

## The *Lives of the Caesars* and Plutarch's other *Lives*<sup>1</sup>

ARISTOULA GEORGIADOU

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> A slightly different version of this paper was delivered at the International Conference of the Plutarch Society, in Athens, in the Summer of 1987, entitled "Short Lives, Short Reigns: the *Lives of Galba and Otho*." I am indebted to Dr David Lammour and Professors J. Geiger, D. Sansone, Ph. A. Stadter, who read the article in manuscript and offered several helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> *Galba* 2. 5 τὰ μὲν οὖν καθ' ἕκαστα τῶν γενομένων ἀπαγγέλλειν ἀκριβῶς τῆς πραγματικῆς ἱστορίας ἐστίν, ὅσα δὲ ἄξια λόγου τοῖς τῶν Καισαρῶν ἔργοις καὶ πάθει συμπέτωκεν, 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 (ἔργων καὶ παθημάτων) of the man which were the greatest, and most illustrative of his character (ἦθος)."<sup>4</sup> 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 (παθῶν), 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 (ἦθους καὶ τρόπου)."<sup>5</sup> 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 ἦθος, because he hopes that his readers may be led by examples of virtue to become better themselves.<sup>6</sup> Now, Plutarch in his statement of purpose in *Galba* mentions nothing about providing his readers with material which might illustrate the ἦθος and τρόπος of the Caesars. However, he does say that he will not omit such incidents as are worthy of mention in the ἔργους καὶ πάθεισιν of the Caesars.<sup>7</sup> Ἔργα 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*,<sup>8</sup> as he clearly states in the *Life of Alexander* 1. 1–2,

<sup>4</sup> . . . οὕτως ἄς ἔπραξε τότε πράξεις ὁ Πομπήιος, αὐτὰς καθ' ἑαυτὰς ὑπερφυεῖς οὖσας, πλήθει δὲ καὶ μεγέθει τῶν ὕστερον ἀγῶνων καὶ πολέμων κατακεχωσμένας, ἐδεδῖεν κινεῖν, μὴ περὶ τὰ πρῶτα πολλῆς διατριβῆς γενομένης τῶν μεγίστων καὶ μάλιστα δηλοῦντων τὸ ἦθος ἔργων καὶ παθημάτων τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἀπολειφθῶμεν.

<sup>5</sup> ἄς γοῦν Θουκυδίδης ἐξήνεγκε πράξεις καὶ Φίλιστος ἐπεὶ παρελθεῖν οὐκ ἔστι, μάλιστα γὰρ διὰ τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὴν διάθεσιν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ὑπὸ πολλῶν καὶ μεγάλων παθῶν ἀποκαλυπτομένην περιεχούσας, ἐπιδραμῶν βραχέως καὶ διὰ τῶν ἀναγκαίων, ἵνα μὴ παντάπασιν ἀμελῆς δοκῶ καὶ ἀργὸς εἶναι, τὰ διαφεύγοντα τοὺς πολλοὺς . . . πεπείραμαι συναγαγεῖν, οὐ τὴν ἄχρονον ἀθροίζων ἱστορίαν, ἀλλὰ τὴν πρὸς κατανόησιν ἦθους καὶ τρόπου παραδιδούσ.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Pelling, "Plutarch's Adaptation of his Source-material," *JHS* 100 (1980) 127–39, esp. p. 135.

<sup>7</sup> *Galba* 2. 5 (quoted in n. 3).

<sup>8</sup> See E. G. Hardy, *Plutarch's Lives of Galba and Otho* (London 1890) xii; also *Fabius Maximus* 16. 5.

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."<sup>9</sup>

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 judgements 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<sup>10</sup> describe the heroes in accordance with the concept, as far as possible.<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> which serve to concentrate and direct the moral

<sup>9</sup> . . . ἂν μὴ πάντα μηδὲ καθ' ἕκαστον ἐξειργασμένως τι τῶν περιβοήτων ἀπαγγέλλωμεν, ἀλλ' ἐπιτέμνοντες τὰ πλείστα, μὴ συκοφαντεῖν. οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν ἀλλὰ βίους . . .

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> A. J. Gossage, "Plutarch" in *Latin Biography* (London 1967) ed. T. A. Dorey, pp. 45-77.

<sup>12</sup> *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, Antigonos 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 σύγκρισις occurs very frequently in the *Lives*.<sup>14</sup> As D. A. Russell remarks, "either character or circumstance may be the basis of a syncretism; similar events affecting dissimilar persons and similar persons reacting to contrasting events alike provide a suitable field for the exercise . . ." <sup>15</sup> Plutarch, in his *Life of Galba*, uses a series of comparisons as the starting-point of his narration of events. The syncritical technique, however, is not limited to the preface, but appears again and again throughout the *Life of Galba*,<sup>16</sup> throwing the main characters into relief and displaying both their virtues and their limitations.<sup>17</sup> In the *Life of*

<sup>13</sup> For the structural function of the προοίμιον and the formal σύγκρισις in the *Lives* of Plutarch see H. Erbse, "Die Bedeutung der Synkrisis in den Parallelbiographien Plutarchs," *Hermes* 84 (1956) 398-424; see also C.B.R. Pelling, "Synkrisis in Plutarch's Lives," *Giornale Filologico Ferrarese, Miscellanea Plutarchea*, v. 8 (Ferrara 1986) 83-96.

<sup>14</sup> Titles of Plutarch's works appearing in the *Lamprias Catalogue* attest to his strong tendencies to compare and classify: Πότερον Ἀθηναῖοι κατὰ πόλεμον ἢ κατὰ σοφίαν ἐνδοξότεροι, Συγκρίσεως Ἀριστοφάνους καὶ Μενάνδρου ἐπιτομή, Περὶ τοῦ πότερον ὕδωρ ἢ πῦρ χρησιμώτερον, Πότερα τῶν ζώων φρονιμώτερα τὰ χερσαῖα ἢ τὰ ἔνυδρα, Περὶ τῆς διαφορᾶς τῶν Πυρρωνείων καὶ Ἀκαδημαϊκῶν, Πότερον ὁ περισσὸς ἀριθμὸς ἢ ὁ ἄριστος ἀμείνων, Σταϊκῶν καὶ Ἐπικουρείων ἐκλογαὶ καὶ ἔλεγχοι, Πότερον τὰ ψυχῆς ἢ σώματος πάθη χεῖρονα, Αἰτίαι Ῥωμαϊκαί, Αἰτίαι βαρβαρικαί, Γυναικῶν ἀρεταί.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London 1973) 114.

<sup>16</sup> See 16. 1-3, where the policies of Galba and Nero are compared; in 16. 4 Galba is compared with Vinus; in 19. 2 Otho is compared with Paris; in 19. 4-5 Otho is compared with Nero; in 20. 3-6 Otho with Vinus; 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.

<sup>17</sup> D. A. Russell, "On Reading Plutarch's Lives," *G & R* 13 (1966) 139-54, pp. 150-51.

*Otho* we notice again the same feature, though to a lesser degree,<sup>18</sup> 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*,<sup>19</sup> in which the description of acts illuminating the person's character are both many and lengthy.<sup>20</sup> 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*.<sup>21</sup>

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

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> *Otho* 3. 1; 4. 3; 9. 2; 9. 4.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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 reflexions 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 σύγκρισις, that Plutarch brings the two *Lives* to an end.<sup>22</sup>

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, Vinusius 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 *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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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*

<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> *Galba* 22. 5; 22. 7; 27. 5.

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> *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.<sup>26</sup> 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,"<sup>27</sup> or of Flaccus "who was physically incapacitated by acute gout" (*Galba* 18. 8).<sup>28</sup> 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

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

<sup>27</sup> *Galba* 25. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *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*.

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*