

PLUTARCH'S HEROES AND THE 'BIOGRAPHICAL SYNECDOCHE'*

"Boswell," Sunny said.

She meant something along the lines of "Your life doesn't interest me."

Lemony Snicket, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Book 13 (2006), ch.7

In Lemony Snicket's surreal tale Sunny Baudelaire is a bright and brave toddler who cannot yet speak in sentences, but only in single words. Each word she utters, however, is typically laden with cultural memories and ironic provocations, which are coyly spelled out by the narrator. Thus the name of James Boswell (1740-1795) is used not just to convey depreciation of Boswell's writing, but perhaps also to query the overall relevance of classic biographical narratives such as his *Life of Samuel Johnson*. The mention of a famous name can do two things at once: it can both recall the career and achievements of a specific individual and signal a larger phenomenon (here a strand¹ of the Anglophone literary tradition).

This paper will first address Plutarch's tendency to frame comments on statesmanship and/or moral issues through compact onomastic references to notable figures of the Greek and Roman past. Many of the passages where Plutarch behaves like a grown up, serious version of Sunny Baudelaire are found within his *Lives* (although not exclusively there). So the stakes are higher for Plutarch, because *nominatim* references to widely-known historical characters cannot help being pregnant with further biographical textuality. Some owners of these names are themselves protagonists in Plutarchan *Lives*, while others are biographically significant at the level of anecdotes and *exempla*². A second topic of the paper will be Plutarch's equally prominent habit of cross-referencing famous persons by means of very brief summations of the

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¹ Which is thoroughly influenced by the Plutarchan life writing: Gippert (2004).

² On the mutual osmosis between *exempla*, anecdotes and biographical literature in antiquity, see below, Section II.

salient points of their life stories. Analysis of the Plutarchan practice of condensing lives into onomastic tags or minimalist summations will open up fundamental questions about his approach to biography. I shall use the term ‘biographical synecdoche’ as a shorthand way of describing his invocations and synopses of famous Greek and Roman personalities; the idea of selection inherent in synecdoche³ promises fresh insight into the dynamic complexity of Plutarch’s concerns with the past as a matrix of ethico-political values. At the end of the day, ‘biographical synecdoche’ is a heuristic tool that will serve to demonstrate how full-scale biographical individuation, which is what each Plutarchan *Life* appears to offer in abundance, co-exists with and draws upon other discursive modes of processing biographical identities. Needless to say, within the space of a short paper it is only possible to tentatively broach such a weighty and ramified topic; more exhaustive discussion must await its time.

I

To begin with a straightforward example of Plutarch’s biographical synecdoche: in the stand-alone *Life of Artaxerxes* the conduct and policies of the Spartan statesman Antalcidas are criticised as reckless and corrupt. During his mission to Persia he effectively betrayed the benchmarks of Spartan leadership.

ἦν δ' ὡς ἔοικεν ἐπιτήδειος οὗτος ἐντρυφηθῆναι ... ἐξορχησάμενος ἐν Πέρσiais τὸν Λεωνίδα
καὶ τὸν Καλλικρατίδαν.

This man was obviously prone to wallow in luxury... having danced away Leonidas and Callicratidas among the Persians. (*Artaxerxes* 22.3)

³ The distinction between synecdoche and metonymy continues to be debated by linguists: see esp. Nerlich and Clarke (1999); Nerlich (2010); Whitsitt (2013); Matzner (2016), 154-65. The most incisive attempt to disambiguate synecdoche from metonymy is Seto (1999); modern treatments have progressed far beyond the ancient (again, not altogether uniform) understanding of synecdoche vis-à-vis metaphor; see Lausberg (1960), 292-8.

Antalcidas's misbehaviour⁴ ruins the image of Sparta evoked by the names of two of its paradigmatic heroes. Plutarch is patently selective: the list could have included different names, or indeed more than two names. The names he opted for constitute, in any case, a synecdoche of the 'normative' Spartan past. But for Leonidas and Callicratidas to be valid synecdochic emblems of Sparta, their biographical profiles ought to be, at least momentarily, activated in the readers' memory. And Plutarch perhaps aims for more than rudimentary biographical awareness, since he does -envisage- writing a *Life of Leonidas*: ἐν τῷ Λεωνίδου βίῳ γραφήσεται (*De Herodoti Malignitate* 866B).⁵

In the passage above biographical synecdoche materialises as two names in the singular. But much more often Plutarchan biographees are assessed against (in)famous individuals whose names are pluralised. B A comparison between the *Life*'s protagonist and an entire generation of his contemporaries or predecessors may call for a cluster of well-known names in the plural form.

... but he [Pericles] was leader for forty years among Ephialtuses and Leocrateses, Myronideses and Cimons and Tolmideses and Thucydideses... (*Pericles* 16.3)

Aristides' claim on the second place is contested by Sophaneses and Ameiniases and Callimachuses and Cynegeiruses, who fought with conspicuous valour in those contests (*Comparison of Aristides and Cato* 2.2; [trans. D. Sansone](#))⁶

⁴ According to Van den Hout (1999) 566, the verb ἐξορχέομαι in Greek literature connotes debasement of the sacred rites. Yet in Plutarch's *De Herodoti Malignitate* 867B the verb is linked with an allusion to the antics of Hippocleides (Hdt. 6.129), and so suggests general wantonness.

⁵ Cf. Muccioli (2012) 138-40 for convincing speculation about how the *Life of Leonidas* would have been put together.

⁶ Also *Comparison of Aristides and Cato* 1.3-4: "... the political life of Rome, which was no longer the work of Curii and Fabricii and Atilii as leaders, and which no longer welcomed as officeholders and popular leaders poor men who worked their fields with their own hands and who mounted the speaker's platform straight from the plough and the hoe. The state had become accustomed to heed great families and wealth and largesses and ambitious election campaigns. ... To have as your opponent Themistocles, who was not distinguished by birth and whose wealth was modest... was not the same as contending for supremacy with Scipiones Africani and Servii Galbae and Quintii Flaminii..." (trans. D. Sansone, modified)

For even earlier than these events [the deeds of Pompey and Cassius], Cinnas and Marii and Carbones set up their country as prize and booty and almost openly waged war to gain a tyranny. But Brutus, it is said, was not accused of this even by his enemies (*Brutus* 29.6-7)

If need be, a hero could be evaluated against the synecdochically sampled generation of his counterpart within the pair of *Parallel Lives*:

... he [Crassus] was competing, not with Cleons and Hyperboluses – oh no, but with Caesar’s brilliance and Pompey’s three triumphs. (*Comparison of Nicias and Crassus* 2.4)

Plutarch relies on a similar strategy when making comparisons in historically themed declamations. In order to set up a foil for his main subject, he lists famous persons as representative specimens.

... compare Alexander’s pupils with those of Plato and Socrates. <...> But Critiases and Alcibiadeses and Cleitophons spat out reason like the bit of the bridle, and have gone astray. (*De Alexandri Fortuna* 328B-C)

For other men who are reported to have attained divine marriages and to have been paramours of goddesses – Peleuses and Anchiseses and Orions and Emathions – lived their lives not in an altogether cordial and painless manner. Numa, on the other hand, apparently had Good Fortune as his true spouse, coadjutor, and colleague in government. (*De Fortuna Romanorum* 321C)

It is clear that Plutarch has a penchant for synopsisising the political climate-cum-ethos of whole generation by means of a handful of pluralised names of prominent statesmen or celebrated warriors. In a more panoramic survey of (Roman) history, names in the plural may alternate with names in the singular,⁷ with the same effect of synecdochic sampling.

⁷ The plural names in these passages can be ‘genuine’ plurals that form a mini-catalogue of the famous republican clans: so Pelling (2011a) 208; Plutarch obviously uses the plural onomastic form when talking about Roman families (e.g. *Cic.* 1.5; *De fort. Rom.* 325F). Alternatively, the juxtaposition of the plurals with names in the singular might be a clue that Plutarch is in fact pluralising names of particularly renowned individuals, such as M. Furius Camillus or Fabius Maximus. Either way, the focus on the eminent families of republican

ἀλλ' εἴτε Φαβίους καὶ Σκιπίωνας καὶ Μετέλλους καὶ τοὺς κατ' αὐτὸν ἢ μικρὸν ἔμπροσθεν αὐτοῦ, Σύλλαν καὶ Μάριον ἀμφοτέρους τε Λευκούλλους, ἢ καὶ Πομπήϊον αὐτόν... παραβάλου τις, αἱ Καίσαρος ὑπερβάλλουσι πράξεις

But if one were to compare him with Fabii and Scipios, and Metelli, or with those whose careers were contemporary or slightly preceded his – Sulla and Marius and the two Luculli, or even Pompey himself... – the deeds of Caesar are superior... (*Caesar* 15.3)

βούλεσθε δὲ πυθώμεθα, τίνες ποτ' εἰσὶν οὗτοι; Φαβρίκιοι φασὶν εἶναι καὶ Κάμιλλοι καὶ Λούκιοι [καὶ] Κικιννάτοι καὶ Μάξιμοι Φάβιοι καὶ Κλαύδιοι Μάρκελλοι καὶ Σκιπίωνες. ὁρῶ δὲ καὶ Γάιον Μάριον ... καὶ Μούκιος ἐκεῖ Σκαιόλας

Do you wish to inquire, who these men are? They say they are Fabricii and Camilli and Lucii and Cincinnati and Fabii Maximi and Claudii Marcelli and Scipios. I see also Gaius Marius... and there Mucius Scaevola... (*De Fortuna Romanorum* 317D)

The chronology of the personalities Plutarch summons for the sake of comparison with his biographee can be extended to men of later ages. Thus, the intensely moralising digression about justice in the *Life of Aristides* refers to quasi-timeless “kings and tyrants”:

ὄθεν ἀνὴρ πένης καὶ δημοτικὸς ἐκτήσατο τὴν βασιλικωτάτην καὶ θειοτάτην προσηγορίαν τὸν Δίκαιον· ὁ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ τυράννων οὐδεὶς ἐζήλωσεν, ἀλλὰ Πολιορκηταὶ καὶ Κεραυνοὶ καὶ Νικάτορες, ἔνιοι δ' Ἄετοὶ καὶ Ἰέρακες ἔχαιρον προσαγορευόμενοι, τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς βίας καὶ τῆς δυνάμεως ὡς ἔοικε μᾶλλον ἢ τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ἀρετῆς δόξαν ἀγαπῶντες.

Wherefore, although poor and a man of the people, he [Aristides] acquired that most kingly and godlike surname of “The Just.” Which is what none of the kings and tyrants ever coveted. Instead they rejoiced to be called “Besiegers” and “Thunderbolts” and “Conquerors” and some “Eagles” and “Hawks,” embracing a repute based on violence and power, as it seems, rather than on virtue. (*Aristides* 6.2; [trans. D. Sansone, modified](#))

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The five grandiose epithets, all in the plural form, are thinly disguised references to five Hellenistic kings. Plutarch of course knew which sobriquet goes with which monarch — “Besieger” Demetrius Poliorcetes; “Thunderbolt” Ptolemy Ceraunus; “Conqueror” Seleucus Nicator; “Eagle” Pyrrhus; “Hawk” Antiochus Hierax⁸ — not to mention that he wrote

Rome implies individualized breakdown – as a potentiality, at the least! – of their biographical data (cf. *Nep. Att.* 18.3-4). We should not forget that Plutarch wrote a (lost) biography of Scipio Africanus (fr. 2 Sandbach); biography of Metellus Numidicus is perhaps hinted at in the *Marius*, 29.12.

⁸ See, respectively, *Demetr.* 1.7 and 42.10-11, *Py.* 22.2, *Cato Ma.* 12.2, *Py.* 10.1, *De soll. an.* 975B and *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 184A.

biographies of two of these kings (Demetrius and Pyrrhus). The value of these monarchs as foils is not so much historical as ethical.⁹

There are some interesting cases when biographical synecdoche is not employed by the authorial voice, but is rather a reaction of the characters and ‘onlookers’ within the Plutarchan narrative.¹⁰ Sulla rebukes Romans for failing to discern “many Mariuses” in young Julius Caesar (*Caesar* 1.4 πολλοὺς ... Μαρτίους); Brutus regrets that Antony sided with Octavian, thereby missing the opportunity ‘to be numbered with Bruti and Cassii and Catos’ (*Brutus* 29.10). In the *Life of Caesar*, when the tribunes Flavius and Marullus remove the royal diadems from Caesar’s statues, the crowd cheers and calls them “Bruti” (*Caesar* 61.9 δῆμος ... Βρούτους ἀπεκάλει τοὺς ἄνδρας). Plutarch steps in to explain that this was a reference to Brutus the Founding Father of the republic (61.9 ὅτι Βρούτος ἦν ὁ καταλύσας τὴν τῶν βασιλέων διαδοχὴν καὶ τὸ κράτος εἰς βουλὴν καὶ δῆμον ἐκ μοναρχίας καταστήσας), but the analogy must still be credited to the internal audience of the scene. Then we are told how the tribunes were punished and mocked by Caesar who kept calling them “*bruti* and Cymaeans” (61.10 πολλάκις βρούτους τε καὶ Κυμαίους ἀπεκάλει τοὺς ἄνδρας). Caesar’s phrase makes sense if it is taken to insult the tribunes as morons by assimilating them to the proverbially stupid inhabitants of Cyme as well as by punning on the adjective *brutus*.¹¹ Caesar thus tries to de-historicise and de-biographise the dangerous reference; he needs “Bruti” to be an adjective instead of the pluralised name of Rome’s archetypal revolutionary – for Caesar,

⁹ Cf. the strikingly similar list of royal sobriquets in the speech, ascribed to Dio of Prusa, on the powers of Tyche: “What should one say of those who took over his [Alexander’s] empire, or of those who followed after them, with their braggart titles – Thunderbolts, Besiegers, Eagles, Gods (τὰ ἀλαζονικὰ αὐτῶν ὀνόματα, κεραινοὺς καὶ πολιορκητὰς καὶ αἰετοὺς καὶ θεοὺς)? One of the lot death proved mistaken; another found Fortune to be a loftier being than himself...” (Dio Chr. 64.22, trans. H. Lamar Crosby)

¹⁰ On the importance of the responses of intradiegetic ‘onlookers’ across the *Lives*, see Pelling (2002) 119-20; Duff (1999) esp. 120, 152-3, 231-5 and (2011) 65-7.

¹¹ I follow Pelling (2011a) 458-9. Note that all the standard editions of the Greek text in *Caes.* 61.10 have Βρούτους with a capital letter.

bruti as “beastly blockheads” is a safer meaning, in the circumstances. Here we see biographical synecdoche being used as a political weapon, which Caesar seeks to parry.

The most vibrant and far-reaching Plutarchan experiment in biographical synecdoche ~~comes is found~~ in the *Life of Flamininus*. It unfolds as the ruminations of anonymous Greeks in the immediate aftermath of Flamininus’ proclamation of Greece’s freedom at the Isthmian games (196 BCE).

... σπάνιον μὲν ἀνδρεία καὶ φρόνησις ἐν ἀνθρώποις, σπανιώτατον δὲ τῶν ἄλλων ἀγαθῶν ὁ δίκαιος. οἱ γὰρ Ἀγησίλαοι καὶ <οἱ> Λύσανδροι καὶ οἱ Νικίαι καὶ οἱ Ἀλκιβιάδαι πολέμους μὲν εὖ διέπειν καὶ μάχας νικᾶν κατὰ τε γῆν καὶ θάλασσαν ἄρχοντες ἠπίσταντο, χρῆσθαι δὲ πρὸς χάριν εὐγενῆ καὶ τὸ καλὸν οἷς κατώρθουν οὐκ ἔγνωσαν, ἀλλ’ εἰ τὸ Μαραθῶνιον τις ἔργον ἀφέλοι, καὶ τὴν ἐν Σαλαμῖνι ναυμαχίαν, καὶ Πλαταιὰς καὶ Θερμοπύλας, καὶ τὰ πρὸς Εὐρυμέδοντι καὶ τὰ περὶ Κύπρον Κίμωνος ἔργα, πάσας τὰς μάχας ἢ Ἑλλάς ἐπὶ δουλείᾳ μεμάχεται πρὸς αὐτήν, καὶ πᾶν τρόπαιον αὐτῆς συμφορὰ καὶ ὄνειδος [ἐπ’ αὐτήν] ἔστηκε, τὰ πλεῖστα κακία καὶ φιλονικία τῶν ἡγουμένων περιτραπείσης. ἀλλόφυλοι δ’ ἄνδρες <...> τοῖς μεγίστοις κινδύνοις καὶ πόνοις ἐξελόμενοι τὴν Ἑλλάδα δεσποτῶν χαλεπῶν καὶ τυράννων ἐλευθεροῦσι.

... that valour and wisdom are rare things among men, but the rarest of all blessings is the just man. For Agesilauses and Lysanders and Nicias and Alcibiades could indeed manage wars well and understood how to win battles by land and sea as generals, but they did not know how to use their successes towards noble benevolence and the good. Indeed, if one discounts the action at Marathon and the sea-fight at Salamis and Plataea and Thermopylae, and Cimon’s deeds at the Eurymedon and around Cyprus, Greece has fought all her battles with herself for slavery, and every one of her trophies stands as a memorial of her own calamity and disgrace: she was overthrown chiefly by the baseness and rivalry of her leaders. Whereas men of another race ... are setting Greece free, having rescued her, at the cost of the greatest perils and hardships, from cruel despots and tyrants. (*Flamininus* 11.4-7)

Here the self-destructive mind-set of the Greek nation and its morally flawed leadership are foregrounded by means of pluralised household names from classical Sparta (Agesilaus, Lysander) and Athens (Nicias, Alcibiades). Each of them receives full-scale biographical treatment in the *Parallel Lives*. To all intents and purposes, Plutarch anchors a big historical generalization in the biographical tradition, which he once again handles synecdochically.

To sum up the argument so far: Plutarch routinely uses onomastic tags to reference ethico-political contexts and scenarios; the term ‘biographical synecdoche’ assists in capturing the essence of this operation as one that entails selection from the pool(s) of well-known and thus biographically relevant figures. It is noteworthy that several of Plutarch’s

‘mainline’ biographees feature in his lists of pluralised names; the trend peaks in *Flaminius* 11.5 (four names),¹² but one should add “Cimons” (*Pericles* 16.3), “Marii” (*Brutus* 29.6), “Flamininii” (*Comparison of Aristides and Cato* 1.3-4), “Fabii” (*Caesar* 15.3),¹³ and the two Hellenistic kings (*Aristides* 6.2).

Biographical synecdoche, in a nutshell, is about tapping the ancient biographical tradition in an economical way. Yet it is apparent that among the individuals Plutarch refers to there are ‘strong’ biographees (Cimon, Alcibiades, Lysander, Marius...) and ‘weak’ biographees (Cynegirus, Ephialtus, Callicratidas, the Old Brutus, Cinna...); perhaps people of the latter category are not biographees at all?¹⁴ The range of Plutarchan references that are put to work as biographical synecdoche makes it necessary to re-visit and expand the parameters of biographical tradition in the Greco-Roman world.

II

At first sight, there is a gap between biographical synecdoche and biography per se. Plutarch employs the names of ‘representative’ (à la Ralph Waldo Emerson) men as tags for demarcating large-scale historical situations and trajectories, such as political rivalry among the elite at Athens or Rome, the endemic conflict between the Greek states, or the rise of power-hungry warlords in the Late Republic. A famous name may be a handy signpost but it hardly has the same status as a fully-fledged biographee.

Having said that, the Plutarchan use of famous names does not cancel the need to maintain awareness of the biographical) contents encapsulated in each onomastic tag. My contention is based on a twofold premise. First, it is appropriate to proceed from a broad and

¹² Also Cimon in *Flam.* 11.6 – understandably in the singular form, as his battles are listed under exceptions to the rule.

¹³ Yet see n. *7*, above.

¹⁴ With the caveat that an individual’s weak presence in the ancient biographical literature could be an impression contingent on survival of the sources. For instance, Cinna might have received coverage in Sulla’s *Memoirs*, on which see Smith (2009).

inclusive view of the Greco-Roman biographical tradition as a discursive domain that comprises of anecdotes and *exempla* as well as continuous birth-to-death narratives. The anecdotes are the indispensable ‘rhizome’ of biography throughout antiquity.¹⁵ A good anecdotal story is equally apposite in a Plutarchan *Life* and in texts which do not have a sustained biographical agenda.¹⁶ Nor does the hero of an anecdote have to be a protagonist of a *Life*; the anecdote is biographically pre-charged by default.¹⁷ Moreover, the relationship between anecdotes and biographical literature in antiquity is reciprocal; Menander Rhetor (2.138) praises Plutarch’s *Lives* as a resource of rhetorically suitable “tales” and sayings (πλήρεις ιστοριῶν καὶ ἀποφθεγμάτων καὶ παροιμιῶν καὶ χειρῶν). Therefore, instead of emphasising the difference between continuous biographical narration and the snapshot-like singularity of *exempla* and anecdotes¹⁸ it would be rational and interpretatively rewarding to acknowledge the primary, ‘bedrock’ biographism in which very diverse textual engagement with ‘famous men’ is saturated. In the Plutarchan passages assembled in Section I (above), the reader is assumed to be familiar with the individuals mentioned, indeed, to be able to unpack the ethico-political narrative behind each name¹⁹ — which works as kind of hyper-

¹⁵ As is richly illustrated by Hägg (2012). For the ‘rhizome’ metaphor in biography, cf. Davies et al. (2006) 81. Salient studies of anecdotes and exemplarity, with Roman sources given priority, are Saller (1980); Skidmore (1996); Pausch (2004) esp. 33-42, 164-232; Morgan (2007) 122-59; Bell (2008) 1-12; Barchiesi (2009); Roller (2004) and (2009). On Plutarch’s anecdotes see Stadter (1996) and (2008); excellent case studies abound, e.g. Beck (1999); Duff (2005). See also n. *25* below.

¹⁶ E.g., Alexander’s meeting with Diogenes (Plut. *Alex.* 14.3-4) is elsewhere a peg for a lengthy inquiry into the true nature of kingship (Dio Chr. 4.14); Agesilaus’s veto on statues of himself (Plut. *Ages.* 2.4) is citable as precedent in real-life oratory: [Dio Chr.] 37.43 and Apul. *Apol.* 15.1 (*Agesilai ... sententia*).

¹⁷ E.g., the story about the Thessalian tyrant Alexander becoming tearful during a tragic performance (Plut. *Pel.* 29.9-10; Ael. *VH* 14.40).

¹⁸ The stance taken, more recently, by Geiger (2009) 23 and 33.

¹⁹ Cf. Hampton (1990), 25: “... the smallest semantic unit whereby the great life is represented: the exemplar’s name. The reader who comes upon the name of a heroic ancient exemplar in a text has come upon a single sign which contains folded within it the entire history of the hero’s deeds, the whole string of great moments which made the name a marked sign in the first place. <...> the name is a noun with a verb phrase (the various great deeds) condensed inside it.”

link to the biographical tradition. Even without biographies, the owners of famous names are nevertheless biographees.

Second, Plutarch is without doubt an author who works from an immanently ‘biostructured’²⁰ view of the past; to him, history hinges on individual statesmen. Thus, Rome’s civil wars are stamped with the names of the leading contestants (*Otho* 9.5);²¹ Philopoemen is flagged as “the last of the Greeks” (*Philopoemen* 1.7, *Aratus* 24.2), which suggests that after him the political energy of the nation ran out; Roman imperialism, as perceived by the Greek ‘onlookers’, is embodied in the commanders-in-chief (*Sulla* 12.9-14). Hence, when in Plutarch the name of a great man functions as a compact reference to his biographically defined place in the historical context, the biographical factor remains alive and potentially expandable. The prominence of biographical synecdoche in one of the most poignant Plutarchan digressions on Greek history (*Flamininus*, 11.4-7) shows that Plutarch does not stop thinking biographically while he wears the hat of a moralist historian.²²

So on one level biographical synecdoche re-affirms Plutarch’s commitment to construing history through the lens of biography.²³ At the same time it opens a fault-line

²⁰ The term “biostructuring” was coined by Christopher Pelling to designate how Cassius Dio shapes his *History* around the key figures (*in primis*, rulers) of the Empire: cf. Pelling (1997), (2006) 257-8. But the term neatly sums up the tenor of much imperial writing about the past: see e.g. Kraus (2005); Späth (2005); Pelling (2011b). Ancient readers, too, hold palpably biostructured expectations about history and historical fiction – cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Oration* 22.5: “History is a pleasure (προσηνές ... ἡ ἱστορία), for it allows you to travel the world without effort... fighting at sea with Themistocles, in the battle line with Leonidas, making the crossing with Agesilaus, coming safely home with Xenophon, loving with Pantheia, hunting with Cyrus, ruling with Cyaxares” (trans. M. Trapp).

²¹ “... the pain that the citizens inflicted on each other and suffered (δρῶντες ἀλλήλους καὶ πάσχοντες) because of (διὰ) Sulla and Marius, and later because of Caesar and Pompey”. Cf. Aristotle’s comment on historiography as reportage of particular incidents (“what Alcibiades did and suffered”) in the *Poetics*, 1451b7, 10-11.

²² The thesis of Pelling (2010) about crystallisation of “global history” across the *Parallel Lives* is apropos too.

²³ Compare and contrast the language of tropes in the profound, if rather abstract, appraisal of ancient historiography vs biography by Späth (2005) 41, who argues that historiography deploys individuals metonymically as elements of the historical texture, whereas biography

within Plutarch's overall vision of biography. Clusters of pluralised names of great, biographically significant men do not sit comfortably with the principle of individuation which is essential to his biographical programme:

ὥσπερ ἐπιξενούμενον ἕκαστον αὐτῶν ἐν μέρει διὰ τῆς ἱστορίας ὑποδεχόμενοι καὶ παραλαμβάνοντες ἀναθεωρῶμεν ὅσσοις ἔην ὁ ὅς τε [Hom. *Il.* 24.630]

... I receive and welcome each of them in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe "his stature and his qualities"... (*Aemilius* 1.2; [trans. R. Waterfield](#))

For there is surely a difference (ἔστι γὰρ ἀμέλει ... διαφορά) between the bravery of one man and that of another, for instance, between that of Alcibiades and that of Epaminondas; between the wisdom of one man and that of another, as between that of Themistocles and that of Aristides; between the justice of one man and that of another, as between that of Numa and that of Agesilaus. (*Phocion*- 3.7)²⁴

The sculptures and paintings of the Dioscuri show them to be alike, but also different in some respects (ὁμοιότης ἔχει τινὰ ... διαφοράν), as a boxer and a runner respectively. In the same way, these two young men [scil. the Gracchi] were very similar (ἐν πολλῇ ... ἐμφερεία) in terms of their courage and self-restraint, as well as their generosity, eloquence, and high principles, but great differences as it were sprouted and manifested themselves (μεγάλοι ... οἷον ἐξήνθησαν καὶ διεφάνησαν ἀνομοιότητες) in their deeds and political courses. (*Tiberius and Gaius Gracchi*- 2.1; [trans. R. Waterfield, modified](#)).

turns individuals into illustrative ethico-political metaphors: "Die entscheidende Differenz scheint mir vielmehr in der Erzählfunktion der Einzelfiguren zu liegen: Die Geschichtserzählung behandelt die Figuren *metonymisch*, indem sie sehr wohl deren Charakter narrativ ausgestaltet, aber damit eine Situierung der Figuren im Figurengeflecht der Akteure und in deren Handlungszusammenhang anstrebt, das ihr eigentliches Erzählthema ist. Die Biographie abstrahiert keineswegs von diesem Figuren- und Handlungsgeflecht, aber sie fokalisiert die Einzelfigur innerhalb des Geflechts und macht deren Charakter zu ihrem Thema und schreibt damit den Figuren der biographischen Erzählung eine *metaphorische* Bedeutung zu; sie schafft sich damit Raum, um auf allgemein-philosophische Überlegungen – wie *politische Macht* – einzugehen, die in und mit der Hauptperson illustriert werden."²⁴

²⁴ Cf. *Mul. virt.* 243C-D: "...considering whether the magnificence of Semiramis has the same character and pattern (εἰ τὸν αὐτὸν ἔχει χαρακτήρα καὶ τύπον) as that of Sesostris, or the intelligence of Tanaquil the same as that of Servius the king, or the high spirit of Porcia the same as that of Brutus, or that of Pelopidas the same as Timocleia's For the fact is that the virtues acquire certain other diversities, their own colouring as it were, due to varying natures, and they take on the likeness of the customs on which they are founded, and of the temperament of persons and their nurture and mode of living (ἐπειδὴ διαφορὰς γέ τινας ἐτέρας ὥσπερ χροιάς ἰδίας αἰ ἀρεταὶ διὰ τὰς φύσεις λαμβάνουσι καὶ συνεξομοιοῦνται τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις ἔθεσι καὶ κράσεσι σωμάτων καὶ τροφαῖς καὶ διαίταις). For example, Achilles was brave in one way and Ajax in another (ἄλλως ... ἄλλως), and the wisdom of Odysseus was not like (οὐχ ὁμοία) that of Nestor, nor was Cato a just man in exactly the same way (οὐδὲ ... ὡσαύτως) as Agesilaus, nor Eirene fond of her husband in the manner of Alcestis, nor Cornelia high-minded in the manner of Olympias."

_____ Any given Plutarchan *Life*, then, can be read as an exercise in the individuation of the biographee;²⁵ the urge to present themselves as, literally, ‘special’ and unique to the point of eccentricity is ascribed to some Plutarchan biographees (*Themistocles* 18.8 ἴδιος δέ τις ἐν πᾶσι βουλόμενος εἶναι; *Cato Maior* 25.2 ἐν παντί φιλοτιμούμενος περιττὸς εἶναι καὶ ἴδιος). But biographical synecdoche does something very different: when a biographee’s name becomes an onomastic marker for an ethico-political pattern, it is hard not to feel the shift away from individuation. Synecdochically processed biographees transcend their own biographical identity, turning into representative entities of biostructured history..

The problem is arguably less acute when biographical synecdoche consists of names in the singular form (*Artaxerxes*, 22.3). Pluralised names, on the other hand, seem scarcely compatible with the principle of biographical individuation. To put it bluntly, how unique are, say, Nicias or Marius if their biographical identity, of which the name is the chief sign, can be changed into the plural? (This is actually the tactical reason why throughout the paper Plutarch’s pluralised names are transliterated as ungainly but authentic plurals...)

_____ Plutarch did not invent the practice of referencing personal names of well-known people in the plural. Such usage of historical but also mythological and fictional names is

²⁵ It is important to remember that the anecdotes, which are Plutarch’s staple material for biographical portrayal (cf. especially *Alex.* 1.2-3 “a small act... a phrase or some joke reveals character better”), are regularly introduced as “samples” or “symptoms” (δείγματα) of the biographee’s personality and/or conduct (*Py.* 8.3, *Demetr.* 4.5; *Mar.* 6.5, 14.3; *Cic.* 13.2). Furthermore, they can be explicitly marked up as products of synecdochic selection from the mass of available material: *Marc.* 20.3 “I’ll mention one story out of many” (μνησθήσομαι δ’ ἑνὸς ἀπὸ πολλῶν), *Alex.* 39.1 “I’ll mention a few instances” (μνησθήσομαι δ’ ὀλίγων), 41. 3 “I’ll set forth a few instances of this” (ὧν ὀλίγα παραθήσομαι), *Ant.* 4.7 “I shall relate ... one example” (ἓν δέ τι... παράδειγμα διηγήσομαι), 10.10 “this brief episode... I offered by way of example, there being many” (ταῦτα... ὀλίγα πολλῶν ὄντων ἔνεκα δείγματος ἐξενηνόχαμεν), cf. *Cic.* 27.2, 38.3, *Brut.* 33.1. The synecdochic method behind Plutarch’s biographical anecdotes is underscored by Larmour (2000), 267: “Metonymy selects details and has parts stand for wholes; thus we grasp the character of a Plutarchan subject through a synecdochic understanding of a few telling incidents”; cf. generally Hampton (1990) 26. See also n. *40*, below.

attested in Greek texts before and after Plutarch;²⁶ likewise, Latin authors are fond of conjuring up the names of republican stalwarts in the plural.²⁷ What is more, not every pluralised name, in Plutarch has a bona fide biographical dimension. Some individuals who exemplify professions and non-elite social groups carry no biographical baggage; thus the list of entertainers around Mark Antony (*Antony* 24.2 “Anaxenores the lyre-players and Xuthuses the pipe-players and a certain actor Metrodorus...”) cannot be regarded as biographical synecdoche *sensu proprio*.²⁸ Pluralised intellectual heroes such as philosophers are ushered in with minimal, if any, biographical implications:

AUTOBULUS: ... whether it is not ridiculous to rehearse the claim that Socrateses and Platos were involved with vice to no milder degree than any particular slave... (*De sollertia animalium* 962B)

²⁶ E.g., Aesch. *Ag.* 1439 (Chryseises); Pl. *Th.* 169b (Heracleses, Theseuses), *Menex.* 245d (“no Pelopses or Cadmuses or Aegyptuses or Danauses”); Joseph. *In Ap.* 2.154 (Lycurguses, Solons); adesp. ap. [Longin.] *Subl.* 23.3-4 (Hectors, Sarpedons); M. Aur. 7.19.1 (Chrysippuses, Socrateses, Epictetuses); Ael. Arist. 22.8 (Philips, Alexanders, Antipaters, and “this whole roster of princes”, πᾶς ὁ τῶν κάτω δυναστῶν οὗτος κατάλογος), 40.17 (Leonidases, Leotychidases, Archidamuses, Agesilauses, Agises); Max. Tyre 27.6 (Alcibiadeses, Cleons); Pollux 4.128 (Bellerophons, Perseuses); Luc. *Hermot.* 5 (Alexanders), *Bis accus.* 8 (Scirons, Pinebenders, Busirises, Phalarises); Ael. *NA* 6.61 (Lycurguses, Solons, Zaleucuses, Charondases); Philostr. *VA* 6.21.6 (Solons, Lycurguses); Porph. *De abst.* 3.22 (Socrateses, Platos, Zenos); Alciph. 4.19.10 (Theseuses); Men. *Rhet.* 2.386 (Solons, Lycurguses, Minoses, Rhadamanthuses).

²⁷ E.g., Cic. *Pro Sest.* 143 (Bruti, Camilli, Ahalae, Decii, Curii, Fabricii, Maximi, Scipios, Lentuli, Aemilii, “and countless others”, *innumerabiles alios*); *De Sen.* 15 (Fabricii, Curii, Coruncanii); Verg. *G.* 2.169-70 (Decii, Marii, Camilli, Scipios) Val. Max. 2.1.10 (Camilli, Scipios, Fabricii, Marcelli, Fabii), 4.4.11 (Publicolae, Aemilii, Fabricii, Curii, Scipios, Scauri); Mart. 1.24.3 (Curii, Camilli), 9.27.6-7 (Curii, Camilli, Quinctii, Numae, Anci, “and all the other hirsute creatures we read about”, *et quidquid usquam legimus pilosorum*); Quint. *IO* 12.2.30 (Fabricii, Curii, Reguli, Decii, Mucii, “and countless others”, *aliquae innumerabiles*). For more examples, see Jacob (1842) 204.

²⁸ Sometimes a modicum of biographical knowledge about the bearer of the name is still required, e.g. (in the singular) *Amat.* 753D “to marry a Thracian Habrotonon or a Milesian Bacchis...”: see Görgemanns (2011) 149. *Hetaerae* were on the radar of ancient biography: Power (2014) 235-41.

Occasionally pluralised names relate to a recurrent but all-too narrowly focused scenario that has little scope for synecdochic selection of biographical identities. For example, Sulla's march on Rome in 83 BCE is described as follows:

Carbones, Norbanuses, Scipios fought poorly against the advancing Sulla... (*Sertorius* 6.1)

This list of commanders' names is not open-ended but closely tied to a particular campaign, unlike most of the passages in Section I.

Notwithstanding exceptions, the majority of pluralised names in Plutarch belong under biographical synecdoche, since their job is to summon up biographees who are embedded in biostructured history. Yet it is precisely because biographism is so central to Plutarch's work that pluralisation of personal names cannot be simply accepted as a stylistic technique;²⁹ in Plutarch, biographical identities are at stake. A name in the plural form pushes the biographee away from individuation – towards what exactly? What kind of creature is Nicias in the plural? Given the fissure between individuation and pluralisation, is Plutarch's biographical outlook somehow incoherent? I am going to argue to the contrary by elaborating the ostensibly anodyne claim, that there are tiers (as it were) to biographical individuation on Plutarchan terms.

III

Biographical synecdoche, especially when it employs pluralised names, compresses life stories and anecdotes into brief yet culturally potent messages. Famous biographees

²⁹ Use of pluralised names in Greek and Latin writings (nn. *26-27*, above) is geared towards amplification which may be modulated in different genres and authors as sincere, ironic, polemical, clichéd, trivializing, and so on. Biographical synecdoche cannot be ruled out either (e.g., the inventory of Spartan kings in Aelius Aristides, 40.17). Fuller examination of the evidence falls outside the remit of this paper; see generally Jacob (1842); Katsouris (1977).

become grist to the rhetorical mill of antonomasia³⁰ as pervasive and highly communicable discursive assets, or what nowadays might be conceptualised as ‘memes’.³¹ One should hesitate, however, to equate Plutarch’s onomastic pluralisation of Nicias or Marius with typification. The Plutarchan *Lives* are underwritten by a framework of moral and political categories,³² but this does not mean that the intended outcome is typification of the biographees. In other words, the narratives behind Plutarch’s pluralised names do not encourage reading such name-forms as types. And yet it is impossible not to feel that these pluralised names are invested with exemplarity in excess of their owners’ psychological profiles and careers. Plutarch allows these biographees to multiply themselves, to overrun and dominate swathes of biostructured history. Without losing their biographical identities, his Nicias, Lysander, Marius have gone global. Maybe we ought to think of them as brands or, again, memes? But how would that help?

The way out of the quandary could begin from Christopher Pelling’s programmatic idea that Plutarchan biographees are, for all their nuancedly individuated traits, “integrated” characters.³³ So far this paper has been exploring the onomastic tags as the ‘stronger’ mode of Plutarchan biographical synecdoche. But Plutarch frequently enforces ‘integration’ by combining biographical synecdoche with a brief summation of a great man’s achievements. Such summations are structured in two ways: the proper name is bracketed either with an

³⁰ Meyer (1995) 85-119 provides useful discussion of antonomasia *from* proper names. It must be stressed, however, that this species of antonomasia entered rhetorical theory only in the 1600s; the Greco-Roman theorists understood antonomasia as paraphrase *of* a proper name; see Lausberg (1960) 300-2, as well as n. *36*, below. The use of divine names in lieu of gods’ functions or essences (‘Mars’ for warfare, ‘Hephaestus’ for fire) was treated as metonymy, not antonomasia by ancient rhetoricians: Lausberg (1960) 292-3; more guardedly, Matzner (2016) 45-6 and 202-7.

³¹ For literary and cultural studies “meme” is an attractive if over-encompassing term; see Blackmore (1999) 6-7, 65, 132, 143, 163, 232-33.

³² See e.g., Bucher-Isler (1972); Wardman (1974) 49-57; Panagopoulos (1977); Frazier (1996) 101-273; Duff (1999) 72-98; Beneker (2012); Nikolaidis (2012) and (2014).

³³ Pelling (1997) 138; *idem* (2002) 287-97, 315-16.

abstraction under which the individual's biographical performance can be classified, or with a word or phrase that epitomises the foremost activity or deed of that individual. Examples of the former approach³⁴ in Plutarch his observations that Cimon (*Cimon* 5.1) “fell short neither of Miltiades in bravery, nor of Themistocles in acumen” (οὔτε γὰρ τόλμη Μιλτιάδου λειπόμενος οὔτε συνέσει Θεμιστοκλέους), that Sertorius (*Sertorius* 1.10) “made himself equal to Metellus in experience, to Pompey in bravery, to Sulla in luck” (ἐπανίσωσεν ἑαυτὸν ἐμπειρία μὲν τῆ Μετέλλου, τόλμη δὲ τῆ Πομπηίου, τύχη δὲ τῆ Σύλλα), and that Augustus (*De fortuna Romanorum* 319E) wished for his grandson “Scipio's courage, Pompey's popularity, and his own good luck” (ἀνδρείαν μὲν ... τὴν Σκιπίωνος, εὖνοιαν δὲ τοῦ Πομπηίου, τύχην δὲ τὴν αὐτοῦ).³⁵ The latter approach (which is probably more conducive to our understanding of the nature of biographical synecdoche) distils a life-story into a single short phrase:³⁶ instead of a bare onomastic tag, we are offered a minimal narrative³⁷ which highlights the essence of an individual's life and bridges the gap between his unique biographical identity and its availability as example.

Ἐπαμεινώνδα λέγεις ‘μὴ στρατήγει’ καὶ Λυκούργω ‘μὴ νομοθέτει’ καὶ Θρασυβούλῳ ‘μὴ τυραννοκτόνει’ καὶ Πυθαγόρᾳ ‘μὴ παιδεύει’ καὶ Σωκράτει ‘μὴ διαλέγου’

...then you are telling Epaminondas, ‘Don't command an army!’, and Lycurgus, ‘Don't legislate!’, and Thrasylbulus, ‘Don't destroy tyrants!’, and Pythagoras, ‘Don't educate!’, and Socrates, ‘Don't hold discussions!’... (*De latenter vivendo* 1128F)

³⁴ On which (Roman) declamation and Valerius Maximus thrived: see Bloomer (1992) 18, 203-4.

³⁵ Cf. *Apopth. Rom.* 207E “Pompey's popularity, Alexander's bravery, and his own good luck” (εὖνοιαν τὴν Πομπηίου, τόλμαν δὲ τὴν Ἀλεξάνδρου, τύχην δὲ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ).

³⁶ This also happens to mirror the ancient idea of *antonomasia*; cf. Quint. *IO* 8.6.30: “I wouldn't hesitate to say ‘the sacker of Carthage and Numantia’ for Scipio, or ‘the prince of Roman eloquence’ for Cicero” (trans. D. A. Russell). See further Meyer (1995) 47-84.

³⁷ Dio of Prusa (*Oration* 64.18) describes overly familiar historical examples as “those pithy Laconisms” (σύντομα ἐκεῖνα ...τὰ Λακωνικά).

Whereas in imperial Greek rhetoric exemplary biographees are likely to end up as social and ethical types,³⁸ Plutarch on the whole tends to sum up a famous biographical profile without ceasing to take notice of the man's historical agency. His biographical summations are typically cross-references that serve to co-ordinate the corpus of his *Parallel Lives* and, crucially, to create a strongly biostructured perspective on Greco-Roman history, in which great men are emphatically matched with key deeds: Mummius “captured Corinth” (*Marius* 1.1); Brutus “killed Caesar” (*Cato minor* 73.6; *Pompey* 16.8); Julius Caesar is the man “who later became dictator” (*Cicero* 20.5), “by whom Pompey was overthrown” (*Alexander* 1.1), and “who years later became the greatest (μέγιστος) of Romans” (*Marius* 6.4). The *Life of Antony* is capped with an extended and prejudiced summary of Nero's career: he “killed his mother and nearly wrecked the Roman empire with his craziness” (*Antony* 87.9).³⁹

For the purposes of this paper, Plutarchan summations are proof that biographical synecdoche in Plutarch subjects biographees to drastic integration without altogether cancelling their individuation. As an insider and maestro of the biographical tradition, he is entitled to switch between (A) richly nuanced integration of a biographee in a full-length narrative about that individual⁴⁰ and (B) far more radical and compact synecdochic

³⁸ E.g. Maximus of Tyre, *Oration* 6.6: “... Aristides was a just man (δίκαιος), Pericles a virtuous man (ἀγαθός), and Socrates a philosopher (φιλόσοφος)” (trans. M. Trapp); Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* 4.16: “If someone looks to Callias for guidance, Callias will turn him into a drinker (φιλοπότην). If to Ismenias, he will become an aulos player; if to Alcibiades, an arrogant cheat (ἀλάζονα); if to Crobylus, a gourmet; if to Demosthenes, an orator (δεινὸν εἰπεῖν); if to Epaminondas, a general (στρατηγικόν); if to Agesilaus, a man of noble thoughts (μεγαλόφρονα); if to Phocion, a good man (χρηστόν); if to Aristides, a just man (δίκαιον); if to Socrates, a wise man (σοφόν).” (trans. N. G. Wilson).

³⁹ ἀπέκτεινε τὴν μητέρα καὶ μικρὸν ἐδέησεν ὑπ' ἐμπληξίας καὶ παραφροσύνης ἀνατρέψαι τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίαν. A *Life of Nero* (Νέρωνος βίος) is listed amongst Plutarch's lost works (Lamprias Catalogue, no. 30).

⁴⁰ Yet synecdochically selected anecdotes and characteristics also have the potential to destabilise biographical narrative, resulting in fragmentation rather than integration of the biographee's identity. Cf. Larmour (2000) 276: “Metonymy... threatens, like the sea, to overwhelm the coherence the text is seeking to establish with its profusion of details, its

integration within the broad-brush tableau of biostructured history. In fact, the analogy, which is important to Plutarch, between biographical narration and visual arts might help to appreciate the dynamics between (A) and (B). For biographical synecdoche gravitates towards *exemplum*; while the objective of a literary *exemplum* is to depict a hero in his single most iconic moment, a case can be made that quite a few visual representations in antiquity aspired to do the same.⁴¹ The strongly integrated biographical identities in Plutarchan onomastic tags and summations are akin to such representations: it may not be completely serendipitous that the virtuous character of Callicratidas, who in *Artaxexes*, 22.3 is offered as synecdochic representative of heroic Sparta, in the *Life of Lysander* is likened to a statue (5.8 ὥσπερ ἀγάλματος ἠρωικοῦ).⁴² But Plutarch also espouses parallelism between his own life writing and portraiture (*Alex.* 1.3; *Cim.* 2.2-5).⁴³ Carefully detailed and intensely individuated portrayal of biographical identities realizes integrated characterisation in the in-depth mode. Biographical synecdoche and biographical narrative are anything but incompatible, then; Plutarch makes sure that the two policies for doing biography reinforce each other. Pursing the visual-textual analogy further, we can, I think, finally pin down those pluralised names.

contradiction and ambiguities, its lack of closure, and its digressive trail.” By dint of synecdoche, biographical details can be re-framed ironically and subversively. Consider the series of tongue-in-cheek *exempla* in Martial’s epigram (2.89.1-5): “You enjoy stretching the evening with overmuch wine. That I forgive; you have Cato’s bad habit (*uitium... Catonis*), Gaurus. You write verses without Apollo and the Muses. You deserve praise; this habit you have of Cicero’s. Your vomiting: a way of Antony’s...” (trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey). The epigram is having fun with warped biographical summations, i.e. close-ups of flaws which are indeed on record for Cato, Cicero, and Antony (Plut. *Cato mi.* 6.2-3; *Cic.* 2.3-5; *Ant.* 9.6) but would not immediately qualify as their axial, life-profiling flaws – albeit Antony’s vomit is somewhat more emblematic of his narrative than alcoholism is of Cato’s or poetastery of Cicero’s.

⁴¹ Geiger (2009) 34, 88. The best Plutarchan example is the statue of the Old Brutus with his sword drawn (*Brutus* 1.1); see incisive comments by Mossman (1999) 111.

⁴² Mossman (1991) 114-15; Duff (1999) 168-71

⁴³ Duff (1999) 16-17; Hirsch-Luipold (2002) 41-50; Kaesser (2004); Geiger (2009) 200-201; Hägg (2012) 271-72. Cf. also the stimulating essay by Ní Dhúill (2009).

They are portraits, too, yet mass-reproduced portraits – think posters or, better, coinage imagery: after all, this is Plutarch’s currency for negotiating the biostructured past.

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