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THE STUDY AND USE  
OF POETRY; PP.13-136**

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**PLUTARCHUS & BASIL THE GREAT  
& FREDERICK MORGAN PADEFORD**

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VALE STUDIES IN ENGLISH

ALBERT S. COOK, EDITOR

XV

ESSAYS ON THE STUDY AND USE  
OF POETRY

BY

PLUTARCH AND BASIL THE GREAT

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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FREDERICK MORGAN PADEFORD, PH.D.

TO  
GEORGE DANA BOARDMAN PEPPER  
AND  
ADONIRAM JUDSON PADEFORD





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### PLUTARCH'S THEORY OF POETRY

Unless one accepts the theory, playfully or otherwise advanced in the *Ion*, that the poet is but the instrument of an overmastering divinity, he is often at a loss to explain the inability of many a genius in the world of art and letters to judge of the relative excellence of his own creations. Michel Angelo eagerly dropped the brush and resumed the chisel, with the joy of one who returns to the work he loves after interruption, and yet succeeding generations have been unable to tell whether they admire more the frescoes of the Chapel or the *Pietà*; Wordsworth, the author of *Michael*, the *Daffodils*, and 'There Was a Boy,' with infinite self-satisfaction drew out the prolonged monotony of the *Excursion* as the supreme work of a lifetime; and he whose imagination swept from the 'visible darkness' of the throne of Chaos to the skirts of God, 'dark with excessive bright,' failed to see how far the intensity, sublimity, and mighty organ-tones of *Paradise Lost* excel the unimpassioned finish of *Paradise Regained*.

In a similar way Plutarch misjudged his productions, for although he regarded philosophy as the ideal field for the mind's activity, he was not profound enough nor subtle enough to excel as a philosopher, so that the *Morals* are hardly known more than by title to the cultivated reader of to-day, while the *Lives*, those 'idealized ethical portraits,' as Professor Perrin calls them, have charmed generations of English readers by their freshness and spirit, and are found on many a book-shelf where poverty allows them no other companions save Shakespeare and the Bible.

And yet the *Morals* have great value historically. No other extant writings give so complete and satisfactory a record of custom and thought in the late Greek period.

### *Plutarch's Theory of Poetry*

Domestic life in its many phases, affairs of government, questions of religion and ethics, the investigations of science, and the problems of art, all find a place in the pages of this multifarious collection of essays.

The student of poetry, and of aesthetics in general, will find these essays fruitful or barren according to the point of view from which they are approached. If, in the essay on poetry, the reader looks for intrinsic excellence in criticism, he will be disappointed, and will find many pages that are distressingly pedantic, and many that are commonplace and trivial; thus, when the charming episode of Nausicaa and Odysseus is made the subject of prudish speculation, the reader is equally offended by the triteness of the thought and by the writer's pragmatism. If, however, Plutarch is regarded as an exponent of the thought and feeling of his time, the essay is full of significance, for it shows the attempts of decadent Greece to deal with an art which had been the glory of the classical period.

Accordingly, the following pages will attempt an analysis of Plutarch's theory of poetry, the material furnished by the essay on poetry being supplemented by gleanings here and there from essays on other subjects. First will be considered Plutarch's theory of the distinction between poetry and prose; secondly, his theory of the relation of poetry to nature and to truth; thirdly, his theory of the end of fine art.

Wherein do poetry and prose differ? Although Plutarch does not follow Aristotle in threatening the established tradition which made metrical form essential to poetry,<sup>1</sup> he does agree with him in saying that the nature of its subject largely determines whether a composition is prose or poetry.<sup>2</sup> With playful disdain he criticizes the early Greek philosophers and naturalists for presenting didactic subjects metrically: "The verses of Empedocles and Parmenides, Nicander's verses on antidotes to poisons, and the maxims of Theognis, borrowed the poetic form and dignity only as a sort of riding-carriage to avoid footing it."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Poet.* i. 5; ix. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* i. 7-8; ix. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See p. 53.