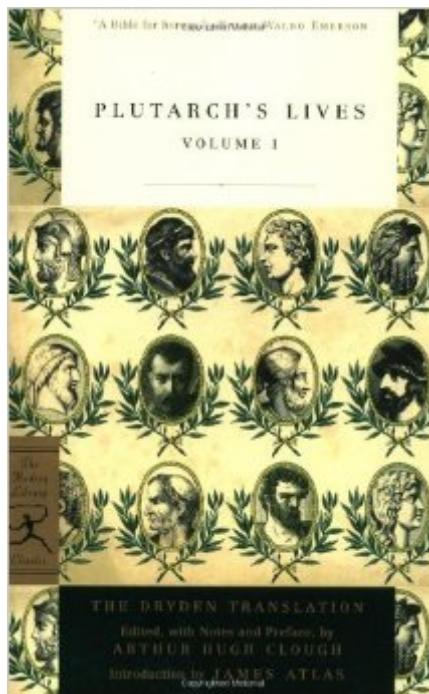


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Plutarch's Lives Volume 1 (Modern Library Classics)



Synopsis

Plutarch's Lives, written at the beginning of the second century A.D., is a brilliant social history of the ancient world by one of the greatest biographers and moralists of all time. In what is by far his most famous and influential work, Plutarch reveals the character and personality of his subjects and how they led ultimately to tragedy or victory. Richly anecdotal and full of detail, Volume I contains profiles and comparisons of Romulus and Theseus, Numa and Lycurgus, Fabius and Pericles, and many more powerful figures of ancient Greece and Rome. The present translation, originally published in 1683 in conjunction with a life of Plutarch by John Dryden, was revised in 1864 by the poet and scholar Arthur Hugh Clough, whose notes and preface are also included in this edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

After having read McCullough's splendid series on Rome, I turned to this fat, dense book with great expectations. I was not disappointed: the stories are endlessly fascinating, from their basic details on ancient history to the bizarre asides that reveal the pre-Christianised mind-set of the author. Like all great books, this one can be read on innumerable levels. First, there is the moralising philosophy that is perhaps the principal purpose of the author to advance - each life holds lessons on proper conduct of great and notorious leaders alike. You get Caesar, Pericles, and Alcibiades, and scores of others who are compared and contrasted. Second, there is the content. Plutarch is an invaluable source of data for historians and the curious. Third, there is the reflection of religious and other beliefs of the 1C AD: oracles and omens are respected as are the classical gods. For example,

while in Greece, Sulla is reported as having found a satyr, which he attempted unsuccessfully to question for its auguring abilities during his military campaign in Greece! It is a wonderful window into the mystery of life and human belief systems. That being said, Plutarch is skeptical of these occurrences and both questions their relevance and shows how some shrewd leaders, like Sertorius with his white fawn in Spain, used them to great advantage. Finally, this is a document that was used for nearly 2000 years in schools as a vital part of classical education - the well-bred person knew all these personalities and stories, which intimately informed their vocabulary and literary references until the beginning of the 20C. That in itself is a wonderful view into what was on people's minds and how they conceived things over the ages.

First off, let me clarify that what follows is a review of a particular edition of Plutarch's Lives, the current (2001) edition from Modern Library Classics. It is not a review of the book itself and will not provide any information on the relevance of this wonderful classic or the many lives it includes or the ingenious structure of paralleling the lives of Greeks and Romans or the importance of this text to the history of biography. Several other reviews here do a fine job of that and I see no reason to cover the same ground. Moreover, I've noted rather a lot of confusion about this edition in reviews here on (see particularly the reviews associated with the hardbound Modern Library volumes). I am still researching the Dryden edition, but thought I might offer a few comments to provide clarity and a better understanding of this edition for those whose buying decisions are based on the nature and quality of a particular translation. "The Dryden Translation" - this unusual phrasing (which appears on the cover) has become the traditional descriptor for this version of the Lives. In fact, Dryden is not, properly speaking, the translator of this book. In one article in Wikipedia he is described as an overseer for the edition and in another as editor-in-chief, but he is also described as having simply "lent" his name to the enterprise. I am still researching this, but I should not be surprised if Jacob Tonson, the publisher, was not more involved in editing than was Dryden. [Update: I have found some indications that Dryden may have had a fairly significant editorial role -- see "Dryden as Cambridge Editor" by Arthur Sherbo in *Studies in Bibliography*, Vol 38, (1985) pp 251-261.

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