

Mark Beck

## Contrasting Catos: Time, Ideology, and Context in Plutarch's Rhetorical Strategies

The last few decades have witnessed a renewed interest in understanding the comparative technique Plutarch employs in his *Parallel Lives*. We have come to understand more fully the intricate interrelations between paired *Lives*. The dominant impact of this way of looking at the *Lives* has perhaps obscured other important relationships and connections Plutarch is intent on conveying between non-paired *Lives*. The *Lives of Cato the Elder and Cato the Younger* represent one such case of an overlooked comparison and contrast, one which proceeds, in recounting the biographical details of two Roman icons, to attack some of the *priscae virtutes* so much a part of traditional Roman ideology.

Plutarch uses several different rhetorical strategies to deliver this criticism. His primary mode is the brief anecdote or *chreia* which he expands or elaborates on by employing direct first person interpretative commentary. He also uses historical *exempla* to evaluate actions and statements in the light of past and future events. He also selects for intensive investigation and commentary certain familial traits that seem to verge on inherited characteristics such as spousal relations, the treatment of slaves, parsimonious lifestyle, etc. Naturally the particular response to Greek *paideia* is a contrasting and very revealing theme with its relationship to rhetorical ability, emotional self control, and the possession of a kind disposition (*praotēs*). Another contrasting sphere of activity may be termed political efficacy. Plutarch appears to prefer the greater justice inherent in the Younger Cato's political activity, yet he also determines that it is the source of his unpopularity that prevents his attaining the consulship. The Elder Cato's political success as a *homo novus* who became consul and censor is legendary.

This paper will demonstrate that Plutarch is at pains in the *Lives of Cato the Elder and Cato the Younger* to vindicate the influence and benefit of Greek culture on influential Romans. The rhetorical strategies he employs to achieve this end are varied

and, in most cases, subtle. Ultimately it will be shown that Plutarch provides sufficient grounds for regarding, in both cases, their assimilation of Greek culture as deficient or at best superficial and that Rome only benefits from a more comprehensive adoption of Greek culture as Plutarch's own era attests.