Taking Centre Stage: Plutarch and Shakespeare

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William Shakespeare (1564–1616) was familiar with various classical sources but it was Plutarch's *Lives of the noble Greeks and Romans* that played a decisive role in the shaping of his Roman plays. The Elizabethan *Julius Caesar* (performed probably at the opening of the Globe theatre in 1599), and the Jacobean *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606–1607) and *Coriolanus* (c. 1605–1610) are almost exclusively based on the *Lives*, while numerous other plays have been thematically influenced by the Plutarchan canon or include references to specific works.

Although modern scholarship generally recognises Shakespeare's knowledge of Latin (ultimately grounded in the playwright's grammar school education, which included canonical texts in its curriculum) as well as French and Italian,1 it is widely accepted that he used Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. Ubiquitously dubbed "Shakespeare's Plutarch", its first edition in the English vernacular appeared in 1579 and was followed by expanded editions in 1595 and 1603. North translated the *Lives* from the French version of Jacques Amyot, published in 1559 (see Frazier-Guerrier and Lucchesi in this volume). Shakespeare was also acquainted with the *Moralia*, possibly in its first English translation by Philemon Holland published in 1603, although a version entered in the Stationers Register in 1600 allows for a possible influence on Shakespeare's earlier works.2

Shakespeare's borrowings should be seen in the light of the fact that Plutarch's *Lives* were admired in early modern England for their profound interest in the complexities of the human character and their didactic significance. This is attested by a passage in North's dedication of the translation to Queen Elizabeth: “I hope that the common sort of your subjects, shall not only profit themselves hereby, but also be animated to the better service of your majesty” (1898: 2). There is no other book, North continues, that teaches so well "honour, love, obedience, reverence, zeal and devotion to Princes" (*ibid.*). Also of great importance for the appeal of Plutarch's *Lives* was the implementation of pagan teachings into the Christian culture of the English Renaissance. However, North's choice of words, influenced by Christian concepts and

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1 On Shakespeare's education, see Kermode (1999), Muir (1977: 1–13); Martindale (1990).
2 Evans (2001: 3); see also Gillespie (2004: 427).
imagery, demonstrates how this process could also introduce connotations of religious antagonism in protestant England: in his rendition, Caesar's title *pontifex maximus* (high priest) becomes “chief bishop of Rome”, an uneasy allusion to the papal institution.

The fact that Plutarch’s *Lives* readily lend themselves to dramatic interpretation is an added value which ensured their popularity with dramatists. A much-quoted passage from the *Alexander* signals Plutarch’s intention to construct a full-bodied depiction of personalities based not only on specific achievements but also on details which exemplify their intrinsic qualities: “oftentimes a light occasion, a word, or some sport makes men’s natural dispositions and manners appear more plain, than the famous battles won” [1 (1)].3 Shakespeare sensed the dramatic potential of Plutarch’s desire to probe beneath the surface of historical fame or notoriety.4 The resulting felicitous combination of didactics and artistic representation not only reflected contemporary debates about what constitutes good governance but also superbly channeled the Aristotelian feelings of pity and fear, triggered by the intricate dissection of human glory and downfall.

In an illuminating essay, Gary Miles argues that Shakespeare, under the influence of North’s translation, misinterprets (although not necessarily to a negative effect) the Roman idea of human character as revealed and defined by public action. Instead, he defines character by internal tribulations which then, in turn, may have consequences for society. Taking the depiction of Brutus as an example, Miles demonstrates that North (via Amyot) reformulates the meaning of “noble” from the original “well-born” into the internal quality familiar to Shakespeare and to the modern reader.5 This pattern of internalisation marks the most significant direction in which Shakespeare develops the Plutarchan material. Therefore, in this chapter, I consider Shakespeare’s creative relationship with Plutarch in *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* with a specific focus on the two conflicts intrinsic to Shakespeare’s Roman protagonists: (1) their internal contradictions of character, including volatility of spirit

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3 All quotations are taken from Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*. References are to page numbers of the 1899 edition, followed by the modern section-divisions in brackets.

4 Thomson (1952: 243) suggests that Plutarch was “the channel or medium of the Greek tragic spirit” for Shakespeare, a claim that has been supported and treated extensively by Pelling (2009). Traversi (1963: 14–15) points out that in appropriating conflicting notions of fascination and mistrust Shakespeare was influenced by Plutarch who saw greatness contrasting with human frailty and a lack of true self-knowledge; Bullough puts the stress on the similarities between Shakespeare’s concept of the “the union of opposites” and Plutarch’s interest in the “diversity of motives warring in the same man” (1966a: 251).

5 Miles (1989: 282).