Introduction to Frederick E. Brenk on Plutarch, Religious Thinker and Biographer

It is approximately seventy years ago that Frederick E. Brenk began his studies at Marquette University. During his long and fruitful career, Professor Brenk successfully combined his numerous academic duties and positions in the USA, UK and Italy with a prolific scientific activity. Resulting of the latter is his abundant scholarly production, which from the beginning centers on the figure of another prolific author, Plutarch of Chaeronea. Among the large amount of articles, edited volumes, and books devoted to the polygraph from Chaeronea the two studies included in this book occupy a special place. To begin with, “The Religious Spirit of Plutarch of Chaironeia” and “The Life of Mark Antony: A Literary and Cultural Study” are, together with his study on “demonology” from 1987, the only ‘book length’ articles of his scholarly production. However, our choice to include both articles in the present volume is not only due to the article’s length. In fact, both studies are also representative of Brenk’s integral approach to the corpus Plutarcheum, which duly reflects his wide interest in the two parts this corpus consists of. As to the former study, it surveys Plutarch’s religious thought mainly (though not only) in the Moralia; as to the latter, it provides a most interesting literary and cultural analysis of the Antonius in particular and of the Lives in general. But what characterizes these articles the most is that they both represent a turning point in Plutarchan studies: with his characteristic lively style Brenk masterfully synthesizes previous scholarship, engages in contemporary scholarly debates, and advances our knowledge of the numerous themes dealt within them by means of a fruitful interdisciplinary approach.


---

tant breakthrough the study of Plutarch’s *Moralia*, due to its exclusive focus on the religious aspect. Professor Brenk’s overview of Plutarch’s religious views and concepts provides an analysis of the most salient issues to understand Plutarch’s thought. His life, the formation of his religious thought, his idea of God and his view on *daemonology* roughly occupy the first half of the study, and Brenk managed to place Plutarch in the wider religious and philosophical context of the first two centuries CE. Equipped with these tools, the reader can then further proceed to unravel Plutarch’s allegorical interpretation and the syncretism behind *De Iside*; understand his polemics *vis-à-vis* the Stoics; and the role *daimon* and *Tyche* play in the *Lives*. Brenks *polymathia* also introduces the reader to other lesser but nevertheless important issues, such as the belief in omens, portents, or dreams, and, of course, to Plutarch’s conviction on divine retribution. Plutarch’s lifelong relationship with Delphi and his approach to Roman religion close the study.

Professor Brenk’s presentation of the main aspects of Plutarch’s religious thought is far from static. His overview introduces the reader to both the main scholarly discussions on these aspects and to the actors behind them. In this sense ideas and/or interpretations are not devoid of their human background. Indeed the main protagonists of the 20th century scholarly discussion on Plutarch populate his pages: Rudolph Hirzel, Konrat Ziegler, Robert Flacelière, Donald Russell, Heinrich Dörrie, Cornelia J. de Vogel, Yvonne Vernière, Philip Merlan, John Dillon, John Gwyn Griffiths, and many others. The wide range of disciplines behind all these names already reflects the growing attraction Plutarch exerted far beyond the narrow scope of Classical Philology: Graeco-Roman and Egyptian Religion, Religious studies, Archaeology, History, Philosophy, History of Ideas, Philology and Comparative Literature, etc. If during the 20th century Plutarch could still be seen by some as mainly an antiquarian, Brenk’s study made sufficiently clear that Plutarch’s prolific production is a crucial witness for the reconstruction of innumerable aspects of the cultural world of the first and second centuries CE.

The second of the studies included here was published five years later than the former, in 1992, and first saw the light as “Plutarch’s Life of *Markos Antonios*: A Literary and Cultural Study,” in W. Haase (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*. Teil 11. Principat. Band 33: Sprache und Literatur 6. Teilband (Allgemeines zur Literatur des 2. Jahrhunderts und einzelne Autoren der trajanischen und frühhadrianischen Zeit) (De Gruyter, Berlin/New York 1992) 4348–4469; with the indexes in the same volume, on pages 4895–4915. To a certain extent this is a rather different kind of study than the previous one. As its title already advances, the History of Religions approach makes room