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Klooster, Julia

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Solon of Athens as a Precedent for Plutarch's Authorial Persona

Jacqueline Klooster

Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Classics Dept.

J.J.H.Klooster@rug.nl

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Abstract

Solon is the subject of both a Plutarchan biography (*Solon*) and a philosophical dialogue (*Convivium septem sapientium*). In this article I argue that Plutarch creates a precedent for his authorial persona of wise but modest adviser of the ruling class under the Roman empire in the figure of the Athenian sage Solon, presumably inspired by the fact that Herodotus used Solon as a text-internal alter ego. To this end I analyze in particular how Plutarch represents Solon's way of dealing with rulers and tyrants (Pisistratus, Philocyprus, Croesus, Periander). I ask whether in this Solon can be considered successful or not, and why. I submit that Plutarch's representation of Solon aims to provide authority to some of the remarkable aspects of his authorial persona, in particular its emphatic modesty and pragmatism with regard to absolute rule. Plutarch does this in particular by showing that it was a time-honoured and respectable practice for wise Greeks to act as advisor to rulers, even tyrants.

Keywords

Plutarch – Solon of Athens – *Parallel Lives* – *Moralia* – authorial persona – Roman Empire – tyrants – Anchoring Innovation

1 Introduction: Solon in Plutarch's Works

As many scholars have noted, the figure of the Athenian sage and statesman Solon takes an exceptional place in Plutarch's oeuvre,¹ not in the last place because he is both the subject of a biography (*Solon*) and a main character in one of the philosophical essays (*Convivium septem sapientium*).² However, opinions about Plutarch's evaluation of Solon differ markedly: according to some, for Plutarch Solon represents an example of a second rate philosopher and a failed statesman, whereas others hold that he is made to rank among the ideal sages and philosopher kings of Plutarch's works, and is intended even as an example for the emperor Trajan.³ This divergence of opinion seems to require an explanation. I shall therefore try to argue that neither assessment of Plutarch's Solon is entirely correct, but that, paradoxically, aspects of Solon's political *failure* are represented by Plutarch in such a way as to serve as positive examples for Plutarch as a philosopher and politically engaged ethical adviser of the ruling classes in the age of Trajan.

Plutarch's writings comprise a great corpus of biographies of statesmen on the one and essays of a moral, often politico-philosophical nature on the other hand. Recent scholarship emphasizes the continuity in aims between these two categories: both are, in different forms, ethic-political discourses aimed at the ruling classes of the Greco-Roman elite.⁴ My aim in this paper is to suggest that Plutarch anchors aspects of his authorial persona, i.e. of moral instructor of this elite via practical ethics (*Moralia*)⁵ and parallel biographies, in the figure of Solon of Athens. By this I mean that he implicitly creates a Solon in which readers may recognize traits of 'Plutarch', or at least of his authorial persona. Plutarch's aim in doing this, as I claim, is to provide authority to some of the remarkable aspects of this authorial persona, in particular its emphasis on modesty and accommodating pragmatism with regard to absolute rule, by showing that it was a time-honoured and respectable practice for wise Greeks to act as advisor to rulers, even tyrants.

1 Leao 2008, 481-489; Hershbell 2008, 489-501; Perez-Jimenez 2004, 127-137; Vela Tejada 2008, 501-515; Calero Secall 2008, 515-535.

2 Solon shares the honour with Alexander the Great, who is the subject of a biography and of the epideictic orations *De fortuna an virtute Alexandri Magni*.

3 Failure: de Blois 2011, 434; 2008, 317-325; Hershbell 2008, 493; Pelling 2004, 99-100; admirable: Vela Tejada 2008, 510, 513; Solon is a model for Trajan: Calero Secall 2008, 530.

4 E.g. Geiger 2008, 5-14; Brenk 2008, 237-255; Stadter 2015, 215-231.

5 See van Hoof 2010 for this felicitous term to indicate Plutarch's *Moralia*.

Of course, Plutarch was not the first to write about Solon; he stands in a long tradition that addresses various aspects of the Athenian sage and statesman. From this tradition, Plutarch selects and reconfigures a number of the characteristic elements in the figure of Solon he 'creates' in his biography, for his own purposes: his *Life of Solon* can be read as a particular stage in the reception of Solon. The most important pre-Plutarchan sources for Solon are, chronologically speaking: Herodotus (who tells of his travels, and in particular of his meeting with Croesus at Sardis),⁶ the *Athenaion Politeia*,⁷ and Diogenes Laertius' *Vitae Philosophorum* book 1. Many references to Solon are moreover found in Plato.⁸ It is in particular Herodotus, as I will argue below, whose use of Solon as a text-internal alter ego has influenced Plutarch's reception of Solon. Before arguing this, I briefly sketch the times Plutarch lived in, the audience he wrote for, and address the innovative aspects of his literary-historical-philosophical enterprise in order to contextualize my argument.

2 The Difficulty of Greek Historical Examples under Imperial Rome

To Plutarch, as many of his works testify, the rise of the Roman Empire seemed providential, both literally, in that it was the inevitable outcome of Fortune/ Providence (τύχη/πρόνοια) as intended by the god(s), and in the sense that it was the best outcome for everyone, including the Greeks.⁹ Plutarch's attitude regarding this state of affairs can be gathered for instance from a famous and often quoted passage from the *Precepts of Statecraft* (*Praecepta reipublicae gerendae*), a treatise dedicated to a certain young Menemachus from Sardis who wanted to enter on a public career.

ὅρα γὰρ ὅτι τῶν μεγίστων ἀγαθῶν ταῖς πόλεσιν, εἰρήνης ἐλευθερίας εὐετηρίας
εὐανδρίας ὁμονοίας, πρὸς μὲν εἰρήνην οὐδὲν οἱ δῆμοι τῶν πολιτικῶν ἔν γε τῷ
παρόντι χρόνῳ δέονται· πέφευγε γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν καὶ ἡφάνισται πᾶς μὲν Ἑλλην
πᾶς δὲ βάρβαρος πόλεμος· ἐλευθερίας δ' ὅσον οἱ κρατοῦντες νέμουσι τοῖς
δήμοις μέτεστι καὶ τὸ πλέον ἴσως οὐκ ἄμεινον.

6 D.S. fr. 20 tells a variant of this story.

7 On the authorship of the *Athenaion Politeia*, see Rhodes 1981.

8 All testimonia concerning Solon in later Greek and Roman literature can be found in Martina 1968.

9 See Swain 1989a, 272-302; 1989b, 504-516 on Plutarch and providence. For Plutarch's (positive) appraisal of Roman rule over Greece, see e.g. Jones 1971 *passim*; Boulogne 1994 *passim*; Bremer 2004, 257-269; van der Stockt 2013, 15-55; Stadter 2014, 24-25; 2015, 165-179.

Consider the greatest goods that cities can enjoy, peace, freedom, prosperity, a thriving population, and concord. As for peace, the peoples have no need for politicians at the present time; every war, Greek, barbarian, has disappeared. The people have as much freedom as the ruling power allows, and perhaps more than this would be no good thing. (824C)¹⁰

Broadly speaking, Plutarch seems to have acquiesced in this state of affairs. Nevertheless, he had first-hand knowledge of problematic aspects of Roman rule, in particular in 69 AD.¹¹ Afterwards, Domitian and even Vespasian had shown their tyrannical side, by exiling and executing a number of philosophers. Trajan's reign advertised itself as a new beginning in this sense, but even so Plutarch's constitutional ideal, the emergence of a true philosopher king, was not to be realized in his own times—that would only happen with Marcus Aurelius on the throne. Next best, in his view, was a ruler who, though no philosopher himself, listened to philosophers.¹² We do not know for certain whether Plutarch actually addressed the emperors Vespasian and Trajan in his writings,¹³ but in his works he certainly addresses figures close to the rulers, such as the consul Quintus Sossius Senecio. At any rate, seeing the political situation of Greece under Roman rule, it is no surprise to find that kingship and statecraft form major themes in Plutarch's works both biographical and philosophical, as well as the question how to deal with the powers that be: by resistance, or by acceptance and advice, e.g. through historical exempla? This concern appears from essays like *Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum*, *Ad principem ineruditum*, *An seni respublica gerenda sit*, and *Praecepta reipublicae gerendae*.

In his *Praecepta*, Plutarch's pragmatic response to the conundrum of being a Greek politician under Rome is: modesty and caution. In this context, it is particularly interesting to see how Plutarch, who subscribes to the general idea that one can learn valuable lessons for the present from the past, manages to include a reference to the great Greek past in the form of Pericles,

10 All translations are the Loeb version, unless otherwise noted. A comparable sentiment can also be found in *De fort. Rom.* 316e, *De Pyth. or.* 408b-d, see Stadter 2014, 31-32.

11 *Luc.* and *Ant.* treat the vicissitudes of Chaeronea under Roman rule. See Stadter 2015, 72-73 on Nero's visit to Delphi (both a boon and a curse); see also *Galb.* and *Oth.* on the chaos of the civil war of 69. In *Ant.* 87 it is stated that Nero almost destroyed Roman power. *Publ.* 15.4-5 condemns Domitian's excessive building schemes.

12 *Max. cum princ.* 776F-777A; 778F.

13 Some works, among which the *Reg. apophth.* and *Ad princ. inerud.* may have been written for Trajan, see Beck 2002, 163-174; Stadter 2015, 165-179.

but in particular to Pericles' modesty (πρόσεχε, Περικλείς· ἐλευθέρων ἄρχεις, Ἑλλήνων ἄρχεις, πολιτῶν Ἀθηναίων, 'Take care, Pericles; you are ruling free men, you are ruling Greeks, Athenian citizens'). At the same time he advises even more modest attitudes in these present times: ἀρχόμενος ἄρχεις, ὑποτεταγμένης πόλεως ἀνθυπάτοις, ἐπιτρόποις Καίσαρος ('You who rule are a subject, ruling a State controlled by proconsuls, the agents of Caesar'). The key issue is to remember always, when on the speakers' platform, the 'Roman boots above your head' (ὀρώντα τοὺς καλτίους ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς).¹⁴

This difficulty of negotiating the examples from (Greece's) great past under the present political circumstances is addressed even more explicitly somewhat further on. After naming a number of events from Greek history which demonstrate compassion, decency, and moderation, rather than evoking the pride of military successes,¹⁵ Plutarch states:

ταῦτα γὰρ καὶ νῦν ἔξεστι ζηλοῦντας ἐξομοιοῦσθαι τοῖς προγόνοις· τὸν δὲ Μαραθῶνα καὶ τὸν Εὐρυμέδοντα καὶ τὰς Πλαταιάς, καὶ ὅσα τῶν παραδειγμάτων οἰδεῖν ποιεῖ καὶ φρυάττεσθαι διακενῆς τοὺς πολλούς, ἀπολιπόντας ἐν ταῖς σχολαῖς τῶν σοφιστῶν.

If we follow these examples, it is possible to resemble our ancestors. But stories about Marathon and the battle at the Eurymedon and Plataea and other examples, which make the populace swell with pride and become conceited and vain, we should leave those in the sophists' schools. (*Praec.* 814B-C)

This attitude suggests a general way of handling the historical examples Plutarch selects to put before his readers, which I will exemplify in his representation of Solon in the *Parallel Lives*. If we wish to argue that Plutarch attempts to create a precedent for himself, as well as his addressees, in Solon, we moreover need to combine the above passage from the *Praecepta* with the observation that Plutarch elsewhere states that he writes his biographies not only to improve others, but also himself, as appears most prominently from his prologue to the *Aemilius Paullus*. This intriguing passage addresses the moral

14 *Praec.* 813D-F.

15 He names the amnesty after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants, the fining of Phrynichus after presenting the capture of Miletus in a tragedy, the decking of the Athenians' heads with garlands when Cassander refounded Thebes, the expiatory sacrifice in Athens after a massacre at Argos, their passing by of a married man's house in a house-search after the fraud of Harpalus. See in particular Ursin 2014, 289-309 on this aspect of the *Praec. reip. ger.*

exchange between history and the biographer-philosopher Plutarch: Plutarch attempts to become like his models (ὥσπερ ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ τῇ ἱστορίᾳ πειρώμενον ἀμῶς γέ πως κοσμεῖν καὶ ἀφομοιοῦν πρὸς τὰς ἐκείνων ἀρετὰς τὸν βίον, ‘using history as a mirror and endeavouring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted’). But his deliberate selection also suggests that he in turn models his topics after his own moral insights (τὰ κυριώτατα καὶ κάλλιστα πρὸς γνῶσιν ἀπὸ τῶν πράξεων λαμβάνοντες, ‘select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know’). In this paper I hope to show that this too holds true in the case of Solon. It might be possible to identify a similar process with regard to other Plutarchan biographees, but as I hope to show in this paper, in the case of Solon there were several elements in the Herodotean version of the story that made it particularly attractive to cast the sage and statesman as a kindred soul, or indeed, predecessor of Plutarch.

3 Plutarch’s Solon: Success or Failure?

Solon’s biography in the *Lives* is coupled to that of the legendary early Roman consul and legislator Publius Valerius Publicola (who died either 503 or 499 BC), a contemporary of Lucius Iunius Brutus; both Romans were associated with driving out the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus.¹⁶ The *synkrisis* between Solon and Publicola is marked out, as Plutarch himself notes, by the fact that it explicitly states how Solon and Publicola mutually enhanced each other’s success and reputation. It is not the usual state of affairs in the *Parallel Lives* that the influence of the Greek on the Roman is explicitly acknowledged.

Ἄρ’ οὖν ἰδιόν τι περὶ ταύτην τὴν σύγκρισιν ὑπάρχει καὶ μὴ πάνυ συμβεβηκὸς ἑτέρᾳ τῶν ἀναγεγραμμένων, τὸν ἕτερον γεγονέναι μιμητὴν τοῦ ἑτέρου, τὸν ἕτερον δὲ μάρτυν;

Is there, then, not something peculiar in this comparison, and something that has not been true of any other thus far, namely, that the second (Publicola) imitated the first (Solon), and the first (Solon) bore witness for the second (Publicola)? (*Sync. Sol. Publ.* 1)

An elaboration ensues in which Plutarch states that Publicola fulfilled what Solon thought of as the happiest kind of life (as illustrated by his tale of Tellus the Athenian, *Sol.* 27.4, an instance of Solon being a *witness* for Publicola).

¹⁶ Cf. Liv. 2.6–7.

Publicola on the other hand instated some of the laws that Solon had drafted, thus *imitating* the Greek. Plutarch concludes:

ὥστ' εἰ σοφώτατος ἀπάντων ὁ Σόλων, εὐδαιμονέστατος ὁ Ποπλικόλας. ἃ γὰρ εὖξατο τῶν ἀγαθῶν ἐκεῖνος ὡς μέγιστα καὶ κάλλιστα, ταῦτα καὶ κτήσασθαι Ποπλικόλα καὶ φυλάξαι χρωμένῳ μέχρι τέλους ὑπῆρξεν. Οὕτω μὲν ὁ Σόλων κεκόσμηκε τὸν Ποπλικόλαν, τὸν Σόλωνα δ' αὖ πάλιν ἐκεῖνος ἐν τῇ πολιτείᾳ παραδειγμάτων κάλλιστον ἀνδρὶ κοσμοῦντι δημοκρατίαν θέμενος· τῆς μὲν γὰρ ἀρχῆς τὸν ὄγκον ἀφελὼν εὐμενῇ πᾶσι καὶ ἄλυπον κατέστησε, νόμοις δὲ πολλοῖς ἐχρήσατο τῶν ἐκείνου.

So that if Solon was the wisest, Publicola was the most happy of men, since what Solon prayed for as the greatest and fairest of blessings, these Publicola was privileged to win and continue to enjoy until the end. Thus did Solon enhance the fame of Publicola. And Publicola, too, in his political activities, enhanced the fame of Solon, by making him the fairest of examples for one who was arranging a democracy. For he took away the arrogant powers of the consulship and made it gracious and acceptable to all, and he adopted many of Solon's laws. (*Sync. Sol. Publ.* 1-2)

Apart from this remarkable picture of the beneficial way in which a Roman and a Greek statesman enhance each other's political success and fame, there are more considerations that make the figure of Solon unique, and as I would argue, in a sense programmatic, for Plutarch's works. For one thing, as noted, Solon is not just the biographical subject of one of the *Parallel Lives*, but plays a main role in the *Convivium* too. He is therefore not only used to exemplify an ideal mode of parallelism between Greek and Roman statesmen, but also made to bridge the gap between statesman and philosopher, and between biography and moral essay: we could say that he is truly at the heart of Plutarch's literary undertaking. Combined with the notable emphasis in the *Life* on Solon as the wise instructor of rulers this makes it plausible that Plutarch singled Solon out as something of a paradigmatic figure: an archaic predecessor who served to justify his own practices.

Which are the characteristics that enable Plutarch to identify with Solon in the first place? The obvious answer would seem to be Solon's interest in politics and his wisdom, which gained him the reputation of a Panhellenic sage. However, it must be noted that some hold that "Plutarch does not portray Solon as an ideal statesman, more as a clever politician with temporary short-lived success".¹⁷ This modern judgement is based mainly on Solon's reported

17 De Blois 2011, 434.

inability to change the mentality of the Athenian *demos* successfully and the fact that he has to look on while Pisistratus seizes tyrannical power.¹⁸ His democratic legislation does not win the day.¹⁹

However, while Solon's laws and political measures were not entirely successful in their *immediate* Athenian context, not only did they prove their value in the *later* Athenian context, but, more importantly, the Romans too benefited, as Plutarch notes in the *synkrisis*. For Solon's laws not only remain in place under the tyranny of Pisistratus (*Sol.* 31.1 καὶ γὰρ ἐφύλαττε τοὺς πλείστους νόμους τοῦ Σόλωνος, '[Pisistratus] retained most of Solon's laws'), but, even more interestingly, as we saw, they eventually form the basis for the Roman constitution as reformed by Publicola (*Sync.* 2.1 νόμοις δὲ πολλοῖς ἐχρήσατο τῶν ἐκείνου, '[Publicola] adopted many of Solon's laws'). The *intrinsic value* of Solon's political measures is thus put beyond question and Plutarch shows that they did have their actual beneficial long-term effect.²⁰ The implication throughout is that Solon's intentions were good and justified, but fortuitous circumstances, a factor Plutarch always acknowledges in his appraisals of statesmen of the past, made the full achievement of his aims impossible in his own time.

De Blois and others argue that Plutarch moreover portrays Solon as a 'second rate' philosopher, because of his primitive ideas on natural philosophy, and his initially rather vulgar and decadent lifestyle and poetry.²¹ It is true that there are some initial passages in the *Life* that express a somewhat negative judgment of Solon's deeds.²² Nevertheless, I would like to counter that there is also a notable emphasis on Solon's *wisdom*, and specifically on how it increases steadily throughout his life. Solon is cited twice to the effect that he 'grew older always learning' (*Sol.* 2.2; 31.7),²³ strategically at the beginning of the *Life* and near the end. Indeed, the vulgar poetry and lifestyle that could initially be held against him (*Sol.* 3.1) are represented as issues of his youth. He grows out of them to realize that poetry should serve his political aims

18 De Blois 2011, 429-455.

19 We might wonder to what extent Plutarch actually believes this failure should be attributed only to Solon; we might look for example at *Sol.* 16, where he admits that Solon's reforms were less successful than those of Lycurgus, but excuses Solon's failures, and favourably compares his lack of violence to the violent rule of Lycurgus. On the negative portrayal of 'the people' in Plutarch's *Lives*, see Saïd 2004, 7-27.

20 Apart from this important consideration, we may moreover note the correctness of Solon's own judgment about his political actions, as cited in *Sol.* 30.6: 'I have done what I could to help the Athenians.'

21 De Blois 2011, 434, Hershbell 2008, 493.

22 *Sol.* 3.1 on his poetry and love for boys; 3.4 on his simplicity in matters of natural science.

23 Pelling 2004, 98.

(*Sol.* 3.4). As his later reaction to the riches of Croesus shows abundantly clearly, his early appreciation of the comforts of life (wealth) is also to be viewed as a youthful delusion.²⁴ Even more importantly: Solon is actually called ‘the wisest of all men’ by Plutarch in the *synkrisis*.²⁵ In the *Convivium* too, it would seem that Solon holds a special position of honour as the oldest (and by implication probably wisest) of the company, and is usually the first to be allowed to speak on a new topic.²⁶

This being the case, it is surely not correct to state that Plutarch presents Solon as ‘second rate’ or ‘a failure’. Indeed, I would argue rather that, paradoxically, Solon’s *apparent* ‘failure’ is exactly what turns him into such a congenial precedent for Plutarch. This is the thesis I will explore below. I begin by analysing in some detail the Plutarchan representation of the two characteristics singled out here: wisdom and political actions, and how this enables the anchoring of Plutarch’s authorial persona in Solon that I posit here.

4 Solon’s Wisdom

Solon’s wisdom is characterized as being mainly concerned with *political ethics*:

Φιλοσοφίας δὲ τοῦ ἡθικοῦ μάλιστα τὸ πολιτικόν, ὥσπερ οἱ πλείστοι τῶν σοφῶν, ἡγάπησεν.

In philosophy, he cultivated chiefly the domain of political ethics, like most of the wise men of the time. (*Sol.* 3.4)

Political philosophy and ethics are the fields Plutarch himself is also primarily interested in, and which he thinks are indispensable for human life as such.²⁷ As Pelling 2004, 98–100 and others have noted, unlike most of Plutarch’s

24 See Hertzoff 2008, 339–386 on these aspects of Solon, and how they actually serve to underline his sagacity.

25 On the function of the *synkrisis* to destabilize the readers’ opinion on the life as presented in the biography, and direct them to different assessments of the virtues of the subject of biography, see Duff 1999, 261, 284 ‘closural dissonance’; Larmour 2014, 415.

26 See in particular Aalders 1977, 28–39; Vela Tejada 2008, 501–515; Calero Secall 2008, 515–534; Mossman 1997, 119–141.

27 Cf. *An seni* 791C; *Ad princ.* 779F, 780C, *Max cum princ.* 779B. Indeed, though it is indispensable in the education of any future politician, philosophy can never replace a practical attitude in politics, see e.g. van Raalte 2005, 75–113; Teodorsson 2008, 339–351; Dillon 2008, 351–365.

biographies, this one does not altogether make clear where Solon gets his wisdom. Besides the Egyptian lore he learns from the priests Psenophis of Heliopolis and Sonchis of Saïs (*Sol.* 26, 31.3), it seems Solon enjoys an unspecified, autodidactic *éducation permanente*. His relations with the sages Thales of Miletus (*Sol.* 6) and Epimenides of Crete (*Sol.* 12.4) are nevertheless noted, with the understanding that he is one of their kind (e.g. *Sol.* 28.3). Besides, even if the provenance of most of his wisdom is hard to identify, what Solon learns from the Egyptian priests is clearly considered to have been important: the myth of Atlantis. This political myth is claimed by Plato to have reached the Greeks via the elder and the younger Critias (cf. Plato's *Timaeus*, 21a-22b), descendants of Solon (*Sol.* 31.3). This Platonic connection may moreover account for the fact that Solon is represented as a kind of Plato *avant la lettre*. He also foreshadows, for instance, important ideas of Plato on the problematic psychological aspects of dramatic art (*Sol.* 32,1), which Plutarch in turn echoes in his *De audiendis poetis*.

5 Solon's Relation to Power and Rulers

Besides his reputation for wisdom it is in particular Solon's dealings with rulers, as laid down in the tradition, that enabled Plutarch to see a precedent in the Athenian sage. Solon himself was so powerful and influential at one point that he could have been a tyrant, had he so wished—but he refused. This refusal is judged in various ways. In the biography his contemporaries think that he was wrong to do so, fearing 'the name of tyranny' (*Sol.* 14.4-5). In the *Convivium*, however, Thales hails him as wisest of all for this reason (147C; 152C). The fact that the sage Thales holds this opinion suggests that it is the correct way of looking at Solon's refusal.

Despite this refusal, Solon is consistently represented as the *advisor* of other kings and tyrants, which shows that despite his anti-tyrannical principles, he is not above pragmatism. In the *Convivium*, we see him sharing his wisdom among the other sages at the table of the tyrant Periander, and advising him on the best type of rule or constitution.²⁸ Solon's opinions regarding constitutions and types of rule (154F), which are clearly anachronistic, aim at the kind

28 The opinion of Solon and the other sages on tyranny is so negative as to elicit Aesop's criticism (cf. *Sol.* 28.1) that they should have kept it to themselves instead of annoying Periander with it. Solon's reply is significant: 'Don't you think that anyone could make a ruler more moderate and a despot more reasonable if he could persuade them that it is better not to rule than to rule?' (152B-C).

of mixed constitution that the Romans prided themselves on (cf. Polybius, book 6), and that was believed, to some extent, to still be in place even under the empire.

In the *Life* it is recounted how Solon opposed the tyranny of Pisistratus, with words rather than deeds (*Sol.* 29.3; 30.2-6), but to no avail. However, far from turning him into a public enemy for Pisistratus as some had predicted, the effect was rather that Pisistratus honoured Solon greatly as his counsellor and even adopted many of his laws (*Sol.* 31.1-2).²⁹ What we see, then, in Plutarch's representation is that Solon admittedly could not change the Athenian constitution in the way he would have liked to. But instead of resorting to violent action or a cynical withdrawal from politics, he became the successful adviser of the tyrant. In his guise of counsellor, Solon also played an important role in the successful founding of Cyprian Soloi, by advising King Philocyprus on the site of its foundation and on the most beneficial plan for its constitution (*Sol.* 26.2-4). Such a role of sage adviser to a king is what Plutarch explicitly advertises in *Maxime cum Principibus* (e.g. 777A), since in this way philosophy benefits the greatest number.

The most suggestive and famous moment with regard to rulers in Solon's career, however, is his meeting with Croesus. It is important to note how Plutarch introduces the story, saying that it may not be chronologically correct, but nevertheless accords so well with Solon's character and wisdom that he feels he cannot omit it (*Sol.* 27.1). The anecdote is adapted from Herodotus and follows its main points faithfully,³⁰ but it is illuminating to note specific emphases created by Plutarch. These noticeably key it towards Plutarch's philosophical and ethical outlook. Indeed, the opening *caveat* might actually be interpreted as implicitly claiming Plutarch's right to interpret and render Solon's wisdom as he finds most fitting—much in the way Herodotus himself seems to have done.³¹

In the first place, Plutarch underlines the frank and un-intimidated stance of the Greek sage with regard to the powerful Lydian king (ἄντικρυς καταστάς,

29 There is a suggestion that this is also the result of a previous love affair of Solon and Pisistratus (*Sol.* 1.2 'And this may be the reason why, in later years, when they were at variance about matters of state, their enmity did not bring with it any harsh or savage feelings, but their former amenities lingered in their spirits, and preserved there "smouldering with a lingering flame of Zeus-sent fire", the grateful memory of their love.').

30 A notable omission is the story of Atys and Adrastus.

31 Scholars have long pointed out the resemblances between the Herodotean Solon's view of the *condition humaine* and that of the narrator, and posited that he functions as a text-internal alter ego, e.g. Nawratil 1942, 1-8; Chiasson 1986, 249-262; Miller 1963, 58-94; Dewald 1985, 47-63; Christ 1994, 167-202; Shapiro 1996, 348-364; de Jong 2004, 113.

Sol. 27.4), an anecdote that he admiringly revisits several times in his *Moralia*.³² Secondly, Solon's failure to be impressed by extreme wealth is given much relief. Solon is shown around the palace and, unused to such splendour, keeps mistaking servants in lavish dress for the king. This does not mean Solon is unduly impressed; rather the passage makes the point of the sage's ability to immediately evaluate Croesus' character correctly once he does see him:

ἐπεὶ δ' ὁ Σόλων ἀντικρυς καταστάς οὐτ' ἔπαθεν οὐδὲν οὐτ' εἶπε πρὸς τὴν ὄψιν ὧν ὁ Κροῖσος προσεδόκησεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ δηλὸς ἦν τοῖς εὖ φρονοῦσι τῆς ἀπειροκαλίας καὶ μικροπρεπείας καταφρονῶν, ἐκέλευσεν αὐτῷ τοὺς τε θησαυροὺς ἀνοῖξαι τῶν χρημάτων, καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἄγοντας ἐπιδείξαι μηδὲν δεομένῳ κατασκευὴν καὶ πολυτέλειαν. ἦρκει γὰρ αὐτὸς ἐν ἑαυτῷ τοῦ τρόπου κατανόησιν παρασχεῖν.

But when Solon, in this presence, neither showed any astonishment at what he saw, nor made any such comments upon it as Croesus had expected, but actually made it clear to all discerning eyes that he despised such vulgarity and pettiness, the king ordered his treasure chambers to be thrown open for the guest, and that he should be led about to behold the rest of his sumptuous equipments. *Of this there was no need, for the man himself sufficed to give Solon an understanding of his character.* (*Sol.* 27.3, cf. 28.3)

Finally, whereas Herodotus portrays Solon as insulting Croesus by his outspokenness (Hdt. 1.32.1 Κροῖσος . . . σπερχθείς; 1.33.1 ταῦτα λέγων τῷ Κροίσῳ οὐ πως οὔτε ἐχαρίζετο), Plutarch characterizes him as a frank but remarkably diplomatic moralizer, not unlike Plutarch the mild moralist himself, perhaps: 'unwilling to flatter him *and not wishing to exasperate him further* . . .' (οὔτε κολακεύειν βουλόμενος αὐτὸν οὔτε περαιτέρω παροξύνειν . . . *Sol.* 27.6). His wish not to exasperate Croesus seems to motivate Solon's characterization of his own wisdom as typically Greek: 'a kind of wisdom which is timid, in all likelihood, and fit for common people, not one which is kingly and splendid' (. . . σοφίας τινὸς ἀθαρσοῦς, ὡς ἔοικε, καὶ δημοτικῆς, οὐ βασιλικῆς οὐδὲ λαμπρᾶς, *Sol.* 27.6). This 'typically Greek modesty' looks remarkably like a forerunner of Plutarch's own

32 Calero Secall 2008, 517 notes that the importance for Plutarch of Solon's attitude is suggested by the fact that the story of the meeting is also used to demonstrate that one should not flatter a rich person (*Adulat.* 58D, 69E). It is moreover underlined again by the contrast (in both the *Sol.* 28.1 and the *Conviv. sept. sap.* 155B) with Aesop's cynical attitude towards tyrants.

advice for the kind of wisdom his countrymen might aspire to under Roman rule, as we saw above (*Praec.* 318D-E).³³

As is well known, Croesus initially misunderstands Solon's admonishments, and is displeased, in Herodotus as in Plutarch (*Hdt.* 1.33.1; *Sol.* 28.2). But in time (after being put on the pyre by Cyrus), he comes to understand the wisdom of Solon's advice (*Sol.* 28.2-3). When Croesus then cries out Solon's name, Cyrus hears him, 'sees the word of Solon confirmed in the example (παράδειγμα) before him' (*Sol.* 28.3), and refrains from executing the Lydian king, taking him on instead as his honoured adviser. To conclude, Plutarch explicates what Herodotus' story merely shows by implication: 'and so Solon had the reputation of *saving one king and educating another by a single discourse*' (καὶ δόξαν ἔσχεν ὁ Σόλων ἐνὶ λόγῳ τὸν μὲν σώσας, τὸν δὲ παιδεύσας τῶν βασιλέων, *Sol.* 28.4).

Apart from the suggestive parallels between Solon's wisdom as portrayed in this anecdote and Plutarch's own moral aims, the structure of the narrative as a whole, I suggest, provides a key to reading Plutarch's biography of Solon. Not heeded in first instance, his wisdom nevertheless has its effect: it saves the first intended beneficiary (Croesus—the Athenians under Pisistratus) after an unexpected twist of fate (Cyrus' victory—Pisistratus' grasp of power), and moreover educates a secondary, unintended beneficiary (Cyrus—Publicola and the Romans). Seemingly unsuccessful in first instance, his wisdom finally proves its value, and benefits a great number, in accordance with Plutarch's doctrine in *Maxime cum Principibus*. This structure moreover proves the value of Solon's own famous advice to always 'look to the end of a life' (τὸ τέλος τοῦ βίου σκοπεῖν *Sol.* 28.4, 27.7, cf. *Hdt.* 1.33.1).

Concluding this overview, we see that Solon is portrayed as a wise adviser of not always reasonable rulers, Greek and foreign. His ability to compromise, his frank but mild diplomacy and his judgement of character eventually bring the greatest benefit for the largest number. This certainly sounds like a suitable precedent for the kind of pragmatic wisdom Plutarch is advocating.

6 Plutarch as a Latter-Day Solon?

To conclude, let us attempt a final *synkrisis* between Solon and Plutarch. Of course there are many differences between the archaic Athenian sage, legislator and poet and the second century AD philosopher, local politician and

33 Note moreover that the idea that 'god is jealous', which is among Solon's main points in Herodotus (τὸ θεῖον πᾶν ἐὼν φθονερόν τε καὶ παραχῶδες, 1.32), is absent in Plutarch, who, indeed, would never advocate this point of view.

prolific author Plutarch. Unlike Solon, Plutarch was not committed to drafting legislation, although he shows great interest in the laws of Solon and Lycurgus. Unlike Solon, Plutarch is not a convinced democrat—even if, as we saw, the Solon presented in the *Convivium septem sapientium* is not a convinced democrat either. Moreover, Plutarch's wisdom, though focused on practical ethics and politics, was not limited to this: he also wrote a number of specialized essays on metaphysics (*De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, *De facie in orbe lunae*, *De sera numinis vindicta*, et al.). Finally, Plutarch is certainly no poet, even if he cites poetry frequently, and even if he seems to share with Solon (at least the Solon he presents) the conviction that literature and poetry should primarily contribute to the moral education of its audiences.

Nevertheless, there are important reasons to think that Plutarch wished to create a precedent for specific aspects of his authorship in the Attic sage. Firstly, and most importantly, as argued, there is Plutarch's representation of Solon's way of dealing with rulers, giving them oblique, but lasting and valuable advice rather than opposing them, and thus benefiting the greatest number. In the case of Croesus, Solon actually tells a moralistic biography, or indeed, two (Tellus the Athenian and Cleobis and Biton), to instruct a ruler on how to live. This procedure is highly reminiscent of Plutarch's own practice. Indeed, I would argue that in this anecdote a sophisticated historical demonstration is created of how *Parallel Lives* work in practice. In first instance the parallel lives might appear to be those of Tellus versus Cleobis and Biton: examples of happy, finished civilian lives—even if their beneficiary Croesus does not understand their significance. However, the more challenging parallel Solon constructs is that of Tellus the Athenian with Croesus the Lydian: a Greek civilian and a foreign king. The ultimate beneficiary, the intelligent 'reader' of this *Parallel Life*, is the Persian King Cyrus who recognizes the παράδειγμα (28.4) he is shown in Croesus. Cyrus does grasp the point of the σύγκρισις between these parallel lives.

I also have a suggestion as to where Plutarch may have gotten the notion of creating a precedent for his own authorship in Solon. The key is once more in the Croesus-story. As noted, this story gained its greatest fame in its Herodotean version. Indeed, some modern scholars even think that Herodotus was the originator of specific elements of this anecdote, for instance the Tellus-story.³⁴ However this may be, the significant point about the figure of Solon in Herodotus in the context of my argument is that he has frequently been interpreted as the most important text-internal alter ego of Herodotus' narratorial persona. Solon's ideas on human life and the gods are to a great

34 Nawratil 1942, 1-8.

extent identical to those of Herodotus. In the *Histories* the Athenian sage's strategy of teaching his moral lesson is moreover also similar to the technique of Herodotus the narrator himself: by telling stories about the (great) deeds of human beings, that they may not be forgotten (cf. 1.pr.), and by looking always at the end of things, to guard against *hybris*. Particularly the tale of Tellus the Athenian, otherwise 'a nobody', is a great example of this former aim, or at least so Plutarch thinks, since if Solon would not have recounted his story, no one would have even known Tellus' name (cf. *Sync. Sol. Publ.* 1.2).

In other words, what I argue is that in reading Herodotus, consciously or unconsciously, Plutarch may have picked up Herodotus' strategy of taking Solon as a text-internal *alter ego* and forerunner. Adopting this technique, he in turn created his own updated Solon, who in Plutarch's reconfiguration exemplified a fruitful way for a Greek philosopher and statesman of Trajan's day to deal with powerful rulers. Keep a modest political profile, compromise where necessary, but advise and educate those in power, for instance by telling instructive moral biographies, creating meaningful parallels. Take care that the intrinsic value of your wisdom remains untouched and always benefits the greatest number. This is how Plutarch anchors himself in Solon for his own innovative literary and philosophical project of being a pragmatic politician and sage under absolute rule.³⁵

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