accurate corresponding figures for how many individuals these water advisories affect. Suffice it to say that such a situation would not be tolerated in non-Indigenous towns and cities.

56 <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/canada-indigenous-drinking-water-dangers/>.

57 [https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human\\_right\\_to\\_water.shtml](https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/human_right_to_water.shtml).

58 The salient point made in de Blois 2004.

of the cultural past in light of the cultural present, an activity in which Plutarch certainly engages, as does Liebert himself. Because Plutarch focusses on the historical, and hence cultural, past in his works it is important to ask seriously whether he is identifying with some lost idea of Greekness or not. If he is – as many would argue – it is not a narrowly Spartan one, though his reluctance to comment on his own times certainly hinders our understanding of how he viewed himself. I think that the past simply was a safer space in which to interrogate contemporary concerns, including his own understanding of his own identity, as a Greek living under Roman rule, and that – to reformulate Kristeva’s words one more time – he was reconciled to being a foreigner in the world of Rome and put his own Greek culture in perspective in his writings by having it exist alongside, and as an alternative to, the culture of Rome. But in doing so, I incline still more towards the view that Plutarch’s literary project is at least partially a statement of resistance against the hegemony of Rome, rather than a celebration of “the start of a new and better age” (as Beneker, this volume, phrases it).

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