



# Plutarch's Lives Volume?s I II III Complete (Masterpiece Collection) Plutarch: Great Classics

*Plutarch*

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Plutarch

No apologies are needed for a new edition of so favourite an author as Plutarch. From the period of the revival of classical literature in Europe down to our own times, his writings have done more than those of any other single author to familiarise us with the greatest men and the greatest events of the ancient world. The great Duke of Marlborough, it is said, confessed that his only knowledge of English history was derived from Shakespeare's historical plays, and it would not be too much to say that a very large proportion of educated men, in our own as well as in Marlborough's times, have owed much of their knowledge of classical antiquity to the study of Plutarch's Lives. Other writers may be read with profit, with admiration, and with interest; but few, like Plutarch, can gossip pleasantly while instructing solidly; can breathe life into the dry skeleton of history, and show that the life of a Greek or Roman worthy, when rightly dealt with, can prove as entertaining as a modern novel. No one is so well able as Plutarch to dispel the doubt which all schoolboys feel as to whether the names about which they read ever belonged to men who were really alive; his characters are so intensely human and lifelike in their faults and failings as well as in their virtues, that we begin to think of them as of people whom we have ourselves personally known. His biographies are numerous and short. By this, he avoids one of the greatest faults of modern biographers, that namely of identifying himself with some one particular personage, and endeavouring to prove that all his actions were equally laudable. Light and shade are as necessary to a character as to a picture, but a man who devotes his energies for years to the study of any single person's life, is insensibly led into palliating or explaining away his faults and exaggerating his excellencies until at last he represents him as an impossible monster of virtue. Another advantage which we obtain by his method is that we are not given a complete chronicle of each person's life, but only of the remarkable events in it, and such incidents as will enable us to judge of his character. This also avoids what is the dreariest part of all modern biographies, those chapters I mean which describe the slow decay of their hero's powers, his last illness, and finally his death. This subject, which so many writers of our own time seem to linger lovingly upon, is dismissed by Plutarch in a few lines, unless any circumstance of note attended the death of the person described. Without denying that Plutarch is often inaccurate and often diffuse; that his anecdotes are sometimes absurd, and his metaphysical speculations not unfrequently ridiculous, he is nevertheless generally admitted to be one of the most readable authors of antiquity, while all agree that his morality is of the purest and loftiest type. The first edition of the Greek text of Plutarch's Lives appeared at Florence in the year 1517, and two years afterwards it was republished by Aldus. Before this, however, about the year 1470, a magnificent Latin version by various hands appeared at Rome. From this, from the Greek text, and also from certain MSS. to which he had access, Amyot in the year 1559 composed his excellent translation, of which it has been well said: "Quoique en vieux Gaulois, elle a un air de fraicheur qui la fait rejeunir de jour en jour." Amyot's spirited French version was no less spiritedly translated by Sir Thomas North.

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