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CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Biography and History

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1 Introduction

“There is properly no history, only biography,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson, slicing with a stroke the Gordian knot entangling the two genres. Aristotle explains that history is “what Alcibiades did and suffered” (*Poet.* 9.4, 1451b), but that definition encompasses not only Thucydides and Xenophon but also Nepos and Plutarch. In fact, it is often quite difficult to distinguish history from biography, even with the most careful analysis, nor did the ancients do so consistently. Historiography itself is protean, and biography no less so: not surprisingly, they frequently overlap, and especially in treating political-military persons and events.

Biography has many divisions, according to the nature of the person being studied. That which especially concerns us here treats statesmen and commanders, political and military leaders such as Alcibiades. They describe not just their achievements and failures but what kind of person they were, how they lived their lives, and whether they should be imitated. Nevertheless they use the same sources and many of the same techniques as historians. We can only speak of separate genres of history and biography if we remain aware of the fluidity of the boundary between them, and the difficulty of drawing any neat demarcation. The notion of a genre of biography separate from history is useful only insofar as it helps the reader to understand the nature of the work, but depends upon a pact between author and reader which is renegotiated in every work. Our four major surviving authors provide ample evidence.

First, however, it is necessary to distinguish biography from biographical interest or material. Ancient readers, like modern, found famous people fascinating. Homer had asked how a man’s desires and actions related to his achievements and his end. Phoenix tells Achilles the story of Meleager (*Il.* 9.528–599) as a negative model of heroic behavior, while Nestor offers Odysseus as a noble paradigm for Telemachus. In the fifth-century theater, Athenians saw tragic kings make fateful decisions; in the same years historians recounted how the weaknesses and strengths of leaders, whether

the insecurity of Xerxes or the integrity of Pericles, affected the fates of nations. Anecdotes about the special behavior or witty sayings of notable men were recorded by Ion of Chios or Stesimbrotus, later to be repeated by Plutarch. These are not biography. Biography I tentatively define as a self-sufficient account of the kind of life led by a historical person that also evaluates the subject's character, goals, and achievements.

An admirer of Socrates, Xenophon laid the basis for biography as a genre by combining in his own work the competing claims of history and biography (on the influence of the Socratics on biography, see Dihle 1970). In his *Anabasis*, itself an autobiographical memoir, he sketches the lives of the younger Cyrus (*Anab.* 1.9) and of three Greek leaders of differing backgrounds and temperaments, Clearchus, Menon, and Proxenus (2.6), in an effort to explain their style and achievements as leaders. More ambitiously, his *Education of Cyrus* (*Cyropaedia*) narrates the birth, early life, conquests, and death of Cyrus the Great, and thus figures as the first extant freestanding biography of a political figure. Despite historical touches, the work is fiction, a philosophical novel, but by its representation of Cyrus' personal virtue as essential to his military and political leadership it established moral virtue as a fundamental aspect of biography. A similar treatment of virtue and leadership is found in Xenophon's *History of Greece* (*Hellenica*), from which he derived his encomium of the Spartan king Agesilaus. Although not the first prose encomium (Isocrates claimed this honor for his *Evagoras*), the *Agesilaus* combines two ordering structures which would continue to be used in biography: the first half goes through the king's actions chronologically; the second works by topics, reviewing his virtues one by one, giving examples of each in action.

In Xenophon especially one sees the antecedents of biography as a genre: treatment (when possible) of the whole life from birth to death, practical and moral evaluation of character and achievements and their interrelation, assignment of praise and blame, use of illustrative anecdote, and a willingness to flesh out the portrait with verisimilar detail.

2 The Categories of Ancient Biography

The writing of separate biographies began soon after Xenophon, with the first students of Aristotle. Regrettably, all Hellenistic biography between Xenophon in the fourth century BCE and Nepos in the first is lost and known only through fragments. Rather than survey these traces (admirably done by Momigliano 1971a, 1971b), I will use them and extant biographies to distinguish the following categories of biography according to subject and purpose. As will be seen, most categories are not relevant to standard historiography.

(1) Philosophical biography brought out the moral character of its subjects and the relation of their teachings to their lives. Aristoxenus, a pupil of Aristotle, wrote on Pythagoras, Archytas, Socrates, and Plato; Hermippus in the third century wrote *Lives* of many philosophers, as well as lawgivers and other figures. Diogenes Laertius'

extant *Lives of the Philosophers* continues the tradition. Since such lives are usually heavy in sayings, as in Lucian's *Demonax*, they may be difficult to distinguish from apophthegm collections. The *Gospels* also belong to this category, as does Philostratus' novelistic *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Though closer to philosophy, they can be historically useful, especially for social and religious history. Philosophical biography's emphasis on models of behavior influenced other categories as well.

(2) Literary biography provided background on poets and orators, especially for school. It drew heavily for information upon the authors' own works, often unwisely (Lefkowitz 1981). Extant examples include *Lives of the Sophists* by Philostratus and Eunapius, the *Lives of the Ten Orators* falsely ascribed to Plutarch, and the short biographies preserved with the texts of some authors. A surprise papyrus find has revealed that Satyrus, a third-century BCE biographer, wrote his life of Euripides as a dialogue, presumably for entertainment as well as information.

(3) School and reference biographies represent a special category: short (often very short) sketches that record family origin, major events or accomplishments, and perhaps death. They are similar to modern encyclopedia entries, or genealogical charts of kings, and in fact many are preserved in the *Suda*, the eleventh-century Byzantine encyclopedia.

(4) Encomia provided much biographical information, but ideally should be distinguished from biography since, like Isocrates' *Evagoras* and Xenophon's *Agésilas*, they consciously avoided noting faults. Rhetorical handbooks were available to guide speakers in format and topics.

(5) Lives of those recently departed may represent a category of their own. The biographical tradition at Rome was fostered by the ancestral custom of a public funeral oration for a great man. Treatments of a political figure's career after his death, whether as speech, encomium, monograph, or biography, became popular as political weapons in the civil wars of the middle of the century. After the younger Cato's death in 46 BCE, his life was praised by Cicero, Brutus, and Munatius Rufus, and vilified by Hirtius and Caesar. The works on Cicero by his freedman Tiro and on Caesar by C. Oppius perhaps straddled the fence between biography and history. Polybius' lost *Philopoemen* and Tacitus' *Agricola* (treated under item 7) perhaps belong here.

(6) Autobiographies, commentaries, and memoirs represent a special kind of biographical writing, in which the subject represents his own life and decisions. Plutarch cites memoirs by both Pyrrhus and Aratus. At the beginning of the first century BCE several leading Romans wrote memoirs or autobiographies: Sulla's filled twenty-two books, Augustus justified himself in thirteen books. Though often self-defensive or propagandistic, they became a valuable source for historical biography (cf. Misch 1950; and see above, Ch. 22).

(7) Historical/political biography focused on people active in military or political life: political leaders, commanders, kings, and emperors. Its subject makes it a close companion to political history. Here the genre issue is particularly difficult, since this category overlaps with historical monographs on the deeds of individual leaders or rulers. For lost works (e.g., on Alexander) we often cannot distinguish from the title alone which category is most appropriate. Even among extant writers on Alexander,

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for example, Q. Curtius Rufus' account (1st c. CE) is closer to history, Arrian's *Anabasis* (2nd c. CE) is biography in all but name, and Plutarch famously insists that he "is writing biography not history" (*Alex.* 1).

Because of this ambiguity, the existence of political biography before Nepos wrote in the middle of the last century BCE is disputed (see Geiger 1985; Moles 1989). Some lost Alexander histories might be considered biographies, but Polybius' *Philopoemen* represents the most likely example of political biography in this period. Polybius asserts in his *History* (10.21.5–8) that his three books treated the Greek general's "childhood upbringing" and gave a cursory account of his deeds, defending and magnifying them. It may have been closer to Tacitus' *Agricola* (see below) than to a historical monograph such as Sallust's *Jugurthine War* or to Xenophon's encomium of Agesilaus. But this is guesswork: for this period it is best to acknowledge both our ignorance and the indefiniteness of genre boundaries.

The distinctions between categories are not neat: not only do political lives fuse with history, but a life of Solon might combine political, philosophical, or literary facets; a life of Cato or Brutus political and philosophical; a life of a departed friend, teacher, or model may shade into encomium.

Besides these categories, the nature of a biography depends on whether it is a separate work or part of a series. A series implies a collection of similar lives, associated for ease of comparison or reference – philosophers, kings, commanders; individual lives address the special features of one person, and are frequently encomiastic. Lives in series are usually considerably shorter than individual lives, though Plutarch's are an exception.

The attempt to bind a given category to a particular structure has not succeeded. Leo in a fundamental study (1901) argued that literary lives always followed a topically arranged "peripatetic" model, supposedly originated by Aristotle's students. However, the fragments of Satyrus' *Euripides* and Suetonius' *Caesars* demonstrate both that literary biographies took different forms, such as dialogue, and that political biography could employ the topical organization.

The remainder of this chapter will examine more closely historical/political biography, the category closest to historiography, beginning from the extant Roman writers, then turning to Plutarch, antiquity's most prolific and sophisticated biographer.

3 The Major Extant Authors: Nepos, Tacitus, Suetonius, Plutarch

The four major authors with surviving works demonstrate the varieties of ancient political biography and their relations to history. All four authors, like most ancient historians, belonged to the social elite. Among the Romans, Nepos was not politically active, but his friends Cicero and Atticus (in his own way) were; Tacitus reached the highest rungs of a senatorial career as consul and proconsul of Asia; and Suetonius

held high positions in the imperial bureaucracy. Plutarch, a Greek by birth and culture and priest of Apollo at Delphi for many years, was friendly with prominent Roman senators, several of whom were close to the emperor.

Only Tacitus restricted himself to an individual biography; the others preferred to gather lives into a series, though both Nepos and Plutarch also wrote individual lives. Suetonius' and Plutarch's collections of emperors treated a closed group, and most closely resemble continuous history. Interestingly, Tacitus, after his single biography, turned to histories which were similarly limited and focused on the behavior of emperors (cf. *Ann.* 4.33). Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* apparently were an open sequence, to which Plutarch added as he saw fit.

The relation of the biographer to the period he treats varies greatly. Tacitus' *Agricola* portrays an elder contemporary. Both Nepos and Plutarch write of contemporaries, but also treat the distant past, Plutarch even the legendary past. Suetonius' *Caesars* ends a generation before he wrote. These differences are significant in the treatment of lives, especially the use of sources. The length of the biographies also varies considerably, reflecting the different goals and ambitions of the authors: Nepos wrote a work for casual consultation, Suetonius a survey of autocratic rule, Plutarch examinations of statesmen as moral agents. Nepos' lives are the shortest, ranging from two to thirteen pages. Suetonius' are more ambitious, and Plutarch's can run up to one hundred pages long.

In each case, the writers' individual response to their own life situations determines the purpose and form of their biographies. The audiences they addressed, their goals in writing, whether they wrote lives individually or in groups, their sources, and their style reflect their choices. Their variety explains the wide range of practice within a single genre.

Cornelius Nepos: Biographies for Reference and Browsing

Nepos composed a biographical handbook, *On Famous Men (De viris illustribus)*, containing well over 300 lives, arranged in alternating books on non-Roman (chiefly Greek) and Roman figures. Only one book, *On Outstanding Commanders of Foreign Peoples*, and two lives from *On Latin Historians (Cato the Censor and Atticus)* are preserved of the original sixteen or more books. Nepos had completed most of the *Atticus* by the latter's death in 32 BCE, and the whole life, perhaps in a second edition, by 27, but we do not know when he began. The collection was part of a program of historical publications: he wrote two other works of historical reference, a collection of moral examples in five books, and a chronicle in three, as well as independent lives of Cato the Censor and Cicero.

Nepos' book on foreign leaders contains twenty-three lives, which average fewer than four pages apiece, but the lengths vary greatly. The lives fall into groups: five lives from the Persian Wars, eight from the fall and recovery of Athens, three from Thebes' defeat of Sparta, and two Carthaginians. Cyrus the Great, Alexander, and other kings he reviews in a single summary chapter. The lives are put together from historical sources (he cites, e.g., Thucydides, Xenophon, and Theopompus), supplemented by special material, as in *Alcibiades*, which refers to the famous account in Plato's *Symposium*.

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Nepos first notes parentage and city, then reviews the leader's major battles, stratagems, and political dealings in chronological order. Following the man's death, there is often a paragraph recording his virtues, the honors he received, or his accomplishments. Some treatment of character or personality occasionally appears in the longer lives. Nepos' generals usually support liberty and respect the people. They are models of civic virtue, whose behavior is contrasted with that of contemporary commanders (Dionisotti 1988). At the end of the book he states clearly that he expected his readers to compare the deeds of these leaders with those of the Romans in the following book, and decide "which men should be preferred" (*Hann.* 13). The life of Cato the Censor shows that the same format was followed for Roman lives. It is a concentrated sketch, a page and a half long, suitable for basic reference rather than detailed inquiry, for which Nepos refers to his separate life.

The *Atticus*, a portrait of the wealthy banker who managed to keep on good terms with both sides during the civil war, shows Nepos at his best. Although uniformly laudatory, it creates a multidimensional image of a humane, well-educated, shrewd, and generous individual who lived simply (as billionaires go), refused to take part in partisan struggles, and helped friends of every political stripe when they were in trouble. Nepos speaks from his own knowledge of his friend, and offers him as a model of how to survive in times of crisis.

Why did Nepos write biographies? He does not expect his readers to be thoroughly familiar with Greek history, and like Cicero he thinks it appropriate to distance his readers from Greek customs (*Epam.* 15.1.1). Although ancient politicians were taught from their student days to use historical examples, it was difficult to be familiar with all that might be found in Greek and Roman history. In *On Famous Men* Nepos appears to have responded to a need for convenient access to fundamental information, as he had done in his chronicle. The style uses some rhetorical flourishes, especially antithesis, but is generally pedestrian.

For us, the historical value of the *Lives* is slight, except where they treat figures otherwise poorly documented. His narratives show a number of factual errors, some of which may be attributed to compression of his sources and his emphasis on the generals' respect for the people. The project of comparing Greeks and Romans, seen also in Varro and other republican authors, found its most successful outcome in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

From roughly the same period we possess also fragments of a full-length laudatory life in Greek of the emperor Augustus, written by a contemporary philosopher and political advisor, Nicolaus of Damascus. The extant fragments (*FGrHist* 90 FF 125–130; translation and commentary in Bellemore 1984) seem to straddle the genres of biography and historical monograph, perhaps under the influence of treatments of Hellenistic kings.

Tacitus' Agricola: Filial Piety and Imperial Politics

Tacitus' *Agricola*, though biographical in form, already points to the author's future histories (see Ogilvie and Richmond 1967; Ogilvie with Saddington and Keppie 1991; Whitmarsh 2007). By the time Tacitus published his biography in 98 CE,

Augustus' imperial system was well into its second century. The *Agricola* reflects that changed situation, and especially the dangers of public service under the tyrannical emperor Domitian. Tacitus celebrated the life of his father-in-law as an example of a good man pursuing a political career under a bad emperor. However, the preface and epilogue which frame his account (*Agr.* 1–3, 44–46) mark the biography not just as an act of piety, but as a dangerous political statement. His great works, narrating imperial history from Tiberius to Domitian, were still to come. However, his caustic view, shaped under Domitian, of court intrigues and a subservient, complicitous Senate is already apparent.

Ancient biographies regularly employ the natural structure of human life – birth, youth and education, career, and death – though short lives such as Nepos' may focus almost wholly on career. Tacitus' fuller biography includes in that structure the formal stages of the Roman senatorial career, culminating in Agricola's six years as proconsul in Britain. However, the subjects of several major sections, about half the whole, are genre markers of history: a geographical excursus on Britain (10–12, with citations of earlier writers); a short history of the Roman presence (13–17); the opposing pair of speeches by the British leader Calgacus and by Agricola (30–34); and the set scene of the battle of Mons Graupius of which they are a part (29–37). Moreover, the tone is encomiastic: Agricola's every quality and deed are found praiseworthy, although a dispassionate reader might note flaws about which Tacitus is silent. Thus the biography smoothly absorbs elements of history, praise, and political tract without losing its fundamental emphasis on one man's life.

Much of Tacitus' information undoubtedly came from Agricola himself (cf. 4, 24, 44) or his family. His intended readers are apparently his family and friends, members of his own senatorial class who have survived the same crisis of rule as himself, can appreciate that danger to life and dignity, and can relate Agricola's life to their own past and future role in imperial affairs. For modern readers, the work is essential for the history of Roman Britain, and extremely valuable for the political climate under Domitian and senatorial hopes for the future with Trajan.

Suetonius' Lives of the Caesars: Emperor-Watching

How can one write the history of living under an imperial system? When Tacitus turned to write the history of the first century, he used the traditional format of annals, giving events year by year. Nevertheless biography underpinned the whole, since the sequence of imperial reigns provided a larger structure, most clear in the six books devoted to Tiberius. Suetonius, his younger contemporary, decided to abandon narrative history for historical biography, an innovation already attempted in Greek by Plutarch (see below). In his set of biographies of twelve Caesars, from Julius to Domitian, the new form corresponded to the new reality, already implicit in Tacitus, that the personality and behavior of the emperor was the fundamental political fact.

Suetonius, a scholar and successively Secretary for Libraries and Secretary for Correspondence for Trajan and Hadrian until his dismissal in 121/2 CE, combined the roles of bureaucrat, writer, and scholar. Besides the *Caesars*, he wrote the

collection *On Famous Men*, treating lives of literary figures. Two books survive, on grammarians and on teachers of rhetoric. In addition, lives of Terence, Horace, Vergil, and others preserved in our manuscripts of the authors go back more or less directly to a third book of the series, on poets. These lives fit the format of most such large series: dry and short (those on grammarians run less than a page apiece, those on the poets rather longer), they give the person's origin, a sketch of his career, and the major reasons for his fame (see Kaster 1995).

For his eight books on the Caesars, Suetonius had greater ambitions. The early lives, *Julius*, *Augustus*, and *Tiberius*, are quite long and detailed, running between fifty-six and eighty-three pages in the Loeb edition. The later lives, while shorter, are still longer than any of Nepos' extant lives. If there was a preface explaining Suetonius' purpose or audience, it has been lost with the beginning of *Julius*, the first life. The lives themselves reveal that he expects informed and curious readers, who will be rewarded for their interest by a fascinating potpourri of fact, rumor, and scandal, all centered on the intimate relation between an emperor's administration and his personality and character.

The lives begin with the standard information on family, birth, youth, and career, up to the emperor's accession. From that point Suetonius presents each emperor's achievements and defects, virtues and vices, by category rather than chronologically (*neque per tempora sed per species*, *Aug.* 9.1). This technique, often found in literary lives, and perhaps a standard scholarly technique, becomes in the *Caesars* a potent tool to evaluate an emperor, flexible enough to be adapted to individuals, yet sufficiently rigid to permit comparison between them. Suetonius treats military matters summarily, but reports civil administration and domestic behavior at length. As Wallace-Hadrill (1983: 151–152) has noted, "The prominence Suetonius gives to moral categories makes sense . . . in terms of the mental attitudes of contemporaries living under an autocracy which relied heavily on the language of virtue for its legitimation." Suetonius values the virtues which define a good emperor: clemency, civility, humanity, temperance. The most dangerous vice is abuse of power in all its forms: lust, avarice, luxury, cruelty. Unlike Tacitus, he is not concerned with senatorial prerogatives but with a citizen's right to be treated with dignity by a responsible ruler.

His standard pattern may be seen in *Claudius*: he first introduces Claudius' father Drusus (*Claud.* 1), then speaks of his birth and youth, including Augustus' opinions about him excerpted from his letters (2–4). His public offices before his accession follow (5–10). The greater part of the life (11–42) treats by categories Claudius' administration and character. Finally there comes an account of his death by poison and the omens which marked it (43–46). Frequently Suetonius divides his treatment of behavior into two subsets: virtuous or neutral behavior and vicious behavior, most forcefully at *Gaius (Caligula)* 22.1: "thus far concerning the emperor, the rest will tell of the monster." In *Claudius*, the distinction is less clear-cut. The listing of his marriages, children, and closest freedmen introduces the executions and savagery to which he was led by the influence of his wives and favorites (*Claud.* 29). In chapters 30–42, vice and virtue are mixed as the biographer successively touches upon Claudius' appearance, health, way of life (entertainments, habits), character (sadism,

timidity, outbursts of anger), empty-headedness (both foolish and casually cruel), and intellectual pursuits.

Suetonius' treatment by categories truncates narrative but brings to life the individuality of each emperor. Even though often based on dubious sources, the *Caesars* makes fascinating reading. Lurid accounts of sexual excesses and aberrations scandalize and intrigue the reader. Could the aged Tiberius really be so sexually depraved on Capri (*Tib.* 43–44)? Anecdotes fix traits in the reader's mind. The scene, described in a sentence, of Domitian at the beginning of his reign, sitting by himself stabbing flies with his stylus (*Dom.* 3), sets the tone for the emperor's whole life.

Suetonius selected nuggets of information from earlier histories. He cites a few, but others, such as the common source or sources on the civil wars of 69 CE which he shared with Plutarch and Tacitus, cannot be identified. In addition he refers to a number of documents, including the records of Senate proceedings, the autobiographies of Augustus and Tiberius, and a collection of Augustus' letters. The first two lives, *Julius* and *Augustus*, besides being the longest, are the richest in citations and documentation; in later books citations are few, information is less detailed, and Suetonius tends to generalize behavior. Finally, many of his stories may have come through oral tradition: tales of a dead emperor's quirks were safer than observations on the living.

Though different in form from standard ancient political history, Suetonius' biographies prove invaluable to the modern historian for their sections on administration, finance, entertainments, and not least, scandal. The many brief glimpses of the imperial court, though not as cynical and focused on power as Tacitus' accounts, preserve important insights into the nature of the imperial system and the individuals who were at its peak. He offers significant supplements to our two major histories for this period, Tacitus and Cassius Dio, both of which are only partially preserved.

Suetonius' *Caesars* established imperial biography as the major historical mode under the empire. His many continuators include Marius Maximus, author of lost biographies of the emperors from Nerva to Elagabalus, the *Historia Augusta*, created at the end of the fourth century CE, and Einhard's contemporary biography of Charlemagne.

Plutarch's Biographies: Character, Leadership, and Political Power

The acme of ancient political biography was achieved by Suetonius' elder contemporary, the Greek philosopher and man of letters Plutarch of Chaeronea. Born in Greece in the middle of the first century CE to an old and prosperous family, Plutarch from his youth chose to study and write philosophy, but also maintained close ties with Rome. In Greece and on visits to Rome he made a number of friends and acquaintances among Romans of the highest level, and was granted Roman citizenship. Although he wrote in Greek, Plutarch's readership consisted of the ruling elite of both cultures, Greek and Roman, as is shown by the addressees of his many essays. The *Parallel Lives* are dedicated to a prominent senator and military commander closely associated with the emperor Trajan (see Jones 1971; Stadter and Van der Stockt 2002).

Plutarch's biographies represent only about a third of his writings, many of which are lost; his surviving ethical and philosophical essays, collectively called *Moralia*, equal in volume the extant lives. He wrote three different types of biography: individual lives, *Lives of the Caesars*, and *Parallel Lives*. Two individual historical lives, *Aratus* and *Artaxerxes*, which celebrate respectively a Greek general (the ancestor of one of Plutarch's friends) and a Persian king, are all that survive of about ten independent lives, half of which concerned local Boeotian figures, from Heracles to poets and a Cynic philosopher.

The series of *Lives of the Caesars* from Augustus to Vitellius treated the first one hundred years of the empire. Only two short lives, *Galba* and *Otho*, survive, but the whole series probably ran close to four hundred pages. It was written most likely under the Flavian dynasty (i.e., before 96 CE), perhaps under Vespasian, ca. 75 CE. To judge from the two extant lives, it represents an unusual initiative by a young Greek to give a moral perspective to imperial history. Building on the same historical accounts later used by Tacitus and Suetonius, these lives depict the tragedy of state and army without a leader. The whole series traced the trajectory of empire from Augustus' seizure of sole power after the chaos of civil war to the collapse into the renewed civil war which ended Nero's reign. Plutarch may have hoped that Vespasian would be a new Augustus, bringing peace and stability (see Stadter 2005).

The *Parallel Lives* develop further this scheme of ethical evaluation of historical figures, but immensely enlarge its scope and purpose. The forty-six *Lives* in twenty-two books cover a vast panorama, from the earliest legendary founders of Athens and Rome, Theseus and Romulus, down to the deaths of Antony and Cleopatra in 30 BCE, the point at which the empire, and his *Caesars*, began. The Greek *Lives* include a heavy proportion of Athenian statesmen of the fifth century BCE, but also five Spartans, Alexander the Great, and several Hellenistic commanders; the latest is that of Philopoemen, who died in 182 BCE. The Roman *Lives* give special emphasis to the final tumultuous years of the republic. Each Greek is paired with a Roman of similar character and situation to form a separate book. For most pairs, a short comparison between the protagonists functions as an epilogue.

The focus on statesmen is similar to that of Nepos' extant book, but the scale is much larger, the average length being about forty-five pages and the longest running over one hundred. Each pair of lives represented a substantial volume, or even two. Plutarch did not write the pairs in the chronological order of their heroes, whether Greek or Latin. Five late republican lives, which are also much longer than the others, belong near the end of the series and reflect Plutarch's increased willingness to deal with the darkest aspects of political ambition.

Comparison is central to his project. Already Herodotus and Thucydides had compared nations, cities, and individuals. Some historians, such as Diodorus, had presented Roman and Greek history side by side. Roman writers frequently compared individual Roman statesmen with outstanding Greeks, notably Alexander, and we have seen that Nepos composed his lives in parallel books of non-Roman (chiefly Greek) and Roman subjects. Plutarch went further by setting individual Roman and Greek lives side by side. The juxtaposition stimulated the reader to think more precisely and profoundly about the protagonists' virtues and weaknesses and how

they were strengthened or attenuated in different historical circumstances. Both Pericles and Fabius Maximus, for example, restrained their citizens from rushing into battle with superior opponents, but they differed in their methods and the particular qualities they brought to bear. Correspondences between parallel lives, expressed or implied, reveal the biographer's effort to indicate similarities. The comparative epilogues frequently suggest tensions between conflicting goods, or between moral good and practical success. Since most of Plutarch's statesmen have major flaws, readers must weigh different characters, often admiring and criticizing the same person, and sometimes the same traits.

To create this ethical engagement, Plutarch combined the ancient historians' concern with the morality of action and the philosophers' use of moral anecdotes. He thus adapted political history to make a statesman's whole life material for ethical and practical reflection. By inserting individual anecdotes into a historical and biographical framework, he permitted the reader to see the circumstances in which a historical figure acted and to evaluate his whole life rather than a brief moment of courage or wit.

The *Parallel Lives* also assert the value of the Greek heritage, while recognizing that Romans often more successfully embodied Greek virtues than the Greeks themselves. He presumes an audience already knowledgeable in the history of both nations and receptive to the Platonic perspective on which his lives were based. His own authorial persona, expressed in his proems and epilogues as well as numerous comments and asides throughout the narrative, reflects a warm-hearted, understanding, but strongly moral friend and counselor. He delights in his heroes' lives as a mirror for his own (*Aem.* 1), and invites his readers among the political elite of both nations to do the same. In one of his essays, he affirms that he considered a philosopher's greatest achievement was to improve the rulers or leading men of a state. The *Parallel Lives*, like the *Lives of the Caesars* and many of his moral essays, strove to accomplish exactly that goal.

To achieve its aim, Plutarchan biography had to have its foundation in historical fact. Plutarch, who accepted Aristotle's view that virtue was habitual good action, looks at the actions of his statesmen to understand their virtues or failings. His standard sources are narrative histories. We can document his use of extant historians such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Livy, and confirm his frequent citations of lost works by Ephorus, Theopompus, Phylarchus, and others. In addition, wherever possible, for both Greek and Roman biographies, he privileges sources contemporary with the hero, especially those written by the protagonist himself: Solon's laws and poems, Pericles' decrees, Demosthenes' speeches, Sulla's memoirs. He proudly supplements historians' accounts with inscriptions, dedications, or other documents (cf. *Nic.* 1), and cites when possible contemporary lyric or comic poets. An omnivorous reader in the historians and antiquarians of Greece, time and again he quotes authors and incidents known from no other source (cf. Stadter 1989: lviii-lxxxv). Earlier biographies were not an important source, although he cites Nepos and Hellenistic biographers such as Hermippus. He came to Latin late and his reading of Roman literature is correspondingly restricted, but he cites major authors, including Cicero. All these written sources he supplements with

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his own observation of monuments or stories from his friends or local informants (see Buckler 1992).

Although Plutarch famously stated that he "wrote biographies, not history" (*Alex.* 1), it is more accurate to say that he reshaped historical narrative into biography. This reshaping necessitated a new interpretation of the protagonist and often an imaginative reconstruction of the circumstances behind an event. When treating the same events in different lives, Plutarch in each case refocused the action to make each protagonist the center of the life devoted to him. Historical information not relevant to the biography was condensed or stripped away, and other material compressed, simplified, or displaced. Background and feelings may be imaginatively reconstructed "as they must have been." Responsibility is particularized, so that Plutarch credits to Pericles a decision ascribed by Thucydides to the Athenians. Plutarch's judgments too might change from life to life, as he favors the new protagonist's point of view (see Pelling 1979, 1990b).

Usually the chronological sequence of major life events furnished Plutarch's overall organizing scheme, but it coexisted with and often yielded to thematic and rhetorical structures. Educational influences reported early in a life need not be restricted to childhood, but can include friends and advisors in maturity, such as Damon and Anaxagoras to Pericles (*Per.* 4–5). Incidents and anecdotes were frequently gathered under a common head, or introduced by association, rather than in chronological order. Anecdotes which disclosed character may replace narrative, as when the meeting of Alexander with the captured women of Darius is given fuller treatment than the battle of Issus which precedes it (*Alex.* 20–21). Significant anecdotes appearing early in the life, such as Alexander's taming of Bucephalus (*Alex.* 6) or the child Cato's refusal to change his mind when threatened (*Cat. Min.* 2), often establish major themes or perspectives. Dialogue and quoted sayings are frequent. Speeches are rare, but can be quite dramatic: Appius Claudius' exhortation to the Roman Senate during the war with Pyrrhus (*Pyrrh.* 19), for example, or Cleopatra's words at the tomb of Mark Antony (*Ant.* 84). Combining these disparate elements, Plutarch is unusually successful at creating a rhetorical unity: whereas Suetonius' *Lives* are similar to collages, Plutarch's resemble more a tapestry in which many threads and colors are integrated into a single picture.

The sophisticated techniques of the *Lives* require that the modern historian use them with care. Plutarchan biographies, even more than the others treated here, are not simply warehouses of facts which may be casually excerpted; the context and purpose of each item and the perspective of the whole life and the pair of which it is a part must be considered (see, e.g., Bosworth 1992 [pitfalls in Plutarch]; Buckler 1993; and Badian 2003 [Plutarch's critical skills]). In addition, the *Lives* are an important though underutilized source on the intellectual and political milieu of Plutarch's own day.

Finally, they offer many pleasures to the curious reader. Since the rediscovery of Plutarch in the Renaissance, his *Parallel Lives* have been a favorite avenue of approach to the classical world. The emphasis on individual character found a ready audience among men of action and intellectuals well into the nineteenth century, when the rise of scientific, skeptical historiography undermined the trust in his credibility. In the

last three decades he has reemerged as a major author, whose biographies are an indispensable source for our knowledge of the ancient world, and continue to raise ethical and practical questions relevant to modern political leadership.

4 Biography as History

Speaking generally, political biography represents the personal approach to history. Its focus is not on larger elements of causation, such as the constant seesaw of action and retribution and the limits of human nature seen in Herodotus and Thucydides, but on the personal. It asks what kind of character a historical actor possessed, what motivated his behavior, what he accomplished or failed to achieve. Passing over large-scale movements and consequences, it tends to focus on details and anecdotes. Authorial comments are more frequent than is usual in history, but speeches are rare. Narrative, in particular, is more episodic, or completely excluded. In general, it is not that biography is less accurate or more interpretive than history, but that its scope and purpose are different, even when it uses the same sources.

It is hardly coincidental that our earliest extant biographies, those of Nepos, belong to a time of acute political strife at Rome, which saw the emergence of strong competing personalities, and that our three later authors wrote during and shortly after two crises of empire, when the problem of leadership was particularly acute. In such cases, personal and moral factors, always present to some degree in standard political history, come to the fore. The biographer must evaluate good and bad behavior, look for its sources, and consider its effects. In a time when dynasts and then emperors could control the fate of so many, insight into the character of political leaders became a necessity. Biography was not only a source of information and recreation, it was also a tool for living.

FURTHER READING

For ancient genre in general see Conte 1992; for historiography, Marincola 1997 and 1999; for ancient biography, Gentili and Cerri 1988: 61–85 and Burridge 1992. For an overview of the problems in reconstructing Hellenistic biography, see Momigliano 1971a, 1971b. The basic study of Nepos is Geiger 1985. For Suetonius see in general Wallace-Hadrill 1983; for the *Caesars* Lewis 1991b and Bradley 1991. On Plutarch, the best overview is Duff 1999; valuable essays are collected in Stadter 1992; Scardigli 1995; and Pelling 2002.