CHAPTER 34

Sex, Eroticism, and Politics

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Plutarch sees sexual behaviour as a manifestation of a man's character. For the tyrant or the violent man, sex is an arena for power and the domination of others. Theseus, Demetrius, Sulla, and subsidiary figures like Alexander of Pherae or [the Spartan king] Pausanias express and reveal their viciousness through sexual violence. The ideal statesman instead shows his self-control in the same arena, creating harmony in his household and in his city.

So Philip Stadter (1995) concludes his survey of male sexual behavior in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, marking both ends of the behavioral spectrum. Stadter shows in the course of his survey that Plutarch describes certain types of both problematic and positive behavior in order to reveal the character of his biographical subjects, or of other figures in the *Lives*. Examples of problematic behavior fall into the categories of irrational excess, unseasonable lust (i.e. when a man past the age for marrying engages in a marital or sexual relationship), and sexual violence. Stadter also identifies three categories of positive behavior, although only one, rational self-control, is really a behavior. The other two, harmonious relationships and a stimulus to virtue, are really the result of a controlled response to sexual impulses. Self-control, in fact, is the central issue in the representation of sexual behavior in the *Lives*: irrational excess is one of Stadter's categories of problematic behavior, but this excess may also be seen as the reason behind unseasonable lust and violence, just as the practice of rational self-control leads to important positive benefits for the one who achieves it and for those around him. In the simplest terms, then, the sexual behavior of the ideal statesman is characterized by self-control, while the behavior of the tyrannical or violent man is characterized by the opposite.

Plutarch's biographical subjects exhibit a fair amount of complexity, however, even as they conform to certain types of behavior. While particular incidents may be categorized as tyrannical or ideal, the men themselves are often not so easy to classify. For example,

Stadter's examples of irrational excess, Demetrius and Antony, both regularly engage in excessive sexual behavior, and yet they exhibit positive, even sympathetic, qualities as well. "Plutarch castigates Demetrius for his licentiousness and violence," Stadter writes, "but finds a redeeming feature in his ability to put aside pleasure when military duties called." And even though Antony, in contrast to Demetrius, cannot abandon his lover, Cleopatra, when duty calls, Plutarch nonetheless concludes the biography by representing the pair as "bonded together" in a truly loving relationship, thus softening his condemnation of Antony's lack of self-restraint (Stadter (1995) 235–236; see also Pelling (1988) 18–26). At the other end of the spectrum, Alexander the Great provides "perhaps the clearest example" of rational self-control, but even he consents to kiss his *eromenos* Bagoas late in his life, in the midst of a celebration marked by excessive drinking and a general lack of discipline (Stadter (1995) 228–229; for the context of the kiss, see Mossman (1988) 90 = (1995) 223; Beck (2007)). Episodes of sexual excess or restraint, while easily characterized in isolation, must also be interpreted within their larger narrative contexts.

Plutarch's *Lives*, then, are populated with figures whose sexual behavior, taken as a whole, generally falls along the scale between the polar types represented by the tyrant and the ideal statesman. These figures exhibit similar variety and complexity in other sorts of private behavior, as well as in their public actions as military leaders and statesmen. Their private lives and their public conduct are, in fact, closely intertwined, and Plutarch really has no interest in narrating their sexual activity unless it explains, or at least helps to explain, the motivation for a political or military action (see Walcot (1998); Duff (1999) 94–97). When we consider episodes of sexual behavior in light of Plutarch's biographical method, therefore, we find that Plutarch includes them in the *Parallel Lives* as part of his larger project to reveal the character of individual statesmen in an analytical way; that is, not only to describe a statesman's role in history but also to reveal how he came to play that role. An essential element in Plutarch's characterization is the notion that the ideal statesman is self-controlled in his response to sexual impulses and in other sorts of private behavior, in his dealing with family members and friends, and most importantly, in his role as civic or military leader.

Plutarch, therefore, uses episodes of sexual behavior in two ways. First, he may narrate an episode as a means of indicating that a man possesses or lacks self-control, using private behavior to foreshadow or to explain public behavior that is similarly excessive or restrained. Second, he may represent the consequences of a private action as having direct bearing on the course of public affairs. In what follows, I first examine the internal processes that allow Plutarch's heroes to gain self-control, and I explore how these processes may influence a person's external actions. Then I turn to the *Agesilaus–Pompey* as a case study for how Plutarch depicts the struggle involved in achieving self-control and how this struggle can affect a man's life in a practical, as opposed to a strictly theoretical, manner.

1. Eroticism, Politics, and Self-Control

Sexual self-control in the *Parallel Lives* may be considered an expression of what the Greeks in general called *sophrosyne* or *enkrateia*. For Plutarch, self-control at its most basic level is gained through a struggle against one's bodily appetites, which include hunger, thirst, and in the case of sexual impulses, erotic desire (*eros*). This struggle takes

place within the soul, but it also has real implications for a person's external actions: implicit in the character portraits of the *Lives* is the assumption that a man who is unable to control his appetites is also unlikely to manage his household, lead a city, or command an army with any success. In examining private behavior in order to predict or explain public actions, Plutarch follows a tradition that goes back to Classical Athens. In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, for instance, Socrates asks, "If we were at war and wished to select a man who most certainly would keep us safe and defeat our enemies, would we select someone whom we perceived to be dominated by food or drink or sex or toil or sleep?" (1.5.1). Socrates expects his interlocutors to answer in the negative; Plutarch holds essentially the same view. (On the attitudes of Classical Athens, see Davidson (1997) 250–308; on the influence of Classical literature on Plutarch's political thought, see Aalders (1982) 61–65; Roskam (2009) 17–22.)

Platonic and Aristotelian notions of ethics provide the basis for Plutarch's approach to self-control. The best treatment of the philosophical ideas behind the ethics of Plutarch's *Lives* is found in Duff (1999) 72–98, on whom I rely for the following discussion. As a Platonist, Plutarch was well acquainted with the tripartite model of the human soul, which consists of one rational element and two irrational elements. These irrational elements represent the appetitive aspect of human nature (i.e. the bodily appetites mentioned above) but also the spirited aspect, which manifests itself in emotional responses, such as anger or courage. In thinking about ethics, however, Plutarch preferred the simpler bipartite model set forth by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This model divides the soul into what Plutarch refers to as reason (the rational element) and the passions (the irrational element). Although strictly speaking Aristotle excludes the appetites from the irrational part of the soul, Plutarch conceives of the irrational portion of the bipartite soul as comprised of both the spirited and the appetitive components of Plato's original tripartite model. (See further Fortenbaugh (1975) 35; on Plutarch's adaptation of Aristotelian philosophy, see Dillon (1977) 193–198; Opsomer (1994) 33–36; Beneker (2012) 9–17.) This conception allows him to speak in general of a struggle between reason and the passions, and to include among the passions both spirit (*thymos*) and appetitive desire (*epithymia*).

The soul of a Plutarchan hero, then, is the site of a conflict between reason and the passions, but it is also the place where reason may tame the passions, making them cooperative and even supportive of one's "reasoned plans" (*logismoi*). This taming is accomplished through habituation, a process whereby a man's education and general ethical conduct are designed and executed specifically so that the reason may gain control over the passions and, over time, guide them into a state where they cooperate as a matter of course. Such a cooperative state is considered virtuous, and thus this process of habituation is central to Plutarch's conception of ethical virtue. For the most part, Plutarch conceives of this process as one where the reason habituates the spirited element (*thymos*) into a state of moderation, according to the Aristotelian idea of virtue as a mean between extremes of behavior. An obedient, moderated spirit, in turn, allows a man to be courageous without being rash, for example, or to convert the spur of anger into a measured, rational response when he is attacked by political enemies or on the battlefield.

We find an illustrative, though negative, example of this process in the *Pelopidas*. Although this fourth-century Theban general was an outstanding military commander, he ignored a philosophical education in his youth, unlike his colleague Epaminondas.

“Both were equally gifted by nature with respect to every virtue,” Plutarch writes, “except that Pelopidas took greater pleasure in exercise, while Epaminondas preferred learning, and so the one spent his leisure in the wrestling schools and hunting, and the other listened to lessons of philosophers” (*Pel.* 4.1). The difference in their training becomes evident later in their careers, when their political enemies attack the two men with slander and lawsuits: Epaminondas is able to withstand the attacks with equanimity because of his virtuous disposition, while Pelopidas is unable to restrain his spirited nature, and so he lashes out in anger (25). In the climactic scene of the *Life*, Pelopidas spies his enemy at the outset of a major battle, and then “he did not hold his anger back with a reasoned plan, but having been enflamed by the sight and handing over his body and the command of the battle to his *thymos*, he sprang forth and was carried well ahead of his men” (32). This rash action leads directly to the death of Pelopidas, a fine general who nonetheless dies recklessly on the battlefield because in his youth he had not trained his *thymos* to obey his reason. In terms of biographical technique, Plutarch has explained Pelopidas’ rashness by marking the deficiency in his education, and he has foreshadowed his loss of rational control in the final battle by narrating his immoderately angry response to the attacks of his political opponents at an earlier moment in his life. (On the habituation of the *thymos*, see Plutarch’s essay *On the Control of Anger* 459b–460c; for further discussion of the *Pelopidas*, see Beneker (2012) 58–102.)

Control over bodily appetites, including erotic desire, is also important to Plutarch’s system of ethical virtue. In the essay *On Moral Virtue*, where Plutarch writes about the range of possible responses to these appetites, he gives technical definitions for the two best responses: *sophrosyne*, he explains, is a virtuous mean between a lack of sensation (*anaesthesia*) and unrestrained licentiousness (*akolasia*); and *enkrateia* is self-control in response to an appetite but without a virtuous mean having been achieved (445b–446d). With *enkrateia*, a battle is fought and won each time an appetite arises; with *sophrosyne*, however, a man habitually responds to appetitive desire with moderation, without struggle, and without indulging an appetite beyond what is required to satisfy the needs of the body. Here Plutarch is clearly following Aristotle, who cites food, drink, and sexual intercourse as examples of bodily pleasures that a *sophron* man engages in moderately, and who was the first Greek philosopher to make a rigorous distinction between *sophrosyne* and *enkrateia* (North (1966) 203). Plutarch, therefore, connects control over bodily appetites, including erotic desire, to ethical virtue. This allows him to assume that a man who lacks either *sophrosyne* or *enkrateia* would almost certainly be unable to moderate or control his passions in general. And since Plutarch’s biographical method depends on the interrelationship between private virtue and public actions, this aspect of his heroes’ character comprises an essential part of how he explains the course of their lives. In this way, Plutarch’s exploration of his heroes’ sex lives serves as a means for his evaluation of their general psychological well-being, for exposing their character, and ultimately for demonstrating (at least in part) why they succeed or fail as politicians and military leaders.

Although Plutarch follows Aristotle in providing technical definitions for *sophrosyne* and *enkrateia* in his essay on ethical virtue, in general he uses the terms less formally when narrating particular instances of self-control in the *Lives*. He retains the same basic meanings, but he relaxes the rigid distinction between them, considering both essentially virtuous. In some cases, he even uses the terms as virtual synonyms. In describing Spartan marriage customs, for example, he explains that the practice of the husband visiting his

wife's bed secretly in the middle of the night brought about several benefits for the couple, among them the fact that they both "exercised their *sophrosyne* and *enkrateia*," improving their character by making themselves more self-controlled (*Lyc.* 15.10). Similarly, he speaks of Alexander relying on both "*sophrosyne* and *enkrateia*" in order to resist beautiful captive women (*Alex.* 20.11). In the case of Marcus Coriolanus, when Plutarch names some of the hero's perceived virtues, he includes *enkrateia* on the list, along with justice (*dikaiosyne*) and courage (*andreia*), leaving out *sophrosyne* altogether (*Cor.* 1.4). Plutarch employs both terms, then, to refer to self-control in response to a bodily appetite, and his narratives take for granted that a man's ability to exercise either *sophrosyne* or *enkrateia* makes a positive statement about his character.

In addition to describing or conjecturing a period of habituation that leads to self-control, Plutarch may also assume that self-control is a natural part of a man's character, acquired and practiced without a period of habituation, but this characterization is more rare. An important example is Alexander the Great. In one of the introductory chapters to his *Life*, Plutarch declares that "while he was still a boy, Alexander's *sophrosyne* was made evident in that, even though he was impetuous and eager with regard to most things, he was unmoved by pleasures of the body and approached such things as these with great *praotes*" (*Alex.* 4.8). As Hubert Martin writes, Plutarch generally considered *praotes* to be "a thing learned, not a spontaneous or natural reaction" (Martin (1960) 71; see also Duff (1999) 77). In reporting that Alexander possessed *sophrosyne* while "still a boy," however, he deemphasizes habituation and education, even denying them a role in Alexander's character development. Instead, he gives the impression that Alexander was *sophron* by nature. There are, in fact, no examples of Alexander practicing self-restraint prior to his being declared *praotes* with respect to somatic appetites, and his philosophical education under Aristotle lies in the future. Plutarch's Alexander, an extraordinary historical figure in a wide variety of ways, serves as a model of rational self-control, but not as an example of how a more ordinary man might attain that virtue. (See further Beneker (2012) 195–206.)

Even more frequently, Plutarch does not apply labels at all when he narrates examples of sexual behavior, preferring to let his readers evaluate actions for themselves, and then to draw conclusions about character and to anticipate the course of future events. In the case of Julius Caesar, Plutarch makes a positive statement about Caesar's ability to respond moderately to erotic desire by declining to narrate the tales of his sexual exploits that were well known in the ancient world, as evidenced, for example, by Suetonius' biography. Although he clearly knows at least a few of these tales and even relates them in the *Lives* of other men (e.g. *Cat. Min.* 24; *Brut.* 5), in the *Caesar* itself he is content to pass over them in silence, preferring to depict his hero as eager for political power and unable to be distracted by *eros* or any other pleasure. Even the famous affair with Cleopatra, which Plutarch cannot ignore, is greatly abbreviated and plays an insignificant role in the *Life*: it pointedly does not motivate Caesar's war in Alexandria, as it does for other authors (e.g. the historian Dio Cassius and the poet Lucan); and Plutarch declines to narrate Caesar's dalliance with the queen while in Egypt or her subsequent visit to Rome. Caesar's self-control is made evident by the narrative itself, but Plutarch does not directly name this aspect of his character. The words *sophrosyne* and *enkrateia* do not appear in the *Life*, even though Caesar is perhaps the most self-controlled of Plutarch's heroes.

Plutarch's depiction of Caesar as fully self-controlled reveals an aspect of his character that is critical to his success and, as part of a complex of characteristics, allows him to dominate

the government of Rome. In addition to his ability to avoid erotic entanglements, Caesar, for example, is an outstanding orator, can endure extreme physical hardship, pursues political and military objectives relentlessly, and even seems to be favored by the divine will. The absence of erotic entanglements is one element to Plutarch's full characterization of the sort of single-minded ambition that could drive a man to challenge the Roman political establishment and to overthrow the Republic (Beneker (2002/2003); Pelling (2006)).

Plutarch similarly characterizes Mark Antony by exploring the degree to which he exercises self-control, though Antony serves as a negative example. The narrative of the *Antony* contains many examples of how he lacked control over his own affairs: as a youth, Curio and Clodius lead him into a dissolute lifestyle (*Ant.* 2); later, his wife Fulvia trains him "to obey women" (10); and eventually *eros* for Cleopatra comes to dominate him (25). When Plutarch begins to narrate the battle of Actium, the turning point in Antony's war with Octavian and a pivotal episode in the *Life*, he continues to characterize Antony as lacking self-determination, naturally attributing his fatal decision to fight at sea to his desire to please Cleopatra, even calling him "an appendage" of the woman (62). And when Antony abandons the battle altogether in order to pursue his fleeing lover, Plutarch declares that he evidently "was controlled not by the reason of a general, nor of a man," but was dominated by erotic desire (66). Thus Plutarch narrates Antony's failure at Actium as a lack of self-control, a predictable outcome, given the pattern established in his youth, but also a pointed lesson about the influence of private behavior on public affairs. If Caesar's ability to avoid erotic entanglement helps to establish him as the sort of man who could become sole ruler at Rome, Antony's lack of self-control demonstrates that he is the sort of man who could not. In this way, Plutarch uses the question of self-control both to explain a particular historical event and to create a more general impression of Antony's character and qualifications as a statesman.

In the next section, I turn to a close study of the *Agesilaus–Pompey*, which provides a practical example of how Plutarch represents the struggle to maintain self-control in response to erotic desire, and how that personal, internal struggle can affect the external actions and career of a statesman.

2. The Politics of *Eros* in the *Agesilaus–Pompey*

In the *Agesilaus*, the anecdote involving Megabates, the son of a Persian commander whom Agesilaus meets in Asia Minor, is especially useful for demonstrating the influence of self-control on a man's public actions. Plutarch in general relies on Xenophon's *Hellenica* and *Agesilaus* as sources for his biography (see Hamilton (1994); Shipley (1997) 48–51), and in particular he has adapted the story of Megabates from Xenophon's encomium of the Spartan king (Xen. *Ages.* 5.4–6). The narrative element of Xenophon's original version concerns Megabates' attempt to greet Agesilaus with a kiss, according to the Persian custom. This gesture of respect presents a challenge to the Spartan king, however, because he feels an erotic attraction for the boy. After an internal struggle against his desire for physical contact, he refuses the kiss. Megabates, in turn, is offended and no longer attempts the greeting, which prompts Agesilaus to ask one of the boy's companions to convince him to try again. But when the companion asks him whether he would accept the kiss on a second attempt, Agesilaus declares with an oath that he would

rather do battle again with his desire, and so to resist the kiss, than to have the greatest wealth or be the greatest man (5.5).

The narrative framework is simple, and by addressing the reader directly and encouraging him to conclude that Agesilaus is a praiseworthy model of self-control, Xenophon adds a moral that is equally simple. He introduces the story with this rhetorical question: "Concerning his sexual relations, isn't his *enkrateia* worth recalling, if for no other reason than because it's amazing?" (5.4). After describing Agesilaus' fierce resistance to his erotic desire for Megabates ("he struggled against himself with all his might"), Xenophon prompts the reader with another leading question: "Isn't this a wonderful example of *sophrosyne*?" (5.4). And he concludes with an interpretive dictum: "I am not ignorant of how some people see these matters; for myself, however, I know that many more men are able to get the better of their enemies than of desires such as Agesilaus felt" (5.6). Thus there is no doubt about how Xenophon expects his reader to interpret the anecdote and, in turn, to understand Agesilaus' character.

Such an unwaveringly positive interpretation is by no means out of place in an encomium, but it would be less effective in a biographical text that aspires to an analytical presentation of character. Plutarch, therefore, takes over the main outline of the story from Xenophon, but he changes details and adds interpretations that cast Agesilaus' actions in a more ambiguous light (Plut. *Ages.* 11.6–10). As Mark Beck explains, Plutarch reworks the anecdote so as "to represent the amplitude of Agesilaus' emotional involvement with Megabates" and to depict a "tentative vacillating quality" in the Spartan king (Beck (1999) 181–184). That is to say, rather than describe a paragon of self-control who heroically subdues his passion, Plutarch emphasizes that Agesilaus was teetering on the brink of erotic indulgence. Beck describes the subtle adjustments that Plutarch makes to the details of the narrative. For example, he leaves out the fact that the kiss is a regular Persian custom; he describes Agesilaus as struggling against his desire by relying on his "competitive nature" (*to philonikon*) rather than virtuous *sophrosyne* or *enkrateia*; he adds that Agesilaus' friends reproached him for avoiding the kiss out of fear; and he omits the king's firm oath in declaring that he would resist the kiss a second time. The most significant modification, however, is to be found in the tone of the narratorial interventions. Plutarch includes no praise for the king's self-control while relating the anecdote, and his final dictum creates almost the opposite impression from Xenophon's. Plutarch concludes the anecdote by stating that once Megabates had gone away, Agesilaus "was so enflamed with desire that it is difficult to say whether he would have been able to avoid the kiss if the boy had appeared again" (11.10). Plutarch, therefore, has chosen to represent the outcome of the struggle as less certain and to set before the reader an Agesilaus who is less ideally virtuous.

Plutarch's version of the anecdote depicts the Spartan king as weaker than he is in Xenophon's version, but it also shows a man who is perhaps more realistic. The ideal of *sophrosyne*, acquired through habituation and allowing for a consistently moderate response to appetitive desires, is certainly easier to describe than to attain. The form of self-control that Plutarch defines technically as *enkrateia*, although it demands constant vigilance and internal struggle, might come closer to the reality of self-control for most of his biographical subjects, and perhaps for his readers as well. Moreover, Agesilaus' decision not to attempt the kiss a second time is prudent: unable to resist his *eros* for the boy and yet unwilling to submit to passion, Agesilaus avoids the object of his desire altogether. If in reality a virtuous moderation is difficult for a man to achieve, and if the struggle to maintain self-control is tenuous, then avoidance of temptation appears to be a safe and even a commendable alternative.

In fact, in choosing to evade Megabates' kiss, Agesilaus acts like Cyrus the Great as he is depicted, and admired, by Xenophon in the *Cyropaedia*. This is a connection that Plutarch himself notices elsewhere. In his essay *How to Study Poetry*, he discusses the need for a man to understand the power of the passions and then to deny them the opportunity to arise; by way of example, he writes that "Agesilaus did not allow himself to be kissed by the handsome boy when he greeted him, and Cyrus did not dare to look upon Panthea" (31c). (On the Panthea story in the *Cyropaedia*, see Stadter (1991) 480–484; Due (2003) 585–588; for its influence in Plutarch's works, see Beneker (2012) 113–127.) In another essay, Plutarch praises even the *sophron* Alexander for refusing to gaze upon a beautiful woman, again holding up Cyrus as the model of prudent behavior:

And so Cyrus did not wish to look upon Panthea, but when [his friend] Araspas was telling him that the woman's beauty was worth seeing, he said, "For just that reason I should avoid her, for if I am persuaded by you and approach her, perhaps she herself will convince me to come again, when I can't spare the time, to gaze upon her and sit with her, forgoing many things that require my attention." In the same way, Alexander did not come to see the wife of Darius, who was said to be most remarkable [for her beauty]; although he visited her aged mother, he did not allow himself to see the young and beautiful woman. (*On Curiosity* 521f–522a)

Cyrus here speaks frankly about the difficulty of maintaining one's self-control, making essentially the same choice as Plutarch's Agesilaus, and giving us a glimpse of the rationale that may have lain behind that choice: Agesilaus might also have feared that he would be distracted from his duties as Spartan king if he had allowed himself to indulge in an affair with Megabates. If Plutarch's Agesilaus can be classed with Cyrus and Alexander, then his practical decision to avoid Megabates should perhaps be read as no less wonderful than the *sophrosyne* depicted in Xenophon's encomium.

But there may be another dimension to Agesilaus' choice, one that takes into account appearances and not only actions. In Xenophon's version of the anecdote, Agesilaus seems to be virtuous simply for the sake of virtue: his resistance to the kiss is a natural consequence of his *sophrosyne* and *enkrateia*. Plutarch, however, writes that Agesilaus was relying on *to philonikon* to resist his desire for Megabates, and by this he means his "competitive nature" or "desire for victory." In this way, Plutarch employs a military metaphor to describe the struggle (Shipley (1997) 175–176), but he also implies that the struggle has both an internal and an external component. As Beck points out, concepts such as *philonikia* most often pertain to the public sphere of a man's life (Beck (1999) 182 n. 47). In choosing to emphasize Agesilaus' competitive nature, Plutarch seems to be acknowledging the interconnection between Agesilaus' private life and his public career, and he represents Agesilaus as aware of this interconnection as well.

Other interpreters of this anecdote have also emphasized the public dimension to Agesilaus' actions. One argues that by accepting the kiss, Agesilaus would have left himself vulnerable to criticism for improperly gratifying his erotic desire (Shipley (1997) 176–177). Another suggests that Megabates' father may have been attempting to establish a political connection with Agesilaus by encouraging a relationship between the Spartan king and his son, and that Agesilaus, wary of these political implications, therefore shuns Megabates (Hindley (2004) 127). Even without determining what particular sort of trouble Agesilaus was hoping to avoid, we may still recognize the larger, public context for his actions: if

Agesilaus had indulged his passions and granted the kiss, his lack of self-control would have been evident for others to see. Significantly, this anecdote falls during a period of the *Life* when the Spartan Lysander is openly challenging Agesilaus' authority, and so his resistance has real implications for his political standing. In other words, Plutarch's Agesilaus is not self-controlled for the sake of virtue alone, but he seems to have avoided Megabates in order to avoid being distracted from his responsibilities as king, and so that his display of self-control would serve as an assertion of his authority.

In assessing the impact of Plutarch's version of the anecdote, Beck rightly turns to the second half of the *Agesilaus–Pompey* pair, comparing the interaction of Agesilaus with Megabates to Pompey's affair with the courtesan Flora. In the opening to the second *Life*, Plutarch includes the story of how Pompey turned Flora over to his friend Geminus, who had also become attracted to her, even though Pompey himself "appeared to feel *eros* for Flora" (*Pomp.* 2.6–8). As he narrates Pompey's cool detachment, Plutarch creates the impression that he is in complete control of his erotic desire, and so at the outset of the *Life*, he marks the Roman hero as different from the Greek in this regard (Beck (1999) 185). But Plutarch also relates a second anecdote, which follows immediately on the first, about Pompey's relationship to the wife of one of his freedmen. This anecdote reinforces the impression of Pompey as self-controlled, but it also foretells of less virtuous behavior in the future. The freedman's wife was famously beautiful, and so Pompey kept her at arm's length, so as to avoid the impression that she had conquered him with her beauty (2.9). Like Agesilaus, he is aware of the external, political implications of self-control. Even so, there is a dark cloud on Pompey's horizon, which casts a shadow over the image of a completely self-controlled man. After relating the story of the freedman's wife, Plutarch adds an ominous remark: "So Pompey was very cautious and guarded concerning such matters, but he did not escape the reproach of his enemies in this regard, for concerning his own wives, he was criticized for ignoring public affairs in order to keep them happy" (2.10). Despite his admirable behavior, Plutarch warns the reader, Pompey will eventually allow his private life to interfere with his public duties.

The reproach comes in the second half of the *Life*, later in Pompey's career, when he is contending with Julius Caesar for supremacy in the Roman state. In the first half, however, Plutarch develops the image of Pompey as a rising statesman and, as a component of that image, continues to describe him as self-controlled in his sexual behavior. For instance, while Pompey is leading an army in pursuit of Mithridates, he shows great restraint in dealing with captive women, being "intimate with none of them" but restoring them all to their parents and homes (36.3–9). And when he takes the stronghold of Caenum, he discovers "licentious" (*akolastoi*) letters that had been exchanged between Mithridates and one of his lovers (37.3). By relating details such as these, Plutarch marks Pompey's statesman-like behavior by contrasting it with the licentiousness of his enemy, whom he will eventually defeat (Beneker (2005a) and (2005b)). As promised, however, Pompey will not maintain his resistance. At about the middle of the biography, Plutarch declares that his career has reached its zenith. Here he begins to narrate Pompey's confrontation with Caesar, and he makes clear to the reader that from this point forward, Pompey is conducting a losing campaign for control of Rome. And Plutarch indicates Pompey's declining political fortune by narrating a corresponding decline in his conduct with respect to the women in his life.

This decline, however, has a particular characterization. Pompey does not simply indulge in sexual relations to excess. Rather, he neglects to consider the external consequences of

his private behavior. The first of Pompey's wives during this phase of the *Life* is Julia, Caesar's daughter. In narrating their relationship, Plutarch is careful to indicate both his erotic attachment to his young wife and the distraction that this attachment causes:

Quickly, however, even Pompey himself was made docile by *eros* for the girl, and he turned most of his attention toward her and spent his days with her in the countryside and in gardens. He neglected his duties in the forum, so that even Clodius, who was tribune at that time, had contempt for him and undertook the most daring deeds. (48.8)

A few chapters later, Plutarch adds that Pompey declines to govern his pro-consular provinces in person so that he can remain in Italy, a decision he makes because of his erotic attachment to Julia (53.1–2). Plutarch does not criticize Pompey for the fact that he feels *eros* for his wife; indeed, he generally saw erotic relations between husband and wife as beneficial (see Nikolaidis (1997) 47–51; Goessler (1999) 106–107; Beneker (2012) 7–57). Instead, he emphasizes how Pompey's desire for his wife affects his responsibilities as a political leader. If I am correct in suggesting that Agesilaus resisted his *eros* for Megabates primarily to maintain focus on his duties and to assert his authority as king, then the Megabates anecdote provides an important point of reference for the presentation of Pompey's marriage to Julia. Neither story emphasizes self-control as a virtue important for its own sake. Instead, they both demonstrate the public implications of private behavior. The lesson Plutarch draws in the passage quoted above could not be clearer: although he may have been involved in an admirable erotic relationship, Pompey nonetheless allowed himself to be distracted from his public responsibility at a critical moment in his career and in the history of the Roman Republic.

When Plutarch comes to narrating Pompey's relationship to another wife, Cornelia, he gives even greater emphasis to the political and the historical implications of private behavior:

Those who were more insightful thought that Pompey had overlooked the plight of the city while it was in difficult circumstances. They had selected him as its physician for these circumstances and had turned it over to him alone, but he was putting on garlands and celebrating his marriage, while he ought to have considered the consulship itself to have been troubling, since it would not have been granted to him in such an illegal way if the city had been flourishing. (55.4–5)

As Plutarch reports the criticism of the “more insightful” (*hoi kompsoteroi*), he seems to concur and to invite the reader to share in this opinion. (See Duff (1999) 120, on how Plutarch often shares the opinions of bystanders in his texts.) Once again, he is not critical of the marriage *per se*. In the case of both Julia and Cornelia, he describes the wives as worthy companions. Julia possessed such great devotion (*to philandron*) for her husband that even Romans displeased by Pompey's political alliance with Caesar “did not reproach his *eros* for his wife” (53.4). Cornelia, too, has many attributes that make her an excellent wife: she is well educated in letters, music, geometry, and philosophy; her character is free of unpleasant meddling; and she comes from an excellent family (55.2–3). Plutarch is clear enough that the fault he finds in these marriages has to do primarily with Pompey's choice to indulge his erotic desire to the detriment of his public career.

When Stadter identified three categories of problematic sexual behavior narrated in the *Lives*, he named irrational excess and unseasonable lust as two of them. I suggested

above that both of these categories were really instances of a single behavior, the lack of self-control. In considering the second phase of the *Pompey*, however, it is indeed useful to distinguish unseasonable lust from generic sexual excess, for Plutarch has shaped his narrative of both marriages so that Pompey is charged with conducting himself in a manner unsuitable to his stage in life. When he describes the mutual *eros* in the union of Pompey and Julia, for instance, Plutarch remarks that Pompey ruled his provinces through legates while he spent his time with his wife “in the resorts” of Italy. Literally, these “resorts” are *hebeteria*, or “places for young men.” Further, he says that Julia desired Pompey “despite his age” and that he would “let down his guard” around women, so that his company was pleasant (53.1–2). The implication is once again clear. Pompey was mature and was serving the state in a time of crisis, and yet he was cavorting with Julia as if he were a young bridegroom, without projecting the dignity of an elder statesman or acknowledging the true weight of his responsibilities. In the case of Cornelia, Plutarch is more exact, showing that Pompey was acting as though he were a member of the younger generation. “Some people were displeased,” he writes, “because the marriage was arranged for people incompatible in age; for Cornelia was better suited in age to marry Pompey’s son” (55.4). This statement immediately precedes the criticism of the “more insightful,” who felt that Pompey was not giving sufficient attention to Rome’s dire political situation. In this *Life*, Plutarch asserts the problem of unseasonable lust quite directly.

We may say, then, that the lust exhibited by Pompey is not excessive or violent, but imprudent. He might have struggled to restrain his *eros*, allotting only the minimum amount of time to his marriages, and devoting himself almost entirely to the forum. He has instead failed to balance properly the demands of the public and private spheres, and his experience in turn encourages the reader to reflect back to the first *Life* and to understand the problems that Agesilaus thus avoided by resisting Megabates. Pompey’s ultimate defeat was, of course, brought about by a host of factors, and the full process cannot be explained simply by erotic attraction for his wives, however unseasonable. Plutarch includes, in fact, many more historical and personal details in the course of narrating Pompey’s decline and eventual defeat. Nonetheless, the rather small episodes of Pompey’s indulgence of his wives and Agesilaus’ struggle not to kiss Megabates are critical components in the larger narratives of these *Lives*. They help to elucidate the character of the two men and to demonstrate that, in Plutarch’s view, the intersection of eroticism and politics could have a significant impact on historical events.

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GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

For discussion of Classical thought about the intersection of eroticism and politics, see Davidson (1997), Ludwig (2002), and Wohl (2002). For general studies of *sophrosyne* and *enkrateia* in Greek literature, see North (1966) and Rademaker (2005). For discussion of the erotic dimension to the behavior of Plutarch's heroes, see Martin (1984), Stadter (1995), Beck (2007), and Beneker (2012). On Plutarch's political thought in general, see Aalders (1982) and Pelling (2004). Duff (1999) is the most thorough examination of the psychology behind Plutarch's understanding of human behavior; see especially his chapter entitled "The Soul of a Plutarchan Hero." On the general connection between education and the development of character, see Pelling (1990), Swain (1990), Gill (2006) 412–421, and Duff (2008).

In addition to the works cited above, studies of the erotic elements in particular *Lives* include Henry (1995), González Almenara (2001), and Beneker (2007), on Pericles and Aspasia; and Opsomer (2007), on Brutus and Porcia. On Plutarch's attitude toward sex in general, see Walcot (1998). On Plutarch's essay *On Moral Virtue*, see Babut (1969) and Becchi (1990). On the essay *Dialogue on Love* (also called *Amatorius* and *Eroticus*), see Foucault (1986), Frazier (2005), and Opsomer (2007).