

## PLUTARCH AND THE PERFORMANCE OF BELATEDNESS AT *NICIAS* 1

by

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*for Jerzy Linderski*

ABSTRACT: In the preface to his *Nicias–Crassus*, Plutarch unpacks aspects of what he deems the correct literary approach to a master text, in this instance, Thucydides. He does so by way of approaches familiar in ancient historiography and ancient literary criticism. Timaeus, in this preface, exemplifies the wrong approach. By contrast, Plutarch, by emphasising his belatedness, strikes the correct pose toward a classic. But Plutarch’s preface is neither an apology nor a confession of diffidence: he appropriates and repurposes Thucydides’ assertions regarding his historical achievement (Thuc. I 22, 1–4) in order to make a statement about the distinctive and timeless value of the *Parallel Lives*.

### 1. BELATEDLY YOURS

*Who said that? It sounds too good to be my own. Not that I don't think of some extraordinary things to say.*

*Uncle Fred in Springtime* (P.G. WODEHOUSE 1939)

#### *anxiety and influence*

Published more than fifty years ago, Harold BLOOM’s *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* incited approbation and outrage in almost equal measure. Partisan, even pugilistic, this book, populated as much by declarations and pronouncements as by close readings, constituted a one-two punch against a crusty New Criticism and a surging Structuralism. For readers of conservative inclinations, BLOOM’s return to the view that literary criticism ought to be an exercise in literary history was a very welcome move. And through its unpacking of the creative process, *Anxiety* appealed to a fading modernist mood which luxuriated in ‘the exhaustions of being a late-comer’ and insisted on foregrounding the abiding presence of the pastness of the past<sup>1</sup>. As a bonus, BLOOM rendered

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from BLOOM 1973: 12; cf. ELIOT 1920: 44: “the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence”.