The Lives of the Caesars and Plutarch's other Lives

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The Lives of Galba and Otho have, in general, drawn very little attention from scholars, unlike other Lives. It seems that originally they were a part of a series of biographical sketches running from Augustus to Vitellius. Only these two now survive of the eight Lives of the Caesars which are mentioned in the Lamprias Catalogue. Consequently, observations and suggestions about the lost Lives can only be speculative.

How are we to regard the Lives of Galba and Otho? Where do they stand in relation to the Parallel Lives? I shall attempt to answer these questions by focusing in this paper on a few prominent features of these two Lives.

Let us first examine Plutarch's programmatic statement at the beginning of the Life of Galba and then compare it with similar statements which appear in other Lives. After a few sentences summing up the character of the times, he breaks off, reminding himself that a detailed account of such events would belong to a full, systematic history, whereas he must confine himself to what the Caesars did and suffered. So, he makes it clear from the beginning that he is leaving the narration of details to formal history, but that he will not pass over what is worth mentioning in the actions and experiences of the emperors. Likewise, he says in

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2 Apart from Plutarch, accounts of the brief reigns of these two emperors are also given by Suetonius, Tacitus (Hist. i. 1–ii. 49) and Dio Cassius (64. 1–15). For the dating of these two Lives see J. Geiger, "Zum Bild Julius Caesars in der römischen Kaiserzeit," Historia Band 24, Heft 3 (1975) 444–53 and R. Syme, "Biographers of the Caesars," Museum Helveticum 37 (1980) 104–28, esp. pp.104–11.

3 Galba 2. 5 τὰ μὲν οὖν καθ’ ἐκαστὰ τῶν γεγομένων ἀπαρέγγελται ἀκριβῶς τῆς πραγματικῆς ἱστορίας ἑτείν, ὡσα δὲ ἢξια λόγου τοῖς τῶν Καἰσάρων ἔργοις καὶ πάθει συμπέπτωκεν, οὐδὲ ἐμοὶ προσήκει παρελθεῖν.
Pompey 8. 7: "Pompey's early deeds were extraordinary in themselves, but were buried by the multitude and magnitude of his later wars and contests, and I am afraid to revive them, lest by lingering too long upon his first ventures, I should leave myself no room for those achievements and experiences (ἔργον καὶ παθημάτων) of the man which were the greatest, and most illustrative of his character (ἡθος)." So far, what makes this programmatic statement look slightly different from the one set forth in the Life of Galba is Plutarch's explicit emphasis on character, the matter which interested him most in his biographies. Again, in the Life of Nicias 1. 5: "I cannot pass over the actions narrated by Thucydides and Philistus, because the temper and disposition (τρόπον καὶ διάθεσιν) of Nicias, hidden under his many great sufferings (παθήσας), are involved in them. I have touched on them briefly, relating only the bare essentials, in order not to appear completely careless and lazy, but I have tried to collect other details which have escaped most writers . . . in doing that, I am not gathering a mass of useless information, but passing on the means of observing a man's character and temperament (ἡθος καὶ τρόπος)." So, in both Pompey and Nicias Plutarch’s method is to eliminate some actions in favour of others, in order to draw out information about the character from these events. He feels no responsibility whatsoever to give a continuous history of events—this the reader can easily find elsewhere. His interest is focused on ἡθος, because he hopes that his readers may be led by examples of virtue to become better themselves. Now, Plutarch in his statement of purpose in Galba mentions nothing about providing his readers with material which might illustrate the ἡθος and τρόπος of the Caesars. However, he does say that he will not omit such incidents as are worthy of mention in the ἔργος καὶ πάθειαν of the Caesars. "Εργα καὶ πάθη are also the key-words in the other two programmatic statements, and it is through these that Plutarch illustrates the character of his figures. While Plutarch disclaims in Galba the composition of πραγματικὴ ἱστορία, he does not admit that he is writing mere Lives, as he clearly states in the Life of Alexander 1. 1–2,

4 . . . οὕτως ὃς ἔπραξε τότε πράξεις ο Ὑσομήνιος, αὐτάς καθ’ ἀείνας ἀπερεφείται οὕσας, πλήθει δὲ καὶ μεγέθει τῶν ὠστερών ἁγώνων καὶ πολέμων κατακεχωριμένας, ἐδιδιώτει κινεῖν, μὴ περὶ τὰ πρῶτα πολλῆς διατριβῆς γενομένης τῶν μεγίστων καὶ μᾶλλον διηλούντων τὸ ἡθος ἔργων καὶ παθημάτων τοῦ ἀνδρός ἀπολειψθῆν. 5 ὃς γοῦν Θουκυδίδης ἐξήγει πράξεις καὶ Φιλίστος ἐπὶ παρελθέν αὐτῷ ἐστί, μᾶλλον γε ὁ τῶν τρόπων καὶ τὴν διάθεσιν τοῦ ἀνδρός ὑπὸ πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων παθῶν ἀποκαλυπτομένην περιεχούσας, ἐπιδραμάσθη καὶ διὰ τῶν ἀναγκασῶν, ἕνα μὴ παντάπασιν ἀμελείας δοκεῖ καὶ ἁργός εἴη, τὰ διαφέροντα τούς πολλύς . . . πεπεραίμαι συναγεγεί, οὐ τὸν ἀχρηστὸν ἄθροίζων ἱστορίαν, ἀλλὰ τὴν πρὸς κατανόησιν ἡθος καὶ τρόπου παραδίδου.
where he says “I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men (i.e. Alexander and Caesar), but in epitome for the most part . . . for it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives.”

I believe that Plutarch is at pains to define the exact nature of this series of Lives, and not without reason. He is not prepared to give a history of the whole empire during the specific period he has chosen, as Tacitus promises to at the beginning of the first book of the Histories (1–4), but will rather select only those events which are directly or indirectly related to the personal fortunes of the emperors, that is the ἔργα καὶ πάθη of the Caesars. In this connection, it is informative to examine to what extent his judgments and reflections about the events and persons involved in them reveal the general didactic and moralizing attitude seen in other Lives. Also, to what extent, if at all, is he prepared to change in practice his theoretical outlook of biographical writing in this series of historiographical sketches, represented only by the Galba and Otho?

Plutarch’s moralizing introduction in the Life of Galba 1. 1–2. 1 closely resembles the introductory chapters of many of the Parallel Lives, which open with one or more moral concepts and then describe the heroes in accordance with the concept, as far as possible. So, from the very beginning, the familiar Plutarchian moral tone and didactic tendencies, so strongly present in the other Lives, establish some connections in terms of structure and attitude between these two Lives and all the others. Also, it has to be noted that this moralizing preface appears, when it occurs, only in the first Life of the pair, and is usually followed by, or includes within it, one or more comparisons, which serve to concentrate and direct the moral

9 . . . ἦν μὴ πάντα μηδὲ καθ’ ἐκαστὸν ἐξειργασμένως τι τῶν περιβοτῶν ἀπογέγραμμεν, ἀλλ’ ἐπετέλοντες τὰ πλείστα, μὴ συνοραντεῖν. οὕτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν ἀλλὰ βίους . . .

10 See Aratus 1. 1–4; Agis 1. 1–2. 6; Demetrius 1. 1–6; Sertorius 1. 1–7; Phocion 1–2; Demosthenes 1–2; Alexander 1; Dion 1; Aem. Paulus 1; Pelopidas 1. 1–2. 8; Pericles 1. 1–2. 4; Nicias 1; Cimon 2. 2–5; Theseus 1.


12 Demosth. 3. 1–5 (Demosthenes is compared with Cicero); Pelopidas 3–4: Pelopidas is compared with Epaminondas and both are contrasted with other famous political pairs: Themistocles-Aristides/Cimon-Pericles/Nicias-Alcibiades; Agis 2. 7–11 (Agis and Cleomenes are compared with the Gracchi); Philopoemen 3. 1 (Philopoemen is compared with Epaminondas); Demetrius 1. 7–8 (Demetrius is compared with Anthony); Pyrrhus 8. 2 (Pyrrhus is compared with Scipio and Hannibal); Sertorius 1. 8 (Sertorius is compared with Philip, Antigonus and Hannibal); Phocion 3. 7–8 (Phocion is compared with Cato in virtue, Alcibiades with Epaminondas in bravery, Themistocles with Aristides in wisdom, Numa with Agesilaus in justice; [again in Phocion 38. 5 Phocion is compared with Socrates in justice]); Fabius Maximus 1. 9 (his maxims are compared with those of Thucydides, ibid. 9. 2 the fate of Minucius is compared with the one of the son of Manlius Torquatus; Fabius Maximus is compared with Flaminius, Minucius, Varro, Marcellus, Scipio); Per. 5. 3 and 7. 3 (Pericles is compared with Cimon; [ibid. 18. 2–3 he is compared with Tolmides, in 6. 2–3 and 8. 4 with Thucydides]; there is also a series of comparisons in Per. 16. 3 between Pericles and Ephialtes, Leocrates, Myronides, Cimon, Tolmides and Thucydides).
reflections that are the primary purpose of Plutarchan biography. Why the above mentioned features, i.e. the preface and comparisons of moralizing nature, appear only in the first Life of each pair of Lives can be explained by Plutarch's desire to draw immediately the attention of the readers to the basic didactic purposes which, presumably, made him choose these specific Lives. To go back to the Lives of Galba and Otho, we see that the same features reappear in them: the moralizing preface occurs in the first Life of the pair, and includes a series of moralistic precepts about how the army should behave according to Iphicrates, Aemilius Paulus and Plato (Galba 1. 1–3), as opposed to what was actually happening during the reign of Nero and after his death. There follows a comparison between the brief reign of Alexander, the king of Pherae (Galba 1. 6–7), and the reigns of the four emperors: Nero, Galba, Otho and Vitellius (1. 8–9).

The Lives of Galba and Otho were not originally conceived as a pair, like the Pairs of the Parallel Lives. However, although they were probably designed to be read one after the other, like a series of interdependent annalistic narrations, they present some similarities, perhaps superficial, to the other Lives, as far as their overall structure is concerned.

The compositional device of συγκρισεις occurs very frequently in the Lives. As D. A. Russell remarks, "either character or circumstance may be the basis of a syncrisis; similar events affecting dissimilar persons and similar persons reacting to contrasting events alike provide a suitable field for the exercise . . . ." Plutarch, in his Life of Galba, uses a series of comparisons as the starting-point of his narration of events. The symcritical technique, however, is not limited to the preface, but appears again and again throughout the Life of Galba, throwing the main characters into relief and displaying both their virtues and their limitations.


14 Titles of Plutarch's works appearing in the Lamprias Catalogue attest to his strong tendencies to compare and classify: Πότερον Ἀθηναίοι κατὰ πόλεμον ἢ κατὰ σοφίαν ἐνδοξότεροι, Συγκρίσεως Ἀριστοφάνους καὶ Μενάνδρου ἐπιτομή, Περὶ τοῦ πότερον ὦδορ ἢ πύρ χρησιμότερον, Πότερα τῶν ζωῶν φρονιμώτερα τὰ χερσαία ἢ τὰ ἔνυδρα, Περὶ τῆς διαφορᾶς τῶν Πυθρονείων καὶ Ἀκαδημαίκων, Πότερον ὁ περίσσος ἀριθμὸς ἢ ὁ ἀρτιός ἀμείνων, Σταϊκῶν καὶ Ἐπικουρείων ἑκάτης καὶ ἔλεγχοι, Πότερον τὰ ψυχὴς ἢ σώματος πάθη χείρονα, Αἰτταὶ Ῥωμαϊκαί, Αἰτταὶ βαρβαρικαί, Γυναικῶν ἄρετα.


16 See 16. 1–3, where the policies of Galba and Nero are compared; in 16. 4 Galba is compared with Vinius; in 19. 2 Otho is compared with Paris; in 19. 4–5 Otho is compared with Nero; in 20. 3–6 Otho with Vinius; in 22. 7 Flaccus Hordeonius is compared with Galba; in 29. 1–5 we have the general concluding comparison between Galba and Nero and in 29. 4–5, Galba's idea of commanding Tigellinus and Nymphidius is compared to Scipio's, Fabricius' and Camillus' leadership of the Romans of their time.

Otho we notice again the same feature, though to a lesser degree, 18 because the Life of Otho is much richer in the narration of military events and factual instruction in general, and more meager in appraisal of characters than the Life of Galba, 19 in which the description of acts illuminating the person's character are both many and lengthy. 20 It is Plutarch's moral emphasis and deep interest in the study of character in the Life of Galba which establish, more than anything else, strong connecting links between this particular Life and the others. And it is for this reason, I believe, that Plutarch's programmatic statement at the beginning of the Life of Galba actually applies with more consistency to the Life of Otho than to the Life of Galba. 21

At this point, reference should be made to the concluding comparisons which form a kind of an epilogue to these two Lives. It is very likely that these two Lives were written singly and without parallels, like the Aratus and Artaxerxes, though they formed a group, unlike those. Formal parallels were not needed, anyway, since the primary purpose in writing the Lives of the Caesars was to narrate the events which were related to the ἔργα καὶ πάθη of the Caesars. Yet, Plutarch, carried away by his desire to draw moralistic lessons from these two Lives, as well, and thus to illustrate more graphically his heroes' characters, uses the procedure of σύγκρισις here, as he does later, in his Parallel Lives, but makes it undergo a kind of metamorphosis: he incorporates at the end of each Life an "internal" σύγκρισις, which makes up for the absence of the formal σύγκρισις seen in the other Lives. So, in Galba 29. 4 Galba's fate is compared with Nero's, and in Otho 18. 2 Otho's life and conduct are compared with Nero's. These two comparisons are not entirely unexpected, as both Galba and Otho are compared with Nero on other occasions: in Galba 16. 1–4 Galba's policy is juxtaposed to Nero's in a lengthy passage, and in Galba 19. 1–5, Otho's lavish prodigality in his private life is likened to Nero's similar habits. It is

18 In Otho 4. 34–36 Otho and Vitellius are compared; also in 9. 5 three pairs of public persons are brought together: Sulla-Marius, Caesar-Pompey and Vitellius-Otho; in 12. 4 the legion of Otho is compared with that of Vitellius.

19 Otho 3. 1; 4. 3; 9. 2; 9. 4.

20 The portrayal of Galba's character is given in 3. 2–3, 4. 1, 5. 2, 6. 4, 15. 2, 15. 4, 16. 1–3, 17. 2, 21. 1, 27. 2, 29. 1–4; Otho's character in 19. 2–5, 20. 1–4, 21. 2, 23. 3–4, 25. 1; Vitellius' character in 22. 5; Piso's in 23. 2–3; Verginius Rufus' in 6. 1–3, 10. 1–3; Tigellinus' in 2. 1, 8. 2, 13. 2, 17. 2–5, 19. 1, 23. 4, 29. 3; Nymphidius Sabinus' in 1. 5, 8. 1–5, 9. 1–4; Clodius Macer's in 6. 2; Vinius' in 11. 2–12. 3, 17. 1, 17. 3–4; Clodius Celsus' in 13. 4; Flaccus Hordeonius' in 22. 5.

21 I only partly agree with C. P. Jones' emphasis on Plutarch's ethical interest in both Lives, because, as I have already shown, most moral characterizations and ethical reflections regarding Galba and Otho are included in the Life of Galba and not in the Life of Otho; see also Jones (above, n. 8), pp. 73–74.
with these two final, internal comparisons, which play the role of an informal σώγκρισις, that Plutarch brings the two Lives to an end.\textsuperscript{22}

Additionally, what makes these two Lives look unlike the other Lives is their strong interdependency. They are interlocked in such a marked way, that it is, in fact, impossible to understand the Life of Otho without constantly referring to the Life of Galba. For instance, all the information about Otho, his lineage, his connections with Nero, Galba, Vinius and other political figures, his early military career, his conspiracy against Galba, and the events which led to his proclamation as emperor by the army, are narrated in the Life of Galba. Plutarch, beginning the Life of Otho, plunges \textit{in medias res}, after Otho's proclamation as emperor. By doing so, Plutarch stays in line with his programmatic statement, that he will only be concerned with the ἔργα καὶ πάθη of the Caesars, which implies, I believe, that only the period during which the Caesars held their office will be covered by the author. Plutarch makes no effort whatsoever to sum up the most crucial incidents concerning Otho at the beginning of the Life, and thus to introduce us more gently to the reign of the new emperor. He does not even spare a few words to explain how the new emperor came into power. He silently sends us back to the previous Life. Any reiterations and reminders in the Life of Otho would only make it look just like one of the other Lives.

The Life of Vitellius must have also been composed in the wake of the Life of Otho. We see, for example, that, in the Life of Galba, Galba is the center of attention, but the spotlight is often turned on Otho, and, to a lesser degree, on Vitellius.\textsuperscript{23} In the Life of Otho the same pattern is followed: Plutarch focuses his attention primarily on Otho, but, at the same time, Vitellius' personality and pre-imperial activities are, on occasion, appropriately highlighted.\textsuperscript{24} So, Plutarch constantly reminds his readers of the future development of events and tactfully introduces, well in advance, the emperors who will succeed Galba: in the Life of Galba, Otho and Vitellius are introduced, and in the Life of Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian.\textsuperscript{25} Accordingly, I would suggest that the Lives of Otho and Vitellius were also interconnected, in a manner resembling what we have seen in the Lives of Galba and Otho.

A similar feature of interdependency between Lives can be traced in the Lives of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, which, however form a double Life

\textsuperscript{22} It is entirely possible that the other Lives of the Caesars, now lost, also concluded with similar general comparisons of each emperor's character, fate and conduct of affairs with that of his immediate predecessor.

\textsuperscript{23} Galba 22. 5; 22. 7; 27. 5.

\textsuperscript{24} In Galba 22. 7 Vitellius accepts the title "Germanicus," but not "Caesar"; in Otho 4. 1 there were rumors that Vitellius had assumed the dignity and power of emperor; in Otho 13. 7, after the defeat of Otho's army at Bedriacum, the army took an oath to support Vitellius and went over his side.

\textsuperscript{25} Otho 4. 5.
and not two separate ones. All the initial information about Gaius is given in the *Life of Tiberius* 1. 8–3. 3 and, when Plutarch starts the *Life of Gaius*, he picks up the thread of events from where he left it in the *Life of Tiberius*. Thus, Plutarch can by no means claim to present in the *Life of Gaius Gracchus* an all-rounded portrait of Gaius, or in the *Life of Otho* a full portrait of Otho.

Another feature, which is directly related to the device of interdependency, is the brevity of the two *Lives* and particularly of the *Life of Otho*. The absence of features which occur regularly in other *Lives* accounts for the striking shortness of the *Life of Otho*. References to Otho's personality, early military career and private life all occur in the *Life of Galba*. Also, the usual details of the boyhood and education of both men are completely absent from the two *Lives*. Finally, Plutarch focuses primarily on the events immediately preceding the death of Nero in 68 A.D. and up to the death of Otho in 69 A.D. This very short period offers fewer opportunities for expansions and digressions than the rest of the *Lives*, in which Plutarch could take the whole life-span of his protagonists into consideration. It is true that the *Life of Galba* is much more eventful and informative than the *Life of Otho*, as persons and circumstances had to be adequately presented in this *Life* before the more factual and annalistic narration of events takes the leading role in the *Life of Otho*.

Finally, I should like to mention one more feature common to nearly all of Plutarch's *Lives*, that of Plutarch's polarized attitude towards the individuals' physical appearance.26 His descriptions of physique fall within two clearly defined and opposed categories, which reflect an attitude of polarization: beautiful, graceful, symmetrical and generally idealized features are opposed to asymmetrical and "defective" ones. He speaks, for instance, of Pyrrhus' "awful mouth defect," or of Sulla's "fearful facial expression with coarse red blotches," of Fabius Maximus' "wart on the upper lip" or of Philopoemen's "waist which is out of proportion with the rest of the body," of Sertorius' one eye, of Demosthenes' "lean and sickly body," of Pericles' "oddly shaped head," of Galba's "baldness and wrinkled face," of Otho's "weakness and effeminacy of the body,"27 or of Flaccus "who was physically incapacitated by acute gout" (*Galba* 18. 8).28 It is not accidental that Plutarch selects from among all the features of an individual only those which may produce a certain dramatic effect with their "peculiarity" or "ugliness." No doubt he bears in mind that such features are better impressed upon the readers' memory. It is not accidental either that

26 Plutarch's physiognomical descriptions in his *Lives* are treated in a greater detail in my unpublished paper "Iōsia and the theory of Physiognomy in Plutarch's *Lives*."

27 *Galba* 25. 2.

28 *Pyrrhus* 3. 6; *Sulla* 2. 1; *F. Maximus* 1. 4; *Philopoemen* 2. 3; *Sertorius* 1. 8; *Demosthenes* 4. 4–5; *Pericles* 3. 3; *Galba* 13. 6.
three such statements occur in the Life of Galba, which is more concerned with matters of personality and character than the Life of Otho.

In conclusion, then, the Lives of Galba and Otho are both similar to, and different from, the corpus of Parallel Lives. In his introductory remarks, Plutarch's comments suggest that the Lives of Galba and Otho will be more given to facts than to moral instruction. This would appear to mark a significant divergence from his practice in the Parallel Lives. As we have seen, however, Plutarch does not fully adhere to his statement of intent: the Life of Otho is indeed different from the Parallel Lives. The Life of Galba, however, with its moralizing preface, its series of comparisons, its self-contained development, its emphasis on ethics and character and its use of physiognomy in the service of morality, is clearly a less distant relative of the Parallel Lives.

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