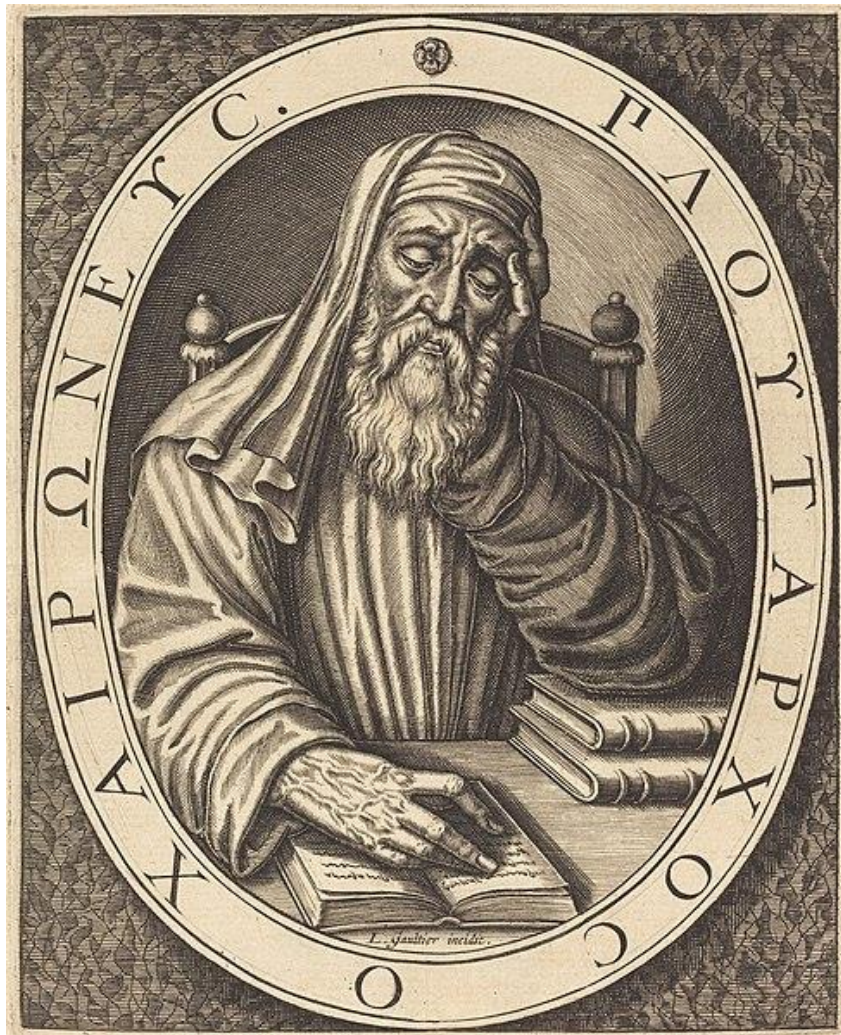


## BELLARIA LVI



The Chaironean, Plutarch (engraving, Léonard Gaultier, d.1641)

## PLUTARCH I

### Introduction

Plutarch (c. AD 50-120), who as a Roman citizen was named Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus, was born and lived in Chaironea (twenty miles east of Delphi). His works can be divided into the philosophical and historical-biographical. He served as a priest of Apollo at Delphi and was active in local affairs. Influential in government circles, he was keen to develop the idea of a productive relationship between Greece the educator and Rome the centre of power. A catalogue of his works lists 227 items, many lost. By the 4<sup>th</sup> C he had become a 'classic' and was hugely popular from the renaissance onwards, including in America.

His *Moralia* ('topics relating to customs and *mores*'), from which this *Bellaria* sequence will be drawn, is an eclectic collection of 78 essays and speeches on ethical, political, polemical, and literary topics.

## PLUTARCH ON TALKATIVENESS

This is a delightful essay but—ironically—does go on rather. The Greek for ‘chatterer’ is *adoleskhês*, but I have translated it ‘bore’ because in all but the last passage that is the most appropriate translation.

Plutarch has set out his theme and describes *adoleskhaias* people ‘who go about like empty vessels, void of sense, but full of noise’. So what can we do to help them, if anything?

**A bore is difficult to silence, so people run from him**



**502E** If however it is agreed that no attempt should be left untried, let us say to the bore,

‘Be silent, boy; silence has great advantages’.

Two of the first and foremost merits of this advice are hearing and being heard. Neither of these is the outcome for bores, for however great their desire for it, they fail miserably. For in other diseases of the soul—love of money, love of glory, or love of pleasure—it is at least possible for people to attain what they desire. But this is extremely difficult for bores, who desire hearers but cannot get them, since everyone **502F** runs headlong from them; and if people are sitting in a public place or walking about there and see one coming, they quickly pass on the message to break camp.

**502E** εἰ δ' οὖν δοκεῖ πείρας μηδὲν ἔλλελεῖσθαι, εἵπωμεν πρὸς τὸν ἀδόλεσχον  
ὦ παῖ, σιώπα. πόλλ' ἔχει σιγή καλὰ

δύο δὲ τὰ πρῶτα καὶ μέγιστα, τὸ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκουσθῆναι: ὧν οὐδ' ἑτέρου τυχεῖν ἐγγίγνεται τοῖς ἀδολέσχοις, ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ αὐτὴν τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν ἀποδυσπετοῦσι. τοῖς μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοις νοσήμασι τῆς ψυχῆς, οἷον φιλαργυρία φιλοδοξία φιληδονία, τὸ γοῦν τυγχάνειν ὧν ἐφίενται περίεστι. τοῖς δ' ἀδολέσχοις τοῦτο συμβαίνει χαλεπώτατον, ἐπιθυμοῦντες γὰρ ἀκροατῶν οὐ τυγχάνουσιν, **502F** ἀλλὰ πᾶς φεύγει προτροπάδην κἂν ἐν ἡμικυκλίῳ τινὶ καθεζόμενοι, κἂν περιπατοῦντες ἐν ταύτῳ θεάσωνται προσφοιτῶντα, ταχέως ἀνάξουσιν αὐτοῖς παρεγγυῶσι.

## Bores are the worst of companions, being unstoppable



**502F** And as, when silence falls in any meeting, they say Hermes has joined the company, so when any bore joins some drinking party or social gathering of friends, **503** all are silent, not wishing to provide him with an opening. But if he begins to open his mouth, they all,

‘as before a storm at sea, with Boreas blowing a gale around the headland’, suspecting a rough ride and seasickness, get up and go. As a result, they find neither willing table-companions nor messmates when they are travelling by land or by sea, but only such as cannot help themselves; for he is always at you, plucking at your clothes and your beard, or giving you a dig in the ribs with his elbow.

‘Most valuable are the feet at such a juncture’, according to Archilochus, and indeed according to the wise Aristotle himself.

**502F** καὶ καθάπερ, ὅταν ἐν συλλόγῳ τινὶ σιωπὴ γένηται, τὸν Ἑρμῆν ἐπεισεληλυθέναι λέγουσιν, οὕτως ὅταν εἰς συμπόσιον ἢ συνέδριον γνωρίμων λάλος εἰσέλθῃ, **503** πάντες ἀποσιωπῶσι, μὴ βουλόμενοι λαβὴν παρασχεῖν. ἂν δ’ αὐτὸς ἄρξηται διαίρειν τὸ στόμα

πρὸ χεῖματος ὥστ’ ἀνὰ ποντίαν ἄκραν βορέου πνέοντος ὑφορώμενοι σάλον καὶ ναυτίαν, ἐξανέστησαν. ὅθεν αὐτοῖς συμβαίνει μήτε παρὰ δεῖπνον συγκλιτῶν <sup>3</sup> μήτε συσκήνων τυγχάνειν προθύμων, ὅταν ὁδοιπορῶσιν ἢ πλέωσιν, ἀλλ’ ἀναγκαστῶν: πρόσκειται γὰρ ἀπανταχοῦ, τῶν ἱματίων ἀντιλαμβανόμενος, τοῦ γενείου, τὴν πλευρὰν θυροκοπῶν τῇ χειρὶ

‘πόδες δὴ κεῖθι τιμιώτατοι’

κατὰ τὸν Ἀρχίλοχον, καὶ νῆ Δία κατὰ τὸν σοφὸν Ἀριστοτέλην.

## Aristotle's way of dealing with bores



**503B** For he, bothered by a bore and worn down by his ridiculous tales and frequent enquiry 'Isn't this *fascinating*, Aristotle?' replied 'Not at all. What is fascinating is that anyone with legs stops here to listen to you.' And to another such who said, after a long rigmarole, 'I've bored you, philosopher', 'Certainly not,' he replied. 'I wasn't paying attention.'

**503B** καὶ γὰρ αὐτὸς, ἐνοχλούμενος ὑπ' ἀδολέσχου καὶ κοπτόμενος ἀτόποις τισὶ διηγήμασι, πολλάκις αὐτοῦ λέγοντος 'οὐ θαυμαστόν, Ἀριστότελες;' οὐ τοῦτο φησὶ 'θαυμαστόν, ἀλλ' εἴ τις πόδας ἔχων σὲ ὑπομένει'. ἑτέρω δέ τινι τοιοῦτω, μετὰ πολλοὺς λόγους εἰπόντι 'κατηδολέσχηκά σου, φιλόσοφε,' 'μὰ Δί' εἶπεν 'οὐ γὰρ προσεῖχον'.

### A bore's talk makes the mind wander



**503B** For even if bores force you to listen, the mind offers the ears to be flooded only peripherally, while it itself unfolds and pursues alternative thoughts to itself; so they are not well supplied with listeners either who pay attention to them or believe them. Of the sex-mad, they say, the seed is barren, and of bores the discourse pointless and fruitless.

**503B** καὶ γὰρ ἂν βιάσωνται λαλεῖν οἱ ἀδόλεσχοι, παρέδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ ὦτα περιαντλεῖν ἕξωθεν, αὐτὴ δ' ἐντὸς ἐτέρας τινὰς ἀναπτύσσει καὶ διέξεισι πρὸς αὐτὴν φροντίδας: ὅθεν οὔτε προσεχόντων οὔτε πιστευόντων ἀκροατῶν εὐποροῦσι. τῶν μὲν γὰρ πρὸς τὰς συνουσίας εὐκαταφόρων ἄγονον εἶναι τὸ σπέρμα λέγουσι, τῶν δ' ἀδολέσχων ὁ λόγος ἀτελής καὶ ἄκαρπός ἐστι.

**His presence kills all pleasure in conversation**



**504B** So the drunken man prattles only in his cups; but the bore prattles everywhere, in the market-place, in the theatre, out walking, by night and by day. As your doctor, he is worse than your disease, as your shipmate, more unpleasant than sea-sickness, as a flatterer, more offensive than a slanderer. The company of clever crooks is preferable to that of worthy bores. **504C** In Sophocles' play, Nestor trying to reason with and calm down a loutish Ajax, tactfully said this:

'I do not blame you: for your good deeds have led you to speak evil'.

But we cannot feel like this with a bore, whose tactless words corrupt and kill off all gratitude for his actions.

**504B** ὁ μὲν οὖν μεθύων ληρεῖ παρ' οἶνον, ὁ δ' ἀδόλεσχος πανταχοῦ ληρεῖ, ἐν ἀγορᾷ ἐν θεάτρῳ ἐν περιπάτῳ ἐν μέθῃ μεθ' ἡμέραν νύκτωρ: ἔστι δὲ θεραπεύων τῆς νόσου βαρύτερος, συμπλέων τῆς ναυτίας ἀηδέστερος, ἐπαινῶν τοῦ ψέγοντος ἐπαχθέστερος. ἡδιόν γέ τοι πονηροῖς ὁμιλοῦσιν ἐπιδεξίους ἢ χρηστοῖς ἀδολέσχαις.

**504C** ὁ μὲν γὰρ Σοφοκλέους Νέστωρ τὸν Αἴαντα τραχυνόμενον τῷ λόγῳ πρᾶϋνων ἠθικῶς τοῦτ' εἶρηκεν

‘οὐ μέμφομαί σε: δρῶν γὰρ εὖ κακῶς λέγεις’

πρὸς δὲ τὸν ἀδολέσχην οὐχ οὕτως ἔχομεν, ἀλλὰ πᾶσαν ἔργου χάριν ἢ τῶν λόγων ἀκαιρία διαφθείρει καὶ ἀπόλλυσι.

## Repetition is the bore's vice



Lysias wrote a speech for a litigant, and gave it him. He read it several times, then came to Lysias in some despair and said that when he first went through this speech, it seemed wonderful, but taking it up a second and third time, it seemed altogether dull and ineffective. Then Lysias laughed, and said, 'And so? Are you going to read it more than once to the jury?'

Λυσίας τινὶ δίκην ἔχοντι λόγον συγγράφας ἔδωκεν· ὁ δὲ πολλάκις ἀναγνοὺς ἦκε πρὸς τὸν Λυσίαν ἀθυμῶν καὶ λέγων τὸ μὲν πρῶτον αὐτῷ διεξιόντι θαυμαστὸν φανῆναι τὸν λόγον, αὖθις δὲ καὶ τρίτον ἀναλαμβάνοντι παντελῶς ἀμβλὺν καὶ ἄπρακτον· ὁ δὲ Λυσίας γελάσας 'τί οὖν' εἶπεν 'οὐχ ἅπαξ μέλλεις λέγειν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τῶν δικαστῶν;'

## Homer knew all about creative variety



Homer from *The Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493)

And just think of the persuasiveness and grace of Lysias' style! For he, as I can

504D 'say was greatly favoured by the dark-haired Muses'.

And when it comes to things said about Homer, the truest is that he alone of all poets has men begging for more, being ever fresh and at the top of his game in the pleasure stakes, and yet saying and proclaiming this about himself,

'It is hateful for me to repeat a tale already plainly told'.

He avoids and fears that overindulgence that lies in ambush for every narrative, but guides the ear through a variety of tales, and by his creativity relieves the listener of saturation. But bores scratch away at our ears with their repetitions, like people messing about with palimpsests.

καὶ σκόπει τὴν Λυσίου πειθῶ καὶ χάριν! κάκεινον γὰρ ἐγώ

**504D** ‘φαμί ἰοπλοκάμων Μοισᾶν εὖ λαχεῖν’.

τῶν δὲ περὶ τοῦ ποιητοῦ λεγομένων, ἀληθέστατόν ἐστιν ὅτι μόνος Ὁμηρος τῆς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀψικορίας περιέγονεν, αἰεὶ καινὸς ὢν καὶ πρὸς χάριν ἀκμάζων: ἀλλ’ ὅμως εἰπὼν καὶ ἀναφωνήσας ἐκεῖνο περὶ αὐτοῦ, τὸ

‘ἐχθρὸν δὲ μοί ἐστιν

αὐτίς ἀριζήλως εἰρημένα μυθολογεύειν’.

φεύγει καὶ φοβεῖται τὸν ἐφεδρεύοντα παντὶ λόγῳ κόρον, εἰς ἄλλα ἐξ ἄλλων διηγήματα τὴν ἀκοὴν ἄγων καὶ τῇ καινότητι τὴν πλησμονὴν αὐτῆς παραμυθούμενος. οἱ δ’ ἀποκναίουσι δῆπου τὰ ὦτα ταῖς ταυτολογίαις ὥσπερ παλίμψηστα διαμολύνοντες.

**The chatterer due to assassinate Nero gave the game away**



Nero: a flattering portrait

**505C** One man’s loose tongue also prevented Rome from becoming free by the removal of Nero. It was the one night before the tyrant was due to be assassinated, with all preparations made, when the man who was to kill him was going to the theatre. When he saw someone in chains near the palace gates, about to be taken to Nero and lamenting his bad luck, he went up close to him and whispering said, ‘Just pray, fellow, **505D** that to-day will pass, and tomorrow you will thank me.’

**505C** τὴν δὲ Ῥωμαίων πόλιν ἐκώλυσεν ἐλευθέραν γενέσθαι Νέρωνος ἀπαλλαγεῖσαν, ἐνὸς ἀνδρὸς ἀδολεσχία. μία γὰρ ἦν νύξ, μεθ’ ἣν ἔδει τὸν τύραννον ἀπολωλέναι, παρεσκευασμένων ἀπάντων. ὁ δὲ μέλλων αὐτὸν ἀποκτινύναι, πορευόμενος εἰς θέατρον ἰδὼν τινα τῶν δεδεμένων ἐπὶ θύραις μέλλοντα προσάγεσθαι τῷ Νέρωνι καὶ τὴν αὐτοῦ τύχην ἀποδυρόμενον, ἐγγὺς προσῆλθεν αὐτῷ καὶ προσψιθυρίσας ‘εὐχου’ φησὶν ὧ ἄνθρωπε, **505D** τὴν σήμερον ἡμέραν παρελθεῖν μόνον, αὔριον δὲ μοι εὐχαριστήσεις.’

505D Guessing the meaning of the riddle, and thinking, I take it,

‘He is a fool who gives up what is in his hand for what is not’,

The [prisoner] chose the more certain over the more just route to safety. For he informed Nero of what the man had said. That man was immediately arrested, and torture, fire and scourging applied to him who now necessarily denied what he had unnecessarily divulged.

505D ἀρπάσας οὖν τὸ αἰνιχθὲν ἐκεῖνος καὶ νοήσας, οἶμαι, ὅτι

‘νήπιος, ὃς τὰ ἔτοιμα λιπῶν ἀνέτοιμα διώκει’

τὴν βεβαιοτέραν εἴλετο σωτηρίαν πρὸ τῆς δικαιότερας. ἐμήνυσε γὰρ τῷ Νέρωνι τὴν φωνὴν τῆς ἀνθρώπου. καὶ ἐκεῖνος εὐθύς ἀνήρπαστο, καὶ βάσανοι καὶ πῦρ καὶ μάστιγες ἐπ’ αὐτόν, ἀρνούμενον πρὸς τὴν ἀνάγκην ἢ χωρὶς ἀνάγκης ἐμήνυσε.

It is worth pointing out that this bears no relation whatsoever to Tacitus’ version of the assassination attempt (*Annals* 15.54ff).

**Next week:** Plutarch on animals