

## Citation style

Harrison, George W. M.: review of: Donald R. Shipley, A Commentary on Plutarch's "Life of Agesilaos". Response to Sources in the Presentation of Character, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, in: Journal of Ancient Civilizations, 15 (2000), p. 119-121, DOI: 10.21245/rec.ant.1157646038



## copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

D.R. SHIPLEY, *Plutarch's 'Life of Agesilaos': Response to Sources in the Presentation of Character*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. ISBN 0-19-815073-3. Pp. ix + 514. \$125.00.

Since the formation of the International Plutarch Society in 1984 there has been a dramatic increase in the number of papers, conferences, articles, and books on Plutarch. Dr. Shipley's thorough and insightful study should be assigned an honored place among the recent publications on Plutarch and deserves to have a wide influence among not just Plutarch scholars but also among historians of the fourth century B.C.

Agesilaos is one of the most complex and intriguing characters in Greek history since his life spans from the eventual Spartan victory over Athens down to the denouement of the so-called Spartan hegemony. Although he was a principle protagonist in much of this rich and divisive history, he was as often 'present by his absence' from the pivotal events, such as the surrender of the Athenians in 404 B.C. and Leuctra; for the latter it is an interesting question whether the Spartans could have won at Leuctra with Agesilaos as commander rather than Cleombrotus. Concomitantly, the battles and political controversies in which he did find himself did not often reflect well on him or on Sparta, such as his presumed role in the seizure of the Cadmeia at Thebes, the acquittal of Sphodrias against all common sense and point of law, and perhaps most grievously the removal and humiliation of Lysander. Agesilaos thus poses an intriguing moral problem for Plutarch who pairs him with Pompey. The choice of the pairing is particularly revealing since both figures had tremendous prestige and military prescience, but both by their mistakes in judgement and political single-mindedness/short-sightedness contributed significantly to the fall of their governments and obliteration of the political factions that grew around them.

Shipley should be congratulated for having printed the *syncrisis*, or comparison, which accompanied the paired *Lives* of Pompey and Agesilaos. Hilliers had said for years that reading one *vita* is incomplete without having read its opposite number and also the *syncrisis*, if it is extant. There has certainly long been a recognition that much of the moral standards by which Plutarch would wish a pair of *Lives* to be judged are contained in the comparisons which accompanied each set. Shipley's printing of the *syncrisis*

and his discussion (9-24) of the *synkrisis* are thus essential to the book. For Pompey and Agesilaos, Shipley recognizes the facile, surface similarities (battles in the East, death in Egypt) but is not taken in by them anymore than is Plutarch. What Plutarch foresees but which only we can now know at a much later remove is that the blindness in the character of Agesilaos and Pompey are precisely that shortcomings and failings of most of the worst emperors, such as Nero, Arcadius, Honorius, and others who waged pointless battles in the East and seemed determined to destroy men of military genius on the point of victory, such as Corbulo, Symmachus, and Stilicho (among others) rather than share credit. In this way the Alexander-Caesar pair seems to be the standard emperors wish to imitate but Agesilaos – Pompey is the template for failure. Such a view is consonant with scholarly opinion that there are two ‘nodes’ of pairs of *Lives*, that is Pericles – Fabius Maximus and Alexander – Caesar, advanced respectively by Stadter and Harrison, around which all of the other *Lives* revolve like satellites, and the view of Titchener that each set of *Lives* is meant to propound a different and distinct moral characteristic or moral flaw.

Perhaps most intriguing for historians of the text and working methodology of Plutarch, the *Life of Agesilaos* is perhaps the one in his collection in which Plutarch is most actively and exclusively engaged with the works of Xenophon. Xenophon was an acquaintance of Agesilaos, but not an uncritical admirer, as emerges from Xenophon’s biography of Agesilaos and from the *Hellenica*. Weighing and comparison of Plutarch’s use of Xenophon is greatly facilitated by Shipley’s arrangement of the commentary in which each series of chapters dealing with a specific topic (such as Agesilaos’ ancestry [chapters 1-3], and character of Agesilaos and Sparta [chapters 4-5]) has at its head parallel passages in other historians, both earlier than Plutarch and after, followed by some general introductory remarks. It is thus easy to trace the extent to which Plutarch’s formal organization of the *life* and information come directly from Xenophon and where and how he departs, or perhaps put differently paraphrasing the subtitle, we are able to see the degree to which this *life* is a ‘response to sources in the presentation of character’. Shipley means ‘sources’ to be taken both ways; that is, not just the accounts used by Plutarch, but the ethical source (*physis*) of moral character.

The format of the book is impressive. Commentaries tend to be line by line expositions of grammar and thoughts, filled out with parallel passages in that author or other authors. There are many such commentaries on Plutarch; one thinks immediately of the exemplary one by Phil Stadter to the *'Life of Pericles'*, among many, many others. Plutarch, however, is a challenging if rewarding author and thus he is not often taught successfully at the undergraduate level. The decision of Shipley, himself once senior Classicist at a premier British public (i.e. private) school, not to do a standard commentary but rather something on the model of Gomme on *Thucydides* and Syme on *Tacitus* is a wise one. It has enabled him to select words, phrases or ideas within a sentence of Plutarch and expand and explicate as he deems worthwhile or necessary. As a result, a sentence or section in the *'Life of Agesilaos'* might have an exegesis of only a limited number of clauses but each of these will have a full and thoughtful paragraph.

This book is a great achievement. The author's intelligence and persistence are everywhere evident and each page individually is an intellectual achievement. It is a very great pity that the hefty price will necessarily limit its readership.

George W.M. Harrison, IHAC  
Northeast Normal University