On dealing with tyrants: Plutarch’s anchoring of his moral instructorship in Solon of Athens

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Abstract

In this article I argue that Plutarch creates a precedent for his authorial persona of wise but modest adviser of the ruling class in the figure of the Athenian sage Solon, who is the subject of both a Plutarchan biography (Solon) and a philosophical dialogue (Convivium septem sapientium). To this end I analyze in particular how Plutarch represents Solon’s way of dealing with rulers and tyrants (Peisistratus, Philocyprus, Croesus; Periander) and ask whether this can be considered successful or not. Plutarch’s aim in representing Solon the way he does is, as I claim, to provide authority to some of the novel aspects of his authorial persona, in particular its emphatic modesty and 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.
Introduction

As many scholars have noted, the Athenian sage and statesman Solon takes an exceptional place in Plutarch’s oeuvre, not in the last place because he is the subject of both a biography (Solon) and a main character in one of the philosophical essays (Convivium septem sapientium). However, opinions about Plutarch’s evaluation of Solon differ: according to some, Solon represents a second rate philosopher and a failed statesman, others hold that he ranks among the ideal sages and philosopher kings of Plutarch’s works, and is intended as an example for the emperor Trajan. I argue that neither is the case, but that, paradoxically, Solon’s apparent failure makes him an anchor for Plutarch himself as a philosopher and writer 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 political-philosophical nature on the other hand. Recent scholarship emphasizes the continuity in aims between these two categories: both are ethic-political moral meditations aimed at the ruling classes of the Greco-Roman elite. My aim in this paper is to suggest that Plutarch anchors his innovative authorial persona of moral instructor of the elite via philosophy and parallel biographies in the figure of Solon. By this I mean that he creates a Solon in which readers may recognize traits of Plutarch himself. The aim of this “anchoring” is to provide authority to Plutarch’s position in the current political situation, and to show that it was a time-honoured practice for wise Greeks to act as advisers to rulers.

1 It may be noted that he shares the honour with Alexander the Great, who is the subject of a biography and of the essay De fortuna an virtute Alexandri Magni.
4 See e.g. Duff 1999; Geiger 2008: 5-14, Brenk 2008: 237-255.
Plutarch’s project in context

For Plutarch, as many of his works testify, the rise of the Roman Empire was providential, both literally, in that it was the inevitable outcome of Fortune/Fate (tukhe/pronoia) as intended by the god(s), and in the sense that it was the best outcome for everyone including the Greeks. Nevertheless, Plutarch had first-hand knowledge of problematic aspects of Roman rule, in particular in the wars of 69 AD. 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. It is no surprise to find, then, that kingship is a major theme of Plutarch’s works, and the question how to deal with the powers that be. This appears from essays like *Philosophers and men in power*, *To an uneducated ruler*, *Whether an old man should engage in politics* and *Precepts of statecraft*. In this he resembles his contemporary Dio Chrysostom.

In the *Precepts of Statecraft*, intended for Greeks who wished to enter a public career, Plutarch’s pragmatic solution to the conundrum of being a Greek politician under Rome is: modesty and caution.

εἰσίόντα δ’ εἰς ἅπασαν ἄρχην οὐ μόνον ἑκεῖνους δεῖ προχειρίζεσθαι τοὺς λογισμούς, οὗς ὁ Περίκλης αὑτὸν ὑπεμίμνησκεν ἀναλαμβάνων τὴν χλαμύδα, “πρόσεχε, Περίκλειε, ἑλευθέρων ἄρχεις, Ἑλλήνων ἄρχεις,

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6 *Luc.* and *Ant.* treat the vicissitudes of Chaeronea under Roman rule. See Stadter on Nero’s visit to Delphi 2015: 72-3 (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.
7 Some works, among which the *Reg. Apophth.* and the dubious *Ad princ. Inerud.* may have been written for Trajan, see Stadter 2015: 165-179.
πολιτῶν Ἀθηναίων”· ἀλλὰ κάκειν λέγειν πρὸς ἑαυτὸν, “ἀρχόμενος ἄρχεις, ύποτεταγμένης πόλεως ἀνθυπάτοις, ἑπιτρόπος Καίσαρος· ὀυ ταῦτα λόγχη πεδιάς,’ οὐδ’ αἱ παλαιαί Σάρδεις οὐδ’ ἡ Λυδῶν ἑκείνη δύναμις”· εὐσταλεστέραν δεῖ τὴν χλαμύδα ποιεῖν, καὶ βλέπειν ἀπὸ τοῦ στρατηγίου πρὸς τὸ βῆμα, καὶ τῷ στεφάνῳ μὴ πολὺ φρονεῖν μηδὲ πιστεύειν, ὁρῶντα τοὺς καλτίους ἐπάνω τῆς κεφαλῆς.

And when entering upon any office whatsoever, you must not only call to mind those considerations of which Pericles reminded himself when he assumed the cloak of a general: “Take care, Pericles; you are ruling free men, you are ruling Greeks, Athenian citizens,” but you must also say to yourself: “You who rule are a subject, ruling a State controlled by proconsuls, the agents of Caesar; ‘these are not the spearmen of the plain,’ (Soph. Trach. 1058), nor is this ancient Sardis, nor the famed Lydian power. “You should arrange your cloak more carefully and from the office of the generals keep your eyes upon the orators’ platform, and not have great pride or confidence in your crown, since you see the boots of Roman soldiers just above your head.” (813D-F)

But how to negotiate examples from Greece’s great past under the present political circumstances? This is adressed explicitly somewhat further on, recounting some modest stories about kindness and tolerance:

Furthermore when we see little children trying playfully to bind their fathers’ shoes on their feet or fit their crowns upon their heads, we only laugh, but the officials in the cities, when they foolishly urge the people to imitate the deeds, ideals, and actions of their ancestors, however unsuitable they may be to the

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8 Translations of Plutarch’s texts are taken from the corresponding Loeb editions.
present times and conditions, stir up the common folk and, though what they do is laughable, what is done to them is no laughing matter, unless they are merely treated with utter contempt. Indeed there are many acts of the Greeks of former times by recounting which the statesman can mould and correct the characters of our contemporaries, for example, at Athens by calling to mind, not deeds in war, but such things as the decree of amnesty after the downfall of the Thirty Tyrants, the fining of Phrynichus for presenting in a tragedy the capture of Miletus, their decking their heads with garlands when Cassander refounded Thebes; how, when they heard of the clubbing at Argos, in which the Argives killed fifteen hundred of their own citizens, they decreed that an expiatory sacrifice be carried about in the assembly; and how, when they were searching the houses at the time of Harpalus’s frauds, they passed by only one, that of a newly married man. 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. 814A-C)

This modest attitude suggests a way of reading the historical examples Plutarch chooses for his Parallel Lives, which I will exemplify in Solon.

Plutarch writes his biographies to improve other and himself, as appears from his prologues, e.g. the one to Aemilius Paullus:

I began the writing of my ‘Lives’ for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using

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9 See in particular Ursin 2014: 289-309 on this aspect of the Praec. reip. ger.
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history as a mirror and endeavouring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted (ὡσπερ ἐν ἑσόπτρῳ τῇ ἱστορίᾳ πειρώμενον ἀμώς γε πως κοσμεῖν καὶ ἁφομοιοῦν πρὸς τὰς ἑκείνων ἀρετὰς τὸν βίον). For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully ‘how large he was and of what mien,’ (ll. 24.630) and select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know. (τὰ κυριώτατα καὶ κάλλιστα πρὸς γνῶσιν ἀπὸ τῶν πράξεων λαμβάνοντες) (Aem. Paul. 1)

This interesting passage addresses the moral exchange between history and the biographer Plutarch: Plutarch becomes like his models, but his ‘selection’ also suggests that he in turn ‘models’ his topics.

Plutarch’s anchoring of his own persona in Solon?

Paralleling Greeks and Romans is one of the most innovative features of Plutarch’s works, yet despite this a Greek Life rarely explicitly foreshadows a Roman Life, nor is the Roman statesman actually said to have learned from the Greek. Indeed, the single case in is in the Comparison of Solon and Publicola, the legendary second consul of Rome, (6th cent BC). This synkrisis therefore takes a marked, perhaps even programmatic, position in the Lives:

Ἄρ’ οὖν ἴδιόν τι περὶ ταύτην τὴν σύγκρισιν ὑπάρχει καὶ μὴ πάνυ συμβεβηκὸν ἑτέρᾳ τῶν ἀναγεγραμμένων, τὸν ἑτέρον γεγονέναι μιμητὴν τοῦ ἑτέρου, τὸν ἑτέρον 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)?

Besides this remarkable picture of how a Roman and a Greek statesman enhance each other’s political success and fame, more considerations make Solon unique or even programmatic in Plutarch’s works. He is not only the biographical subject of one of the Parallel Lives, but also plays a main role in the Convivium. He is therefore made to bridge the gap between Greek and Roman, between statesman and philosopher, and between biography and moral essay: he is at the heart of Plutarch’s literary undertaking. Combined with the emphasis in the Life on Solon as the instructor of rulers this suggests that Plutarch created an anchor for himself in Solon, in the way suggested by the proem to the Aemilius Paulus: he tries to become like Solon, and selectively models Solon after his own insights.

What characteristics invite Plutarch’s anchoring? The obvious answer would be Solon’s traditional interest in politics and his wisdom. De Blois disagrees on both counts. I here focus on the statement that “Plutarch does not portray Solon as an ideal statesman, more as a clever politician with temporary short-lived success.” This is based mainly on Solon’s reported inability to change the mentality of the Athenian demos successfully and the fact that he has to look on whilst Peisistratus seizes tyrannical power. His democratic legislation does not win the day. Yet, while Solon’s laws and political measures were not immediately successful, they did

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10 See Hershbell 2008: 489-499 on Plutarch’s interest in Solon. The two works are likely to be dated around 96 AD, i.e. in Plutarch mature years, and after the death of Domitian.
13 We might wonder to what extent Plutarch actually believes this failure should be laid at Solon’s doorstep only cf. e.g. Sol. 16, where he admits that Solon’s reforms were less successful than those of Lycurgus, but excuses Solon’s difficulties, 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 Said 2004: 7-27.
have their lasting effect in Athens and beyond. Solon’s laws remain in place under the tyranny of Peisistratus (Sol. 31: “[Peisistratus] retained most of Solon’s laws”), and even more interestingly, they form the basis for the Roman constitution reformed by Publicola (Synk. 2: “[Publicola] adopted many of Solon’s laws.”).

Solon’s relation to power and rulers

Solon himself was so powerful and influential at one point that he could have been tyrant, had he so wished, but he refused. Despite this refusal, Solon is consistently represented as the adviser of other kings and tyrants: despite his anti-monarchical principles, he is not above pragmatism. In the Convivium, he shares his wisdom among the other sages at the table of the tyrant Periander.14 In the Life, Solon initially opposes the tyranny of Peisistratus (29.3; 30.2-6). Peisistratus, however, far from considering Solon his enemy or banishing him, takes him on as his counsellor and, as we saw, adopts many of his laws (31.1-2). Solon also plays an important role in the founding of Cyprian Soloi, advising King Philocyprus on the site of its foundation and on its constitution. (Sol. 26) Such a role of sage adviser to a king is what Plutarch explicitly advertises in “Philosophers and Men in Power”, since this way philosophy benefits the greatest number (777A).

The most suggestive and famous moment in Solon’s traditional career is his meeting with Croesus. Significantly, Plutarch’s introduces the story by saying it may not be chronologically correct, or historically true, but since it accords so well with Solon’s character and wisdom he feels he cannot omit it (27). The anecdote is adapted

14 The opinion of Solon and the other sages on tyranny is so negative as to elicit Aesop’s criticism (cf Sol. 27) that they should have kept 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) It is remarkable that Solon’s opinions regarding constitutions and types of rule as reported here aim at combining a democracy with an oligarchy or monarchy (154F), the kind of mixed constitution that the Romans prided themselves on, and that was believed, to some extent, to still be in place even under the principate.
from Herodotus and follows its main points faithfully, but specific emphases noticeably key it towards Plutarch’s philosophical and ethical outlook.

After noting Solon’s un-intimidated stance, the passage culminates in Solon’s ability to evaluate Croesus’ character correctly upon seeing him, displaying the perfect biographer’s judgment of character. Herodotus portrays Solon as insulting Croesus by his outspokenness; Plutarch shows him as a frank but remarkably diplomatic moralizer: ‘unwilling to flatter him and not wishing to exasperate him further.’ (οὔτε κολακεύειν βουλόμενος αὐτὸν οὔτε περαιτέρω παροξύνειν… Sol. 27.6) Moreover, Solon characterizes his 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 27.6). Such apparently ‘typically Greek’ modesty may remind one of Plutarch’s advice to his countrymen under Roman rule, as we saw above.15

Croesus initially misunderstands Solon’s admonishments, and is displeased, in Herodotus as in Plutarch (Sol. 28.2). But after being put on the pyre by Cyrus he comes to understand the truth of Solon’s advice (Sol. 28.2-3). When Croesus finally cries out Solon’s name, Cyrus hears him and refrains from executing the Lydian king, taking him on as his adviser instead. Concluding, Plutarch explicates what Herodotus’ version merely implies: ‘and so Solon had the reputation of saving one king and educating another by a single discourse.’ (καὶ δόξαν ἔσχεν ὁ Σόλων ἐνί λόγῳ τὸν μὲν σώσας, τὸν δὲ παιδεύσας τῶν βασιλέων Sol. 28.4).’

The structure of this anecdote holds a key to reading Plutarch’s biography of Solon. Not heeded in first instance, his wisdom nevertheless has great effect: it saves the first intended beneficiary (Croesus-- the Athenians under Peisistratus) after an unexpected twist of fate (Cyrus’ victory -- Peisistratus’ grasp of power). Moreover, it educates a secondary, unintended beneficiary (Cyrus -- Publicola and the Romans).

15 Note moreover that the idea that ‘god is jealous’ (τὸ θεῖον πᾶν ἐὸν φόνευρόν τε καὶ ταραχώδες, Hist. 1.32) which is among Solon’s main points in Herodotus, is absent here.
Seemingly unsuccessful in first instance, his wise advice to kings finally proves its value, and benefits a great number, in accordance with Plutarch’s doctrine in *Philosophers and Men in Power*.

**Synkrisis: Plutarch as a latter day Solon?**

So, to draw the strings of this argument together: does Plutarch see himself as a latter day Solon? Let us attempt a Plutarchan *Synkrisis*: of course there are many differences between the archaic Athenian sage and legislator and the second century AD philosopher, local politician and polygraph Plutarch. Plutarch did not draft legislation, although he shows great interest in the laws of Solon and Lycurgus. He was never as near to holding power himself as Solon was. He was not a convinced democrat. Finally, Plutarch’s wisdom, though focused on practical ethics and politics, was not limited to this: he also wrote a number of technical essays on metaphysics (*de facie in orbe lunae, de sera numinis vindicta, et al.*).

Nevertheless, there are important reasons to think that Plutarch liked to recognize, or indeed, anchor, himself in the Attic sage and statesman. Firstly, and most importantly, as argued, there is Solon’s way of dealing with rulers, giving them oblique, but lasting and valuable advice, 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. I would argue that a sophisticated historical demonstration is here 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. If so, their beneficiary Croesus does not understand. 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 eventual beneficiary, or ‘reader’ of this *Parallel Life* is
the Persian King Cyrus, who apparently does grasp the point of a *synkrisis* between these lives.

I also have a suggestion as to where Plutarch got the notion to anchor himself in Solon. The key is once more in the Croesus-story. As noted, this story gained its greatest fame in its Herodotean version. The significant point about the figure of Solon in Herodotus in the context of my argument, is that he has frequently been interpreted as one of several text-internal alter egos of Herodotus’ narratorial persona.¹⁶ In the *Histories*, Solon’s ideas on human life and the gods are to a great extent those of Herodotus. Solon’s way of teaching his oblique moral lesson is similar to Herodotus’ own technique: telling stories about the great deeds of human beings so they may not be forgotten, and to guard against *hybris*.

In reading Herodotus, consciously or unconsciously, Plutarch picked up Herodotus’ strategy of taking Solon as a text-internal *alter ego* and forerunner. He in turn created his own updated Solon, who in Plutarch’s reconfiguration exemplified a fruitful way for a Greek philosopher and statesmen of Trajan’s day to deal with powerful rulers. Keep a modest political profile, compromise where necessary, but educate those in power, for instance by telling instructive moral biographies and creating meaningful parallels. Take care that the intrinsic value of your wisdom remains untouched, and benefits the largest number. So Solon becomes an anchor for Plutarch’s own innovative literary and philosophical project of a being pragmatic politician and sage under absolute rule

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