



## **Study Guide on Plutarch's *Lives***

### **QUESTIONS ON THE WHOLE WORK**

1. What is Plutarch's purpose in writing these philosophical biographies? Moments when Plutarch talks about why he writes include: intro to the life of Theseus (vol I p. 1), intro to life of Pericles (vol I pp. 201-2), life of Coriolanus (vol I p. 316), intro to life of Timoleon (vol I p. 325), intro to the life of Cimon (vol I p. 643), intro to the life of Nicias (vol I pp. 698-9), intro to the life of Alexander (vol II p. 139), intro to the life of Demosthenes (vol II pp.387-9).
2. Although Plutarch is a historian, he often cites the works of poets and playwrights. Why would Plutarch use these artists as a source for his biographies? Do they serve Plutarch's purpose in making the character's "disposition and habit of mind understood" (p. 699)?
3. What advantage does comparing similar lives afford?
4. What is the temperament, predominant fault, and predominant inclination to virtue of each character?
5. Although Plutarch writes about heroes, no character is perfect and some characters are tragic. What role do tragic and morally-mixed characters play in the education of the reader?
6. If Plutarch is trying to recover Greek studies in an anti-Greek Rome, how does he achieve his goal? What about the Greeks is he trying to recover?
7. In the introduction to the life of Pericles, Plutarch says, "But virtue, by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men's minds as to create at once both admiration of the things done and desire to imitate the doers of them." Many of Plutarch's characters have vices that stain their good actions. Does Plutarch affect your mind to admire and desire virtue?
8. The general structure of each life appears as follows: introduction, family origins, temperament and education, career, and lastly death. How does each part influence another, especially their education and career?

### **QUESTIONS ON THE COMPARED LIVES**

1. Theseus and Romulus: Founders of Athens and Rome
  - a. How do Theseus and Romulus go about bringing people into their city? What means do they employ?
  - b. What god does Theseus aim to imitate? Why? What god does Romulus end up imitating? Why?
  - c. What virtues do Theseus and Romulus order their cities to seek?
  - d. How do Theseus and Romulus treat women? What effects does their treatment have on their cities?
  - e. Both Theseus and Romulus kill. For what purposes do they kill?



2. Lycurgus and Numa Pompilius: Teachers of Greece and Rome
  - a. What are the advantages and disadvantages of written law vs. oral law in Lycurgus' Sparta and Numa's Rome?
  - b. What laws of Lycurgus and Numa are just and unjust?
  - c. How do Lycurgus and Numa inspire in their citizens a willingness to obey, which is "the science of government?"
  - d. How do Lycurgus and Numa discipline the temper of their people?
  - e. How do Lycurgus and Numa view the various arts and trades?
  - f. What arts do Lycurgus and Numa discipline their cities to seek in their leisure time? Why?
  - g. What virtues do Lycurgus and Numa order their cities to seek above all others?
  - h. What philosophers do Lycurgus and Numa imitate most?
3. Solon and Poplicola (Publius): Lawgivers of Greece and Rome
  - a. How does Solon "fit his laws to the state of things, and [did not make] things to suit his laws?"
  - b. How do Solon and Poplicola win over the goodwill of the people? Are their means just or unjust?
  - c. In what ways does Poplicola imitate Solon and put his theories into practice?
  - d. What are Solon's and Poplicola's attitudes toward wealth?
4. Themistocles and Camillus: Defenders of Greece and Rome
  - a. What caused Themistocles' tragedy?
  - b. How do Themistocles and Camillus deal with traitors?
  - c. What motivates Themistocles and Camillus to great public action?
  - d. Is the ambition of Themistocles and Camillus ultimately good or bad for their cities?
5. Pericles and Fabius Maximus: Statesmen of Greece and Rome
  - a. What does Pericles learn from his mentor Anaxagoras and Socrates?
  - b. What role does rhetoric or the art of persuading play in Pericles and Fabius Maximus' statesmanship?
  - c. How do Pericles and Fabius Maximus use public funds? Are they just or unjust?
  - d. Do Pericles and Fabius aim for peace or war in their cities?
  - e. Are Pericles and Fabius better generals than they are statesmen, or vica versa?
6. Alcibiades and Coriolanus: Traitors to Greece and Rome
  - a. Both Alcibiades and Coriolanus are born with noble natures, but turn out bad. What happened in the course of their education to effect that?
  - b. Does the childhood fame of Alcibiades and Coriolanus help or hurt their character?
  - c. What are Alcibiades and Coriolanus educated to seek?
  - d. What does Plutarch see as endangering and preserving the characters of these two generals?
  - e. What are Alcibiades and Coriolanus' "movements toward tyranny?"
  - f. What effect does flattery have on the youth and maturity of Alcibiades and Coriolanus?
  - g. Why do Alcibiades and Coriolanus turn traitor to their city? What causes their treason?



7. Timoleon and Aemilius Paulus: Generals of Greece and Rome
  - a. Why does Timoleon conquer other cities inside of Sicily?
  - b. How would you characterize the leadership skills of Timoleon and Aemilius Paulus?
  - c. Are Timoleon and Aemilius conquerors and tyrants or benefactors and preservers?
  - d. How do these two generals deal with fortune and misfortune?
8. Pelopidas and Marcellus: Generals of Greece and Rome
  - a. What enables Pelopidas and his band to defeat the Spartans?
  - b. What is heroic and tragic in the deaths of Pelopidas and Marcellus?
  - c. Why is it especially important for a commander, like Pelopidas, to be removed from the frontline of battle?
  - d. In the life of Marcellus, how does the Archimedes' scientific knowledge help the Syracusans?
  - e. What virtues does Marcellus bring to the Roman army?
9. Aristides and Marcus Cato: "New Men" in Greece and Rome
  - a. How do Aristides and Marcus Cato guide their public lives by the rule of justice?
  - b. Does Marcus Cato have a realistic and proper understanding of the virtue of poverty?
  - c. How does Marcus Cato form and fashion his son to virtue?
  - d. How do the Greek philosophers who visit Rome offer an alternative education in pleasure to Marcus Cato's austere discipline?
10. Philopoemen and Flaminius: Strategists of Greece and Rome
  - a. How do Philopoemen and Flaminius' education influence the kind of discipline that they bring to their army?
  - b. What kind of liberty do Philopoemen and Flaminius offer Greece?
11. Pyrrhus and Caius Marius: Generals in Civil Wars in Greece and Rome
  - a. Are Pyrrhus' victories worth the great number of casualties?
  - b. Is Pyrrhus rash or brave in his military endeavors?
  - c. What motivates Caius Marius to engage in wars?
12. Lysander and Sulla: Infighting in Greece and Rome
  - a. Does Lysander care more for public or for private gain? For the public or private goods?
  - b. What is Lysander's attitude toward money?
  - c. Compare and contrast Lysander and Sulla's temperaments.
  - d. What childish habits that Sulla formed in his youth carry into his marriage and pastimes as a leader?
13. Cimon and Lucullus
  - a. Cimon has two nightmares. What do they show about his character and fate?
  - b. How does Cimon rise to command the Greek army?
  - c. How does Cimon create division among the Spartans and Athenians?
  - d. How does Lucullus win the love of the people he ruled?
  - e. How does Lucullus' love of the liberal arts in his youth shape his career and his retirement?



14. Nicias and Crassus

- a. What does politics aim at, for Nicias?
- b. What does the life of Nicias show is more real: the study of divination or the natural sciences?
- c. What is Crassus' predominant fault?
- d. How does Crassus win the love of the Roman people?

15. Sertorius and Eumenes: Roman and Greek who suffer betrayal

- a. Does Sertorius have virtues or merely good inclinations, especially as seen after misfortunes?
- b. How do Sertorius and Eumenes win the affection of their people?

16. Agesilaus and Pompey: Greek and Roman Warriors

- a. Why does Agesilaus deny a private friendship with the King of Thebes? Was this denial diplomatic?
- b. As shown by the life of Agesilaus, is a state bound by the common love of war sustainable?
- c. What enamors the young Pompey?
- d. What dangers of absolute power does Pompey's life show?
- e. How does Pompey arouse envy in his countrymen and enemies?
- f. What does Pompey's unchecked ambition lead him to desire at the height of his political career?
- g. As seen in Pompey's stay in Rhodes, what is Greece to Rome?
- h. Did Pompey enter politics too young? If so, why?
- i. What does Plutarch attribute as the cause of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar?

17. Alexander and Caesar: Emperors of Greece and Rome

- a. Philip considers Aristotle the only worthy teacher of his future leader and son, Alexander. Why?
- b. Why does Alexander seek dominion over other territories? Is it to civilize them or satisfy himself?
- c. How does Alexander inspire his soldiers to follow him?
- d. What followed when Alexander gave into his anger with Clitus?
- e. Is Alexander true to his objectives and ideals until the end of his life? Why or why not?
- f. What does Caesar set as the goal of his education?
- g. How does Caesar win the affection of his friends, the common people of Rome, and the Roman soldiers?
- h. As Caesar decides whether or not to cross the Rubicon, what ultimately moves him to cross?
- i. Is Caesar a tyrant or a savior of Rome?
- j. Despite all the ill omens and warnings from priests and even his wife, why does Caesar go to the senate on the Ides of March?



### 18. Phocion and Cato the Younger

- a. What principles of the Athenian and Spartan way of life are in tension in the life of Phocion?
- b. To whom does Plutarch compare Phocion at the end of his life? Why?
- c. Why would Dante put Cato the younger as the guardian of Purgatory, even though he is a pagan suicide?
- d. Who and what motivated Cato to seek public office?
- e. What is Cato's greatest virtue as shown in his dealing with bribes?
- f. Although Cato is a Stoic, when and how does he use his passions?
- g. Why does Cato commit suicide? Is it an honorable death?

### 19. Agis and Cleomenes and Tiberius and Caius Gracchus

- a. What are the dangers of populism?
- b. What ruined the discipline of Sparta?
- c. Why was Leonidas not particularly suitable to his people?
- d. What is the difference between Leonidas and Agis?
- e. What does Cleomenes consider to be the best discipline?
- f. How does Cleomenes attempt to discipline Sparta?
- g. Why does Cleomenes' mother sacrifice herself to Ptolemy, king of Egypt?
- h. Does Tiberius Gracchus seek the common good or private gain?
- i. What is the problem with absolute power in the kingship of Rome?
- j. What about Caius Gracchus' style of rhetoric helped to change Rome from an aristocracy into a democracy?
- k. How does Caius Gracchus win the affection of the Roman people?
- l. What method of ruling do the lives of these four statesmen show to be least and most effective?

### 20. Demosthenes and Cicero

- a. What does Demosthenes' education in eloquence show about the importance of delivery and practice?
- b. What do Demosthenes' rhetorical abilities enable him to do for Greece?
- c. Does Cicero prefer the active or contemplative life?

***Suggested use:*** This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plutarch's *Lives*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.