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## Retrieval and Revision in Plutarch's Lives

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**Retrieval and Revision in Plutarch's *Lives***

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by

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It was Cicero, writing in the 1st-century BCE, who deemed Herodotus the *patrem historiae*, the “father of history”—a paternity so absolute that we barely bother to attribute the phrase. But this decontextualization is misleading; in the same sentence that Cicero calls Herodotus the “father of history,” he also calls him a liar, a *fabulosus*. Elsewhere, too, Cicero takes aim at Herodotus, claiming that certain details of his *Histories* were fabricated, such as the famously ambiguous Delphic prophecy given to Croesus, which stated that if Croesus went to war against Persia he would destroy a great empire—his own. And such critique was by no means confined to Cicero; even before the first century BCE, Herodotus was already an almost too-easy target. That Cicero, in one unbroken sentence, could call Herodotus both the “father of history” and an outright liar seems strange—just as it seems to justify our selective reading of Cicero’s original—but this contradiction is vital to understanding Herodotus’ legacy.

Many of Herodotus’ posthumous critics were openly skeptical that he could know for certain the details of battles fought long before his birth, or understand the cultures whose languages he never learned. His critics saw him as cautious, but uncritical; serious, but imaginative; and, on the whole, strangely inconsistent in his ability to discern myth from fact. The classicist, Alfred Croiset, writes, “he does not believe that doves ever speak; yet he does not think it incredible that a mare should give birth to a rabbit” (Croiset 212). Even among other historians, who as a group were routinely accused of dishonesty, Herodotus was a favorite target. But even this backlash, which might end a modern historian’s career overnight, wasn’t enough to strike out Herodotus from the then young historiographical canon. That Cicero, in one unbroken sentence, could call Herodotus both the “father of history” and an outright liar seems strange—

just as it seems to justify our selective reading of Cicero's original—but this contradiction is vital to understanding Herodotus' legacy. It was clear to the ancient critics and readers of the *Histories* that there was, as Arnaldo Momigliano puts it, “no Herodotus before Herodotus” (Momigliano 2). But it was also clear that mares can't give birth to rabbits. So by the time Cicero deemed Herodotus the “father of history,” it was meant only in the sense of his influence, rather than his value as a historian. More than anything, Cicero's criticism seems to suggest just how much the form developed in the three centuries after Herodotus' death.

Although the idea of vetting a recorded past wasn't entirely foreign to the ancient Greeks, it was by no means an obligatory or common practice. The earliest recognizable histories have been credited to a group of writers the Greeks called the *logographoi*—who, as their title suggests, were the writers (*grapho*) of stories or prose (*logos*). But it might be more accurate to call them collectors, as their writings were confined to chronicling the oral traditions and origin stories surrounding certain peoples and towns. And although the logographers were among the first to break from the Homeric tradition, there was little difference between them and the early poets other than they wrote in prose; whether they wrote myths or merely recorded them, both were equally willing to figure the supernatural and dramatic into their writings. When Strabo read the chronicles of the *logographoi* in the 1st-century BCE, it was already clear they were a far cry from serious histories (Croiset 197). But whether the *logographoi* have more in common with Homer or Tacitus seems like the wrong question to ask: the *logographoi* were the inevitable writerly manifestation of a new era of historical consciousness, beginning in fits and starts around the Greek world during the 6th-century BCE, which saw the first systematic attempts at deliberately archiving and recording the world, both past and present. From a modern,

sympathetic point of view, the *logographoi* then seem less like bad historians than overeager collectors, not yet sure what they're supposed to be looking for.

The first to bring some order to the mess of these proto-histories was Hecataeus of Miletus. In his work, *Genealogia* (c. 490 BCE), he sets out his task: "I write what I consider the truth, for the things Greeks tell us are in my opinion full of contradictions and worthy to be laughed out of court." Among the *logographoi*, Hecataeus' skepticism of oral histories and traditions was singular. He felt that his work was not merely the work of an amanuensis, but the work of a craftsman; and the stories he gathered during his extensive travels served as the raw materials with which he fashioned what he considered more accurate accounts of the past. It might seem strange then that Hecataeus failed to apply a similar skepticism to the works of Homer and other early poets, and, like the other *logographoi*, often leaned on their verses ignored to justify his historical claims. But what we perceive to be lapses of judgment or historical seriousness are really just the growing pains of a completely novel form of writing.

As historical writing gained mass and, through so many generations of writers, differentiated itself from its predecessors, it became increasingly clear what was and what wasn't viable evidence. There was a precedent, an body of guidelines and rules with which historians could evaluate their materials and claims. So even though Hecataeus was the first to make a critical point of separating myth from fact, it wasn't yet clear at that time where one ended and the other began. And whereas Hecataeus might dismiss an account of the past on the grounds that it contradicted a more reliable version, he felt that works as monolithic and culturally embedded as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* occupied a space beyond his critical reach: they had become authorities in their own right; and to challenge their veracity would have seemed less a labor of

truth than an unprovoked attack on Greek identity itself. Although it's difficult to exaggerate the importance and ingenuity of Hecataeus' critical method to the development of the historical form, the fact that he was more concerned with reconciling rather than separating myth from fact means that his *Genealogia* only managed to step halfway out of the shadow of Homeric tradition.

With the few fragments of the *Genealogia* that remain, it's hard to prove with certainty the degree to which Hecataeus influenced Herodotus' *Histories*. And while their systematic, skeptical approach to evidence is undoubtedly the common denominator, Herodotus' numerous, often derisive allusions to the *Genealogia* and the *logographoi* in his own work suggest a cooperative, if contentious relationship to his predecessors. In fact, it seems more likely that it was Herodotus' dissatisfaction with the *Genealogia* and its poetic evidence, rather than the novelty of its skepticism, that inspired him to so radically depart from the historiographical tradition. Writing nearly four hundred years after the death of Herodotus, Dionysius of Halikarnassos summarized the departure: unlike the *logographoi*, he writes, Herodotus "chose not to write down the history of a single city or nation, but to put together many" in order to consolidate the "events of Europe and Asia in a single comprehensive work" (Dionysius 5).

Rather than centering on a particular city, Herodotus expanded the scope and ambition of history to include the known world. Where the *logographoi* painted portraits, Herodotus painted landscapes. In the *Histories*, he relates the major events of the Greek world and Persian empire during the two centuries before his own life, achieving what was then the first general, wide-focused view of history. And to this day his writings remain the primary and often only source of documentation for that the period. But most importantly, in Herodotus we also find the first truly modern use of the word "history" (*ιστορία*). In the opening lines, Herodotus writes,

These are the researches (*ἱστορία*) of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feuds. (A. D. Godley. trans).

Taken literally, *ἱστορία* is closely linked to the English word “inquiry”—especially one applied to a scientific or systematic observation of empirical evidence. In the writings of Herodotus and his contemporaries, *ἱστορία* typically denotes the research or process of questioning behind a work, rather than the work itself; but here, and here only, we see that Herodotus’ employment of *ἱστορία* is meant to mean something like the sum or result of his inquiries.

Like Herodotus, Plutarch stands at the head of a long and complex tradition of writings: biography. In his magnum opus, *Parallel Lives*, he also takes up the endeavor of writing the distant past—but instead of collecting and recording the movements of people and armies to fashion something like the Histories, Plutarch takes up the specific stories and legends surrounding particular people. His approach is largely formulaic, and he divides his portraits into complementary pairs: one remarkable Greek, one remarkable Roman. Typically, Plutarch begins with the subject’s birth, offers a series of vital events and anecdotes, and then ends with death. But different subjects present different problems, require treatments; and Plutarch selects his tools in accordance with the material he intends to carve—wearing away the knots in the wood, the ambiguity of the grain, to fashion from its innermost fibers something more like itself. It brings to mind Ezra Pound’s poetic indictment of Whitman, when he admits that although “It was you that broke the new wood / Now is a time for carving” (“A Pact” 6-7). For Plutarch, it was the early Greek historians—Herodotus, Thucydides, Callisthenes, Cleitarchus—who did the work of breaking “the new wood,” since they not only wrote the histories that would become the

sources of his biographies, but also established new ways of evaluating the questions of historical validity, relevance and, most importantly, utility. And to this, Plutarch's Lives are undoubtedly indebted. The early historians offered Plutarch a way of thinking critically about the past, but whereas a historian's representation of life might amount to something like a catalogue of deeds—or, in Latin, a *res gestae*: simply, “things done”—Plutarch's tailor-made biographies, although necessarily concerned with deeds, are crafted in order to explicate rather than merely demonstrate the facts, the “things done.” And so it's at this intersection, the intersection of quantitative and qualitative speculation—the former concerned with veracity; the latter, value—that Plutarch is most like the Poundian craftsman. He realized he was not writing history but life itself. And although, like life, his portraits begin with the circumstances of the subject's birth and lineage, there is one peculiar exception. In his *Life of Alexander*, rather than beginning, as it were, at the beginning, Plutarch takes a moment to speak directly to the reader:

I am not writing history but biography (*βίος*), and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often, in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, huge troop movements, and whole cities besieged. And so, just as a painter reproduces his subject's likeness by concentrating on the face and the expression of the eyes, by means of which character is revealed, and pays hardly any attention to the rest of the body, I must be allowed to devote more time to those aspects which indicate a person's mind and to use these to portray the life of each of my subjects, while leaving their major exploits and battles to others. (Waterfield. trans).

“The others” to whom Plutarch leaves his subject's “major exploits” are clearly the historians, the cataloguers. But just as Plutarch stresses the comparative novelty of “biography” as a means of investigating the past, he also stresses its similarity to the work of the painter. Though he frees himself from the expectations of an exhaustive history, Plutarch's painterly analogy suggests that his ambition to reveal a “person's mind.” That ambition is quite old—as

old, even, as applying pigments to the rocks and the trees. To further illustrate this point, it helps to tweak the translation of *βίος*, which is here taken to mean “biography”—but this is both true and false. Taken literally, *βίος* means life; and at the time Plutarch set out to write his *Lives*, this was the most useful description he had available.

We call Plutarch a biographer because we recognize his work to be biographical. We see him as a member of a group, a meaningfully connected class of writers who, whether separated by millennia or decades, ultimately took up the same task. And even if other writers like Ion of Chios and Diogenes Laërtius had already written works with a similar biographical ambition, this doesn't mean that Plutarch's contemporary readers would have recognized the radicality of what he was doing, or would have expected him to adopt any formal guidelines. What was so revolutionary about Plutarch was not that he wrote “life,” but that he was the first to conceive of life-writing as something emphatically apart from history, as something deserving of a new name: biography. So Plutarch's substitution of history for *βίος* actually does double-work: it stresses both his departure from the historical tradition—the tradition of simply recording “things done”—as well as his alignment with a more representative, poetic tradition, one that's concerned with the expression of character, feeling, or as Plutarch writes, a “person's mind.”

But this still doesn't shake off the ambiguity of the term; although it's easy to understand how history alone fails to communicate the ethical or psychological dimensions of a subject, it's not exactly clear what details or insights actually do manage to communicate these qualities. To understand how Plutarch represents life and reveals the value of his subjects, it helps to look at the the poets. Long before Plutarch began his project,

Creatures of a day!  
 What is someone?  
 What is no one?  
 Man: a shadow's dream.  
 But when god-given glory (*kleos*) comes  
 A bright light shines upon us and our life is sweet.  
 (Pindar, Goldstein. trans)

This fragment was written by Pindar in the fifth century B.C.E., the greatest of Greece's lyrical poets, to commemorate the victories of remarkable individuals at the Pythian, Olympic, Isthmian, and Nemean games. Pindar's poetry is one of the few windows we have onto Greek values during the transition between the Archaic and Classical age; his commemorative odes shed light on how the ancient Greeks determined the worthiness of lives, how they compared the deeds of one individual to another and, consequently, constructed a shared conception of normative and extraordinary lives.

In the penultimate line, "glory"—or *kleos* in the Greek—is typically swapped for "renown" or "fame," but these substitutions fail to capture the particular sonic qualities of the word. It's best to take *kleos* for something like "acoustic renown"—that is, what others hear about you or, to add a kind of metric, the frequency with which your name is spoken. Odysseus, for example, is a figure who abounds in *kleos*; and every time we read *The Odyssey* we lend him new life, preserving his memory like Hestia's flame against time and forgetfulness. It seems strange then that Pindar would begin his ode to the *kleos* of victorious athletes with a rumination on the inevitability of death. But there is something revelatory, even triumphant in his approach.

That we will die, Pindar reminds, is certain. But this fact isn't meant to humble the newly laureled, or to gather darker clouds for the sake of drama. The key to understanding the purpose of this *memento mori* lies in the poem's self-referentiality: in these lines, Pindar is less concerned

with the *kleos*-winning deeds of particular men, than with his own role as a poet in the process of *kleos*-making. It's the actions of individuals that make them worth remembering, but it's the poets who create the memorial, who reify the "shadow's dream," and assuage the fear of death with the possibility that our songs will be sung long after we've been put in the ground. The victorious may have their trophies, but the real prize, Pindar suggests, is to become a subject worthy of the poets' art.

In achieving something extraordinary, you earned your song; and for the Greeks, for whom the afterlife was a dull eternity in the underworld, this was about as close to immortality as one could hope to get. Songs and poems, although they too come to an end, can be repeated again and again; they become memorials outside of time and more lasting than stone. The alternative was to be forgotten, which was a kind of secondary annihilation. And it's this which makes *kleos* such an emphatically social system of evaluating and remembering lives.

To be seen, or to be extraordinary wasn't enough; one had to be both seen *and* extraordinary. Only a public life, one lived in full view of the crowd, could achieve the necessary visibility to secure *kleos*; there was little room in Athens' pantheon of heroes for the saints toiling in obscurity. And even if a poet like Pindar were to have written an ode on the virtues of a shopkeeper, it's very unlikely that the *polis* would sing his song. If we consider this, it makes the most sense to take "glory" as the translation of *kleos*—since to call even the most virtuous shopkeeper in the world "glorious" seems like overstatement. "Glory" is closer to "fame" than "virtue." Like the throne of an empire, "glory" is always won, taken or seized. And even when it's "found"—or, as Pindar calls it, "god-given"—it's only ever after some superhuman exertion

that it's really obtained. The gates to glory are solid iron, and the poets don't let just anyone inside.

To get an idea of how the will to glory fits into ancient Greek art and life, it helps to look at the character of Achilles who, in Book 9 of *The Iliad*, is given the choice to either secure his *kleos* and die gloriously on the battlefield, or to return to a long but unsung life back in Ithaca.

Homer writes:

Mother tells me, the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet, that two fates bear me on to the day of death. If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory (*kleos*) never dies. If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory (*kleos*) dies. (*Iliad*, 9.497, Fagles. trans)

To some extent Achilles' fate is already decided; there's no escaping the circumstances—Paris took Helen; Agamemnon sailed—and now his options are limited to two: either sacrifice his life or his *kleos*, both offering different shades of oblivion. Nevertheless, after days of anguish, Achilles makes the only decision he could have made and kills Hector, sealing his fate and winning his glory before the ruined walls of Troy. This is a noble sacrifice, a remarkable display of selflessness. But Pindar would seem to suggest, in his work, that to sacrifice life for eternal fame is more or less a fair trade. Regardless, a few years later, Odysseus comes across Achilles in the underworld, fully expecting to find the hero resting on his laurels. But as Odysseus begins to speak, declaring that “there's not a man in the world more blest than you,” the ghost of Achilles cuts in:

No winning words about death to *me*, shining Odysseus!  
By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—  
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—  
than rule down here over all the breathless dead  
(*The Odyssey*, 11.554, Fagles. trans).

Achilles' posthumous regret complicates the notion of *kleos*. Like Pindar, Homer is in the business of *kleos*-making; it's the theme that ties both epics together. But even so, this shift in Achilles' character suggests that *kleos* was a more complicated idea for the Greeks than Pindar's victory odes might lead us to believe. Considering the centrality of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to ancient Greek culture and identity, it's reasonable to believe that most Greeks knew of Achilles' posthumous change of heart, that they wouldn't all have been as incredulous as Odysseus to find the hero despairing in all his glory. As a metric for judging the value of our own lives or others, *kleos* is actually quite limited. It equates being known with being worthy, which makes it unclear whether someone is known *because* they are worthy, or if they are only worthy *because* they are known. And there's no rule that suggests the *kleos* of someone always be in proportion to their virtue or equanimity. But this hardly needs saying. One doesn't have to strain in order to think of historical personalities who, although more or less condemned, are nevertheless spoken of as if their memory were somehow indispensable. *Kleos* for the sake of *kleos* amounts to something like celebrity infatuation. And of all Plutarch's *Lives*, there are few that embody the complexity and shortcomings of *kleos* as clearly as the *Life of Alcibiades*.

He was everything an Athenian should be—beautiful, intelligent, eccentric, humorous, wealthy—remarkable in every sense. Plutarch writes that “even his lisp . . . made his conversation charmingly persuasive” (223). And when he entered seven chariots into the Olympic games—something that “no king” or “private citizen” had ever done before—he swept the competition, gaining “more, in terms of distinction and renown, than anyone can ever have hoped to have achieved” (229). Like Achilles, Alcibiades seemed destined for glory; he did everything in a grand style. But he was also a conundrum. He resisted category. In 415 BCE,

Alcibiades was accused of vandalizing the genitalia of the cult statues of the Herms. The *polis* was furious. And Alcibiades, fearing for his life, slipped away before trial. Plutarch writes that he defected to Sparta, adopted their customs and eventually led their forces to besiege Athens. Then, in 411 BCE, whether out of forgiveness or desperation, the Athenians called Alcibiades back to command the armada and overthrow the tyrants at Argos—a gesture which he must have found touching, or at least politically expedient, since he promptly betrayed the Spartans. Alcibiades returned from exile a hero—his death sentence expunged, and his betrayal forgiven. The Athenians even threw the bronze stele that recorded his death verdict into the sea. Huge crowds met his ship at the harbor with garlands and gifts and “once he was ashore,” Plutarch writes, “people hardly even noticed any of the other military commanders” (252).

Athens’ adoration of Alcibiades was as capricious as his political alliances. When they weren’t enraged, they were enchanted. But whether they loved him, or hated him—they were always talking about him. Alcibiades’ *kleos* was a matter of fact. But it was also problematic. In all things, he was “beyond the normal,” but this was especially true of his radical self-interest. The Athenians repeatedly put their faith in a man whose loyalty was only to himself and, more than once, they got burned for it. But how is that Alcibiades became the prodigal son of Athens? It seems simplistic to assume that the Greeks subscribed wholesale to some Attic-variety of modern celebrity culture—such comparisons are often tidier than plausible—but this might not be too far from the truth. Athens was a complex society; Alcibiades was a complex man. But regardless of how we characterize their relationship, it seems that Plutarch summarizes the general feeling when he relates Arcestratus’ remark that “Greece could not have endured two Alcibiadeses” (235).

Plutarch finds much to commend in Alcibiades, but the picture he gives us is inevitably one of conflict. In fact, it's Alcibiades' inconsistency as a biographical subject that becomes the whole point of Plutarch's representation. In *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that when a character's actions are inconsistent, the tragedian ought to make them "consistently inconsistent"—so that even in uncertainty, the audience finds something like identity. Plutarch seems to adopt this idea in his comparison of Alcibiades to a "chameleon," but he also complicates it. The analogy, Plutarch warns, isn't meant to suggest that his character was "infinitely mutable"; rather, "when his real self was going to upset the people he was with, he assumed and took refuge in whatever appearance and image was appropriate for them" (242). Plutarch's interpretation is generous. And at times his willingness to forgive seems to outdo even the Athenians. But his approach is still critical. Plutarch acknowledges when Alcibiades' shape-shifting was for his own benefit and finds many occasions to wag an authorial finger at his "purple robes, and incredible extravagance." But his portrait is clearly more than invective. Plutarch's intention is to reveal something in Alcibiades's character that, perhaps initially, he could only take on faith—a belief that beneath the purple robes and chameleon skin there was something even grander than his *kleos*: a "real self."

The beginning of the *Life* is front loaded with a series of charming anecdotes. Before anything else, and in quick succession, we see the best of Alcibiades: he cracks jokes, rebukes his teachers, and convinces the Athenians to remove pipe-playing from the curriculum on the grounds that it contorts his face. Even the anecdote in which Alcibiades punches Hipponicus "just for fun"—and which seems to embody so much of the recklessness of his later life—is less an attempt to make an even picture than an opportunity for Plutarch to describe how sincerely

Alcibiades apologized to the bruised statesman. Except for a few general markers—“while he was still a small boy”; “during his school days”—Plutarch orders these anecdotes with little attention to their chronology; their only connection is thematic. And it’s only after these connections have been made that Plutarch arrives at something like a chronological history of Alcibiades’ life. It’s a storytelling tactic. Like a tinted eyeglass, which mutes certain colors and makes others more vivid, Plutarch places these anecdotes at the beginning in order to bring a new emphasis to what follows. The particular order in which Plutarch reveals the anecdotes of Alcibiades’ life is vital to the success of his metaphors and analogies. And although Plutarch admits in the introduction that “later in life” Alcibiades became “noticeably very inconsistent and changeable,” he also adds that this is “perhaps not surprising given the importance of the enterprises he was engaged on and the ups and downs of his fortunes” (223). The “perhaps” here is careful rhetoric; Plutarch doesn’t want to commit—not yet, at least. Like most of his biographies, it’s likely that Plutarch’s contemporary readers had some prior knowledge of his subjects’ lives. And it seems this was especially true of Alcibiades. When Plutarch began writing the *Lives*, Alcibiades’ *kleos* was in anything but short supply: he was a familiar character in Plato’s dialogues, a common subject of Roman rhetoric and invective, and an indispensable figure of Greek and Athenian history. It might have been this *kleos*—the continuous, ubiquitous singing of Alcibiades’ extraordinary deeds—which initially inspired Plutarch to take a closer look at his character. But the care with which Plutarch reorders and redirects the events of Alcibiades’ life seems to suggest that he wanted his portrait to become more than another voice in the chorus of *kleos*. In a sense, Plutarch wanted to rewrite Alcibiades’ song entirely.

Plutarch's assumption behind his treatment of Alcibiades' life, as well as his other subjects, is that a catalogue of an individual's actions, especially an exhaustive one, does little to communicate the subject's character. Like Homer, Plutarch doesn't merely present history—the sum of the misfortunes and triumphs of an individual like Odysseus—he fashions a biography, a collection of meaningfully connected events and anecdotes, that amounts to something like an *Odyssey*, a story. Plutarch's biographical process is more akin to the work of poets than, since he doesn't merely issue particular statements supported by fact—like the subject's eye color or gait, or what they did at a particular battle—but rather gets at the qualities which he believes impart a truth more universal, more ethical than the simple reiteration of history or the sketching of a profile.

Toward the end of the *Life*, Plutarch treads less lightly. His highly positive view of Alcibiades steps out from behind the backs of anecdote and metaphor and he imagines the Athenians looking “back with remorse over all their mistakes and misjudgments, and now considered that the most stupid thing they had done was get angry with Alcibiades for the second time” (258). Plutarch neither blames the Athenians entirely, nor concludes that Alcibiades was flawless. He rests his case somewhere in between guilt and innocence. On the whole, this interpretation seems more hopeful than plausible. The *Life* includes much evidence for and against Alcibiades, but ultimately Plutarch gives his subject the benefit of the doubt and, like the Athenians, tosses his guilty verdict into the sea. Plutarch was neither the first nor the greatest of Alcibiades' apologists—but he's apparently in good company. Among all the adoring crowds of Athens, it was Socrates who first noticed in Alcibiades what Plutarch would later call his “true self.”

As a character in the *Life*, Socrates is an indispensable authority; he was the lover and teacher of Alcibiades. In Plato's *Symposium*, we see something of their relationship when Alcibiades jealously attempts to steal Agathon's seat next to Socrates by means of drunken eulogy. In this scene, while Socrates clearly admires Alcibiades, he also seems weary. Plato, perhaps, had less tolerance for Alcibiades than Socrates, but his dialogues still maintain the character of their intimate, yet conflicted relationship. Plutarch's belief in the goodness of Alcibiades' "real self" owes much to the apparent faith Socrates had in his brilliant but temperamental pupil. The fact that Socrates loved Alcibiades, Plutarch argues, "strongly suggests that the boy was endowed with a natural aptitude for virtue" (224). But, like all things in Alcibiades' life, this "virtue" was unstable and prone to change. And even with his "natural aptitude" and Socrates as his guide, the force of Alcibiades' chameleon personality and endless pursuit of recognition made him one of philosophy's most notoriously intractable students:

It was actually by pandering to his ambitious longing for recognition that his corrupters set him prematurely on the road of high endeavor; they convinced him that as soon as he took up politics, he would not merely eclipse all the other military commanders and popular leaders, but would gain more power and prestige among the Greeks than even Pericles enjoyed. Just as iron, then, is softened in the fire, but is hardened again by cold and reconstitutes his own compact nature, so time and again Socrates took him back in a state of complete promiscuity and presumptuousness, and by force of argument would pull him together and teach him humility and restraint, by showing him how great his flaws were and how far he was from virtue. (Waterfield. trans).

Socrates philosophical relationship to Alcibiades is similar to Plutarch's biographical one. Both sought to bring out the best in him. And both, perhaps, were too forgiving. But Plutarch's forgiveness reveals much about the ethical intentions behind his biographical project. Throughout the *Lives*, Plutarch's character-building, and especially the logic and justification behind his revelation of Alcibiades' "real self," shows an obvious indebtedness to the works of

Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's central issue is the relationship between *ethos* (*ἦθος*) and virtue or *arête* (*ἀρετή*). *Ethos* is typically taken to mean "character," but a more direct translation helps clarify Aristotle's particular usage. Literally, *ethos* is an "accustomed place," the place where one is found, that is, at least most of the time. Fish, lions, stars, clouds, individual humans—each have an *ethos* of their own. Aristotle's idea is that one's "accustomed place" is the consequence of repeated action. Through habit we create *ethos*, our character. But how could Plutarch be so sure of Alcibiades' true dwelling, his "real self"? His only habit seems to have been the continual shrugging off of old faces for new. Plutarch addresses part of the problem in his "consistently inconsistent" chameleon analogy, but still largely assumes the often obscured, yet inherent virtue of Alcibiades' character.

Just as habit creates *ethos*, *ethos* also creates habit. It was the "corrupters," Plutarch argues, who fueled Alcibiades' tendency to indulge in and seek flattery, to love fame and *kleos* as an ends in themselves. They warped Alcibiades' "real self" in the fires of political and material temptation. Although Plutarch blames his subject's "corrupters," he also makes it clear that they seem to have entertained something in Alcibiades that was already there. And this stands for the good in Alcibiades as well; time and again, Socrates retrieved his beloved pupil from presumptuousness and put him on the path of the good and beautiful—but ultimately it seems that Socrates was leading Alcibiades back to his self. It was to his own "compact nature" that he returned when in the presence of Socrates, just as he returned to his own "ambitious longing for recognition" and *kleos* when in the presence of his "corrupters." While Socrates guided his pupil towards virtue or *arête*, the panderers enticed him with promises of glory and *kleos*. And it seems only one side could win. Like Achilles, Alcibiades' choice would come to define his memory.

Considering his later life and problematic political career, it may already be clear that Alcibiades failed to fulfill the potential of his “real self,” that Socrates’ love for his virtue, perhaps, eventually felt small in comparison to the *polis*’ infatuation with his unyielding will to glory. Plutarch seems to believe that, while Alcibiades’ habits and actions suggest his desire for a life of song rather than one of virtue, it’s still possible to retrieve the remnants of his “real” and righteous self. But to understand why Plutarch chose to redeem the memory of a man whose better-half even Socrates couldn’t save, it helps to take a closer look at the general function of *arête* in the *Lives* as a whole.

*Arête* is commonly translated to “virtue.” But, similar to *kleos*, to understand the word in all of its contexts, it requires multiple substitutions, each with their own shade of meaning. On *arête*, the philosopher Alexander Nehamas writes, “We could do no better, I suggest, than to think of it as that quality or set of qualities that makes something an outstanding member of the group to which it belongs. *Arête* is the feature that accounts for something being justifiably notable” (Nehamas 78). *Arête*, like *kleos*, is a quality that makes someone worth talking about. But this is as far as Nehamas would take the comparison. One can be notable, even extraordinary, but in order to achieve *arête* one’s actions must be “justifiably” so. Alcibiades’ betrayal of Athens, for example, was notable—it also made him an “outstanding” member of his *polis*—but if there is any moral value in Alcibiades’ betrayal, it’s only in its service as a model to *not* follow. Of particular importance is the claim that *arête* belongs to an “outstanding member of a group”. This can be read in two ways. On the surface, Nehamas’ use of “outstanding” is clearly ethical: the famous virtue of Socrates, for example, is “outstanding.” But we can also take “outstanding” quite literally, as a quality that makes someone stand out, that makes them

anything but normal. The double-meaning behind Nehamas' use of the word is similar to the double-meaning behind the *kleos*: both equate being *known* with being *worthy*. But this comparison also suggests differentiation.

It's telling that, while avoiding the usual translation of *arête* to "virtue," Nehamas supplies a word that seems more representative of celebrity *kleos* than Socrates' ethical character. It's a clear evocation of Alcibiades; and Nehamas' suggestion seems to be that in order to understand *arête* one also has to understand *kleos*. The most emphatic difference is that *arête* accounts for what makes something "justifiably notable"; but, Nehamas adds, the criteria with which to judge what is or isn't "justifiably notable" is dependent on the nature of the "group to which it belongs." *Arête*, like *ethos* or one's "accustomed place," isn't limited to people. It can apply to lions and fish, too; in a sense, *arête* is the *kleos* of things. It takes on different meanings in different contexts. *Arête* is subtle and less confrontational than *kleos*. We discover the *arête* of other people; it's revealed over long habit or all at once, but it's only understood after careful attention. It can't be shared or sung the same way as Alcibiades' chariot race, for example, since *arête* lacks entertainment value. The value it does have is immaterial—it's good for the sake of being good. *Kleos* dries up without the participation of others; but in gaining *arête*, the crowd is completely beside the point. The only necessary recognition is self-recognition. Plato, speaking for Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, says it best in the opening lines of his eulogy, which might as well be the song of Socrates:

For I say he is likest to the Silenus-figures that sit in the statuaries' shops; those, I mean, which our craftsmen make with pipes or flutes in their hands: when their two halves are pulled open, they are found to contain images of gods (Fowler. trans).

Pindar wanted to revel in *kleos*; he didn't waste time opening up a person's soul to find something like *arête*. *Kleos* is loud; we sing it so the dead can hear their names. *Arête* hides away; it's the shopkeeper of whom the poets never sing. It seems likely, then, that before Plutarch set out to reveal Alcibiades' "real self," the memory of Alcibiades was largely still one of runaway *kleos*; and although the Alcibiades of Plato's dialogues must have complicated this picture, it's clear that Plutarch felt the work wasn't done.

Many flatters and lovers presented themselves to Alcibiades in his youth—and for the most part he treated them with kindness and respect—but Socrates, Plutarch repeatedly insists, stood apart from the rest. They were tent mates during the campaign against Potidaea; and Plutarch seems to relish the picture he paints when he relates the anecdote in which Socrates saves Alcibiades life along with "his arms and armor," fighting off several Corinthians in the process (227). This is the most vivid image of Socrates in the *Life of Alcibiades*—elsewhere, he's a rhetorical device, another authority to cite—and, by itself, it offers a useful representation of Socrates' role in the *Life* as a whole. Plutarch wants the reader to dramatize; and to see Alcibiades and Socrates as the ill-fated lovers of one another's inner-most souls isn't perhaps too far off. The anecdote from Potidaea, too, seems to beg for melodrama. It's more than an event; it's a scene of singular, thematic force—not only for the *Life of Alcibiades*, but for all of Plutarch's biographies.

By any standard, Alcibiades was a difficult biographical subject, a challenge to the form. Like Socrates, Plutarch sticks his neck out for Alcibiades; even if the greatest enemy of his *arête* was his own reputation, both believed he had an *ethos* worth fighting for. For Socrates, this took the form of philosophical argument; he wanted Alcibiades' habits to reflect his soul, not his love

of *kleos*. Plutarch's fight for Alcibiades' better half also took the form of an argument—most of which he owes to the ethics of Plato and Aristotle—but instead of altering his subject's habits or deeds, he reorders and redirects them. In short, Plutarch tells a story, unfolds the life again—but this time with new emphasis and to new ends. Plutarch might have identified with his image of the warrior Socrates; but rather than defending his subject's body or soul, Plutarch defends his memory. And in his mind, perhaps, it was a greater evil for a biographer to leave a diamond in the rough, and thus waste a life's virtue, than attempt to find good where there is none. In a sense, the veracity of a biography seems less important than the end to which it is written: if the moral character represented in the retelling of a life is good, then so too will be the effect on its reader. In the opening lines of his *Life of Emilius*, Plutarch lays out this idea, as well as his ethical ambition:

I began the writing of my 'Lives' for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavoring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted. For the result is like nothing else than daily living and associating together, when I receive and welcome each subject of my history in turn as my guest, so to speak, and observe carefully 'how large he was and of what mien,' and select from his career what is most important and most beautiful to know. And oh! What greater joy than this canst thou obtain, and more efficacious for moral improvement? Democritus says we ought to pray that we may be visited by phantoms which are propitious, and that from out the circumambient air such only may encounter us as are agreeable to our natures and good, rather than those which are perverse and bad, thereby intruding into philosophy a doctrine which is not true, and which leads astray into boundless superstitions.

It's through a familiarity with the lives of great individuals, Plutarch argues, that the readers of the *Lives* will learn to practice their virtues. Of particular importance, is that Plutarch makes no mention of historical veracity; the only falsehoods he hopes to dispel are the "boundless superstitions" of philosophy. Historical seriousness doesn't seem to be a part of

Plutarch's moral equation. But this reveals much about Plutarch's project. In his "Defense of Seneca and Plutarch," Montaigne calls Plutarch a "philosopher who teaches us virtue"; Emerson, in his essay on the biographer, writes that the Plutarch's "delight in magnanimity and self-sacrifice has made his books, like Homer's Iliad, a bible for heroes." Plutarch's intention is to inspire his readers to emulate the best of lives. And, more often than not, this seems to be achieved through a heavy revision and careful reinterpretation of the works of both the historians and poets alike, as it is in the case of Alcibiades. But this isn't to say that Plutarch consciously invents virtue where there is none, or that he was in short supply of exemplary models from which to write the *Lives*. In his essay on Plutarch, Emerson continues:

In his immense quotation and allusion we quickly cease to discriminate between what he quotes and what he invents. We sail on his memory into the ports of every nation, enter into every private property, and do not stop to discriminate owners, but give him the praise of all. 'Tis all Plutarch, by right of eminent domain, and all property vests in this emperor.

"'Tis all Plutarch," indeed: the subjects are his to choose, and their lives are his to recreate. It's his show. Emerson considers Plutarch an experienced historian of "immense quotation and allusion." In other words, he trusts his method. But he also trusts the end to which Plutarch mobilizes his historical materials. Although it's hard to discern the veracity of a portrait like that of Alcibiades, for example, it seems like truth is beside Plutarch's ethical point. For Emerson, Plutarch's reliability is less important than his good will. If anyone will tell a lie, he seems to say, then let it be told by a man who understands virtue. It's hard to disagree with Emerson's sentiment. The historians gather fact and fashion a likely picture; the biographers gather life and fashions likely character. Both outcomes are less than perfect. But ultimately the latter feels more true every time.

When Plutarch was born in 46 AD to a family of Greek aristocrats in the Boeotian town of Chaeronea, Greek lands had been under Roman control for nearly two hundred years. And the Greeks themselves occupied a strange, if capricious place in the Roman imagination. On one hand, the Greek's were a conquered people, and the Romans treated them as such: their cities were occupied, their men were forced into conscription, and local trade and military matters were largely handled by urban Roman officials more concerned with imperial rather than Greek interests. On the other hand, the Romans were the original Graecophiles: their scholars studied and translated philosophy and rhetoric at the platonic Academy in Athens; their craftsmen and artists shipped plaster casts of Hellenistic statuary across the empire; and even their Greek slaves were often guaranteed relatively undemanding roles as the servants to urban, aristocratic households. In other words, as Simon Goodwill argues, "In the Roman empire all are insiders, but some are more insiders than others" (Goldhill 354). As both an aristocrat, and a scholar interested in the complex, shared history of Greece and Rome, it seems likely that Plutarch was an "insider". Plutarch's privileged position as an educated Greek under the Roman empire is, perhaps, what initially allowed him access to the documents and sources upon which he founded the *Lives*. But this same position also seems to have inspired Plutarch's choice of subjects.

Plutarch's comparisons of famous Roman and Greek figures seem to have had a particularly urgent message. In his *Life of Galba*, Plutarch recalls some of the more tumultuous years of the Roman Empire: "The Caesars' house in Rome, the Palladium, received in a shorter space of time no less than four emperors, passing, as it were, across the stage, and one making room for another to enter." Plutarch's comparison of succession to the passing of actors across a stage suggests something of his dissatisfaction with Roman imperial politics. In the years leading

up to Plutarch's life, the Roman people endured a number of spectacularly cruel and extravagant emperors, including the notoriously nefarious figures of Caligula and Nero. And although the examples of virtue found in the *Lives* could service any student of philosophy, his choice of subjects suggest that Plutarch was more concerned with teaching the virtue's of the dead to those in a position of power. Considering that Plutarch's *Lives* would have been heard and read aloud, not to mention incredibly expensive, it's likely that any contemporary readings of his biographies would've occurred in rooms with marble floors, rather than on the dirt or in the homes of *plebeians*.

Thucydides, a Greek historian, argues that the only work a historian should write is a history for his own present moment (Greenwood 39). and, in a sense, Plutarch is of a similar camp. His biographies were designed to address the specific problems of the Roman empire of the first century; he wrote for an audience that would have recognizes the parallels between Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great; but, even now, two millennia later, the utility of Plutarch's *Lives* is far from spent. And this is because Plutarch's subject is human nature just as much as it is specific humans. By relating the best lives, Plutarch offered not so much a present history, but a mirror with which we come to know the value of ourselves and others.

In the *Life of Alexander*, Plutarch relates an anecdote in which Alexander is brought a priceless casket taken from a Persian king. His companions and friends made various suggestion as to what treasure Alexander should place inside but Alexander, Plutarch writes "said that he would put the *Iliad* there for safe keeping." Following this, Alexander has a dream "in which a grey-haired, distinguished-looking man came up to him and quoted the following lines: "Now, there is a certain island in the restless, churning sea / Lying before Egypt: Pharos is the name

men give it (336). The “grey-haired” man seems to be Homer. Alexander eventually founded the city of Alexandria at “Pharos”. This story, like most things surrounding and depicting Alexander’s life, is most likely apocryphal. But it helps to reveal something of Plutarch’s ambition. Like the Homer of Alexander’s dream, Plutarch summons the ghosts of the past in order to help make a future. History has its lessons, but its only in the work of biography that a life is felt, that Democritus’ “phantoms” of the past seem to filter out of the “circumambient air.”

Of all the *Lives*, the *Life of Alexander* is the longest. In the first few pages, Plutarch wastes no time introducing a host of analogies and symbols which he develops over the course of the *Life*. Unlike his comparison of the ever protean Alcibiades to a “chameleon,” which was Plutarch’s own invention, most of the symbols and themes in his portrait of Alexander were already commonplace before he began writing the *Lives*. The most important of these is fire. Olympias, Alexander’s mother, has a dream in which her womb is struck by a thunderbolt and suddenly “burst into flames,” engulfing the rest of the palace; after which, Philip dreamed that he was pressing a seal on his wife’s womb with “the figure of a lion”. Most of Philip’s diviners, Plutarch relates, interpreted these dreams to mean that Olympias was probably unfaithful. But Plutarch includes these nameless interpreters only to introduce Aristander—Alexander’s chief soothsayer and most trusted interpreter of omen throughout his life—who takes their dreams to mean that the child Olympias was carrying would be “impatient and lion-like.” Plutarch also relates that on the day of Alexander’s birth “the temple of Artemis at Ephesus was destroyed by fire” (313).

Although Plutarch anticipates his reader’s knowledge, and warns that his portrait will make use of certain events while ignoring others, it seems that he packs the first few pages to the

brim. In quick succession, Plutarch relates a series of omens that suggest much of Alexander's later life: a snake found alongside Olympias is interpreted as a sign that "she was a partner to a higher being"; an oracle from Delphi tells Philip to honor "Ammon" more than any other god; and Plutarch relates an anecdote in which Alexander hears from his mother the "secret of his birth" while on the "eastern campaign." All this, too, before Plutarch even mentions Alexander's birth.

The particular density of these opening paragraphs is largely characteristic of Plutarch's other biographies. In the introduction to the *Life of Alcibiades*, for example, Plutarch drives home a few key points: he's beautiful, but also changeable. And these two themes—which create the central conflict of Alcibiades' character—take on new meaning and new complexities as the *Life* unfolds. The revelation of character happens gradually, but Plutarch intends these themes to serve as a guide, a way to guarantee that both his readers arrive at the same conclusion. It's clear from the beginning that Plutarch believes the legends and prophecies of Alexander's life reveal his character, especially since he takes Aristander as his initial authority on Alexander's nature. But Plutarch's reliance on myth is, perhaps, necessary. The legends and histories grew up around Alexander almost immediately after his death; more often than not, these accounts take contradictory stances on who Alexander was.

Plutarch's interest in Alexander was nothing new. By the time he began writing his biographical project, there were already two well-established and divergent traditions of Alexandrian life-writing, which branched out in different directions from a small, now lost collection of eyewitness accounts written by those who knew him. The first of these is called the "vulgate tradition"—which stems from *vulgus*: Latin for "common people"—and began with the

writings of Cleitarchus. Although we know almost nothing about the historian himself, we do know that Cleitarchus completed his *History of Alexander* sometime between 310 and 301 BCE, which makes his account one of the few near-contemporary sources on Alexander's life. In short, the *History of Alexander* is a popular narrative—romantic details and forays into the fantastic abound—but what made Cleitarchus' account so unique is that he primarily worked from the eye-witness accounts of soldiers: namely, the memoirs of Onesicritus of Astypalaea and Nearchus, Alexander's helmsman and his fleet-commander. In addition, since Cleitarchus wrote his *History* while living in Alexandria, it's likely that he had many opportunities to speak directly with Macedonian and Greek veterans, whose accounts shed light on the less-than-epic details of Alexander's campaigns. Unfortunately, and despite its popularity, the *History of Alexander* is now lost. We only know Cleitarchus' writings through the tertiary sources of Diodorus and Curtius Rufus, latter writers of the "vulgate tradition" who often relate Cleitarchus' soldiers' stories in nearly identical words.

The "good tradition" began with Callisthenes of Olynthus, a nephew to Aristotle and career historian who, under Alexander's employment, functioned as a kind of professional flatterer. Callisthenes wrote the *Deeds of Alexander*, which is now lost. And although, similar to the works of Cleitarchus, it's possible to reconstruct Callisthenes' writings by working backwards from secondary and tertiary sources, there are numerous anecdotes in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* that already do some of the work for us. Like in the passage where Alexander thrusts a spear through his friend Clitus and is immediately thrown into regretful despair, Plutarch describes Callisthenes as dealing "with his suffering by tactful and gentle means, using euphemisms and circumlocutions to avoid giving pain" (361). It's easy to imagine how this kind

of flattery—the subtle omissions, the turning of words—could characterize the *Deeds of Alexander* as a whole; it was, after all, nothing less than official propaganda. And there's no doubt that Callisthenes, by his position alone, was less concerned with receiving the critics' laurels than with securing his employer's favor. Callisthenes stands apart from other Alexandrian writers because his subject could talk back, could affirm or challenge the details of his own image. And although it's hard to say to what extent Alexander actually exercised his own editorial hand, it's clear that Callisthenes wrote the *Deeds of Alexander* in order to flatter its commissioner and enchant its readers, rather than satisfy any precepts of historical validity. But, like any other position in Alexander's court, the benefits were as spectacular as the risks. And Plutarch, among others, suggest that Callisthenes' circumlocutions and flattery eventually failed him. Alexander's favor gave way to contempt; and the historian of Alexander's court, depending on who we believe, was either crucified or died a slow death in chains.

Like Callisthenes, Ptolemy I Soter was a member of Alexander's often precarious inner-circle of companions and bodyguards. He was never promoted to the ranks of the core commanders, but he seems to have served some indispensable function for Alexander. The king kept him close, heeded his advice; and they remained intimate friends from childhood until Alexander's untimely death in 323 BCE. Ptolemy's proximity to the king helped to secure his position as one of the three *diadochi*, or potential successors to the newly vacant throne. Almost immediately after Alexander's death—as the king's commanders and friends began the long fight for control of the heirless empire—Ptolemy was appointed the satrap of Egypt, where he eventually wrote his memoirs of the Alexandrian campaign.

Ptolemy's memoirs, also now lost, represent the continuation of the "good tradition." We know from later sources—namely, Arrian of Nicomedia, a contemporary of Plutarch, whose work on Alexander's conquest of Asia claims Ptolemy as its main authority—that the memoirs relied extensively on Callisthenes' official court history; we also know that Ptolemy took time to correct a number of details in Cleitarchus, which places the publication of his memoirs at some point between 310 and 301 BCE. That Ptolemy began his memoirs more than two decades after the fact might explain his reliance on Callisthenes' bookkeeping; but this remove also poses a question. Why did Ptolemy publish his memoirs in this particular window of time? And, moreover, to what end did he write the past?

To guess at this, it helps to know something of the political landscape Alexander left in his wake. In short, there was no contingency plan for an empty throne; it hadn't seemed necessary. Alexander had literally marched his armies off the map, had conquered the known world and then some. At the empire's height, he had brought more than two-million square miles of land under the Macedonian yoke. He believed he was the son of Zeus, of Ammon; and even those who quietly challenged the king's claim to divinity could hardly argue that his ambition, courage and strategical brilliance were anything less than god-like. After his death, Alexander's possessions and empty armor were treated like cult objects, the still living symbols of the world's greatest conqueror. And who, from even among the best of us, could replace a man like that?

There's an anecdote found in a few ancient sources which tells us that when the dying Alexander was asked to whom his power should pass, he replied, "To the strongest." These sources are questionable; but, whether true or fictive, Alexander's response anticipates the bloody contest that was eventually held over his throne. Like planets suddenly deprived of their

star, the death of Alexander threw the once harmonious inner-circle of companions into a state of utter chaos. The newly-won empire devolved into an ever-shifting jigsaw of alliances and petty rivalries. And it was Perdiccas, a high-ranking chiliarch and commander of the cavalry, who was the first to come out of the fray with a more or less legitimate claim to the throne. After executing some of his louder detractors and reaching a tenuous compromise among the other companions, Perdiccas became the regent to Arridaeus—the mentally unstable, epileptic half-brother of Alexander—and appointed Ptolemy, among other allies, as the satraps or governors of the empire's far flung provinces. Perdiccas' plan was to spread the circle of companions as thinly as possible. With the potential usurpers sent to the periphery of the empire, and the king's half-brother in tow, it seemed that Perdiccas had already secured his throne. But the succession of power was far from complete. And, more than anyone, it was the dead king who seemed to stand in Perdiccas' way.

In 321 BCE, nearly two years after his death, Alexander still had yet to receive the burial rites of a king. In Macedonian culture, it was customary for a new ruler to bury his predecessor's body; it was a transaction of power, the crown relaying between the living and the dead. So, in a sense, if it was Alexander's death that ignited the wars of the *diadochi*, it would be his burial that finally put things to rest. But the question of *who* was as important as *where*. Macedonian tradition demanded burial at Aegae, the royal tombs where Alexander's father Philip II had been interred. But according to Curtius Rufus, Alexander's own wishes were to be buried at the Temple of Zeus-Ammon in Egypt, indicating his desire to be remembered as the son of a god rather than the son of a man. Perdiccas and the *diadochi* knew that Alexander's body was a commodity, a living symbol even in death; and, like a seed planted in soil, his burial would be

less a conclusion than a beginning. To bury Alexander at Aegae would have stressed his blood relation to Arridaeus, consequently strengthening Perdiccas' position as the proxy successor. Perdiccas wanted Alexander to be remembered as a king, but a burial at the Temple of Zeus-Ammon would ultimately achieve the opposite effect: he would become more myth than man. He would be remembered as a conqueror who had become so much more than a Macedonian, who had defeated the god-kings of Persia and adopted their robes and customs, who had turned his back on his mortal father and claimed to be more than human, the son of a god. But what was expedient for Perdiccas and his allies, wasn't necessarily expedient for the other *diadochi*. As the satrap of Egypt, Ptolemy had the most to gain from Alexander's posthumous deification. And in December of 321 BCE, as Arridaeus and the convoy carrying the king's body stopped in Damascus *en route* to Aegae, Ptolemy made his move.

It's not exactly clear what happened—some sources suggest it was simply an instance of bodysnatching, while others argue that the exchange was premeditated—but what we know for certain is that Alexander's body never made it to Aegae after falling into Ptolemy's hands. The papyrologist H. Idris Bell implies that Ptolemy may have led others to believe that he was simply obeying Alexander's last wishes (*Egypt from Alexander the Great to the Arab Conquest*). But this might have been hard to believe even then; the political benefit was just too obvious to overlook. It's also unlikely that the exchange in Damascus was as amicable as some sources suggest, especially when we consider that almost immediately afterwards Perdiccas sent troops to retrieve the body and overthrow Ptolemy's satrapy. But the contradictions in these competing histories of Alexander's posthumous adventures are telling. Typically, it's the writers of the "good tradition"—those who take Ptolemy and Callisthenes as their authorities—who paint

Arridaeus as readily handing over Alexander's body, even though this seems like needless self-sabotage on Arridaeus' part. But expediency overcomes validity. And although we may never know exactly what happened in Damascus, or how Ptolemy came to acquire the most coveted corpse on Earth, it's clear that in seizing Alexander's body Ptolemy also seized something of Alexander's myth.

Had Perdikkas not been killed by his own troops during his disastrous campaign in Egypt, it's possible that he would have written a memoir in which we would see Ptolemy the usurper, the grave robber. But history goes to the victors. And even if Ptolemy did willfully whitewash the events in Damascus, this didn't stop later historians of the "good tradition" from taking his memoirs as their authority. But this isn't to say that these historians were uncritical. In the preface of the *Anabasis*, Arrian of Nicomedia justifies his reliance on Ptolemy "not only because he accompanied Alexander in his expedition, but also because he was himself a king afterwards, and falsification of facts would have been more disgraceful to him than to any other man" (*Anabasis*, p.7). The last remark is dubious; but Arrian's justification suggests an important characteristic about the "good tradition" and its adherents: they held the primary source or eyewitness account above all other forms of historical evidence. In other words, to have seen the man was to know the truth; and the greater the remove, the greater the lie—a conceit that, although critical in spirit, fails to consider the particular end to which a history is written. There's no doubt that Callisthenes and Ptolemy employed a privileged knowledge of Alexander and his life in their writings—the former essentially wrote over the king's shoulder; the latter was among his closest friends—but what makes Arrian's justification so ironic is that, more than anything, it's the proximity of these writers that guarantees their unreliability.

In the *Lives*, Plutarch mentions the sculptor Lyssipus as the only artist whom Alexander felt was skillful enough to make his image. And it's likely that Alexander felt similarly towards Callisthenes—that is, before demanding his execution. Both were the crafters of image—the former in marble, the latter in prose—but their mediums ultimately achieved different things. In *Nemean 5*, a poem commissioned by the family of a victorious Greek athlete, Pindar argues the difference:

I am not a sculptor, so as to fashion stationary  
 statues that stand on their same base.  
 Rather, on board every ship  
 and in every boat, sweet song,  
 go forth . . . and spread the news. (W. H. Race. trans).

We might expect Callisthenes' *Deeds of Alexander* to have been the prose equivalent of Lyssipus' statues; since both fashioned their portraits in the company of a living sitter, they both expressed the actual gaze, the actual posture: the life as it was really lived. In regard to Lysippus' statues, it's reasonable to believe that his representation of Alexander would have been recognizable to those who actually knew him. Even if the sculptor took certain cosmetic or symbolic liberties, his depiction was still one taken from life. That Lyssipus was Alexander's only sculptor suggests how concerned the king was with his reputation; an unsolicited portrait might have confused the myth he wanted to create. But marble and bronze were expensive; and statues weren't commissioned by the common people, the soldiers, they were commissioned by city-states and kings. Cleitarchus' soldiers' stories were the only true common monument. Pindar also points out that the works of a sculptor don't travel, they "stand on their same base" and transmit their message only to those who see it, while a poem, a "sweet song" gives flight, spreads itself throughout the world "on board every ship / and in every boat." As a king who was obsessed

with reputation, Alexander could expect the writers of song and story to carry his legacy further than sculptors ever could. And even if Callisthenes was a historian rather than a poet, it seems that he wrote the *Deeds of Alexander* with a similar ambition: his history wasn't made to sit and gather dust, it was a song to be sung.

In other words, Callisthenes was a writer of *kleos*, too. But, unlike Pindar, Callisthenes wasn't in the business of tombstone-making or of assuaging our mortal anxiety with promises of poetic remembrance; the *Deeds of Alexander* seems to have been less a memorial of the past than a myth for the future. To be remembered wasn't enough; Alexander wanted to be remembered on his own terms. But this isn't to say that Callisthenes' account would have been more credible if he had been more removed from Alexander's myth-making; this would have simply traded whitewashing for uncertainty. We can choose to believe whatever comes out of the horse's mouth or we can choose to believe a different horse entirely; there's something of value in each and both have their obvious shortcomings. All this to say, when trying to get at the truth, historians often have to be as credulous as they are incredulous. And although Callisthenes was a flatterer and outright propagandist, one has to believe his history just as one has to believe Lyssipus' portraits— for even if they are fictions, they are at least Alexander's fictions. Moreover, Cleitarchus' soldier's stories, too, would have suggested their own half-truths. Callisthenes writes from the center, Cleitarchus moves in from the periphery, but both take Alexander and his conquests as their subject, and both create works of equal parts myth and history—with the truth, perhaps, lying somewhere in between.

Like his body, the myth Alexander helped create would be inevitably appropriated by those who were closest to him. New revisions meant new ends for which the story could be told.

And when Ptolemy took Alexander's body from Damascus to Egypt, it also seems that he took Callisthenes' pen. For Alexander's life was an open book, a palimpsest; and to write his myth was to bury him again, whether in new or familiar soil—by the side of his father, in the house of a god—as if death were merely the pretext for some greater conquest. Ptolemy won Egypt when he captured the body of a god; but it wasn't until he had lost nearly everything that he appropriated Alexander's myth.

In 306 BCE, after nearly two decades of war among the *diadochi*, it seemed that Ptolemy's control of Egypt was finally coming to an end. Antigonus, one of Alexander's Macedonian generals, had crushed Ptolemy's navy off the shores of Cyprus; the remaining ships retreated in disarray and the satrap's brother, Menelaus, had no choice but to surrender the island. Ptolemy's defeat was total. "Upon this," Plutarch writes, "the multitude for the first time saluted Antigonus and Demetrius as kings. Antigonus, accordingly, was immediately crowned by his friends, and Demetrius received a diadem from his father" (*Life of Demetrius* 18). To assume the royal diadem at this particular moment was a hugely symbolic gesture. Alexander first adopted the diadem after defeating Darius III; and, although similar to the Greek wreath, which had become a symbol of semi-divinity, the oriental diadem symbolized divinity outright. Alexander's appropriation of Darius III's divine status ingratiated himself with the conquered Persians and legitimized Macedonian rule after conquest. With this symbol in Antigonus' possession, it seemed that the fractured empire would again unite beneath the diadem of a god-king, that a ruler of Alexander's caliber had finally emerged from the fray.

Antigonus' diadem was an even greater threat to Ptolemy's rule than the loss of his navy, since afterwards Plutarch writes that even the satrap's own subjects began to acknowledge

Antigonus' legitimacy. But Ptolemy wouldn't let himself be outdone. In the same year he, Lysimachus of Thrace, and Seleucus of Babylonia all adopted diadems of their own. Ptolemy, however, seems to have believed that this was a feeble gesture. The diadem was a powerful symbol, but symbols alone can't defeat armies. And without a navy, Ptolemy was vulnerable; he desperately needed the support of the local Egyptian population. So in 304 BCE, he went a step further and, perhaps taking after Alexander's own policy of cultural fusion, declared himself the pharaoh of Egypt.

All this to say, with the future of his kingdom so uncertain, there was a never a better time for Ptolemy to write the past. In the *Anabasis*, Arrian tells us that Ptolemy criticized Cleitarchus' *History of Alexander*, which places the publication of his memoirs somewhere in the spread between 310 and 301 BCE. But perhaps now we can be more exact. Through Arrian, we can infer that the memoirs made little to no mention of Antigonus and his successful invasion of Asian Minor; Ptolemy seems to have entirely scratched his rival's military achievements from the record. And, on top of this, he trumps up his own role in some of the campaign's more pivotal battles, and even makes the dubious claim that he had killed and stripped the armor from an Indian king, an obvious attempt to associate himself with the armor-grabbing, *kleos*-ridden heroes of the Homeric epics. It's very likely that Ptolemy's omission of Antigonus and heroic posturing was an indirect response to his defeat at Cyprus. In addition, since Antigonus was killed in 301 BCE at the Battle of Ipsus, and Ptolemy's rivalry was still very much alive by the time he began writing, it seems we can narrow down the publication date to a spread of five years: sometime after the loss of Cyprus, and sometime before the death of Antigonus. And that

Ptolemy, in this same period of time, also introduced coins freshly minted with Alexander's profile seems to support these dates.

Coins are, after all, the kind of ubiquitous, centrally-controlled memorial that move through a culture like the popular legends Ptolemy hoped his memoir would become. Before Alexandrian currency, coins had displayed cult symbols and city emblems, which reflected monetary value and origin; but in Ptolemy's hands, and for the first time in history, coins were minted as objects of symbolic value and association. The coins can be seen as the visual equivalent of the memoirs. Their portrayal of Alexander—which, in 305 BCE, presented him with the horns of Ammon and an elephant's skin from the campaigns in India—undoubtedly supplemented the version we would've seen in the memoirs. Ptolemy intended both mediums to ultimately achieve the same thing; they would make Alexander more than human, and make him more than a satrap. With the dead king's body in Alexandria, his image on the coins, and his story rewritten, Ptolemy finally achieved a coherent, shared conception of Alexander—at once, entirely under his control, and yet owned by all. In other words, he created not only images and documents, but an entire living culture of symbols. In a sense, Ptolemy combined the propagandistic control of Callisthenes' official history with the mobility and ubiquity of Cleitarchus' soldiers' stories, long before the “good” or “vulgate” traditions separated into emphatically different schools of Alexandrian interpretation. As a work of history or biography, the memoirs would have impressed few modern scholars; but, as a political maneuver, one can't help but admire Ptolemy's insight—it was the same insight that Julius Caesar would have nearly two centuries later when he chose to write his own memoir, the *Bellum Gallicum*.

Ptolemy wanted to become a pharaoh; Caesar wanted to become a dictator; but this wasn't merely a matter of donning the pharaoh's clothes, or sending the senate off to summary execution. With an army, a city is taken; but with the right narrative, a city might even hand itself over. And long before Caesar crossed the Rubicon and took control of Rome, he took control of his story. Caesar's account of the wars in Gaul were sent to Rome in installments over the course of the Gallic campaigns; it was a way to speak directly to the common people without first passing through the senate, who were doing everything they could to defuse the pro-Caesar sentiment growing among the *plebeians*. It's not hard to imagine the scene this must have created in ancient Rome—with Caesar's half-literate supporters reading the annual dispatches aloud to the growing crowd of citizens—it must have evoked the ancient bards and their songs of *kleos*, when citizens would gather, as if for a ritual, to celebrate the cult heroes of their *polis*. Caesar's commentary is, after all, written in third-person; and it reads less like a history than a story in which Caesar himself is the protagonist. There's a sentence on the Battle of the Sabis—in fact, the longest sentence in the entire commentary—in which we see a glimpse of what Ptolemy's own memoirs might have been like.

Caesar drives each clause of his sentence forward like a phalanx: the fourth cohort is wiped; a senior centurion bleeds out on the grass; the standard is captured; the bearer killed; even salvos of arrows and javelins strike the dirt as the soldiers at the front trip over their own feet, hesitating like scared cattle before the wailing hoards of mud-painted barbarians—and just as the battle line starts to break, Caesar seems to take control of the field as casually as Poseidon rolls the tide:

Caesar saw that the rest of the men were slowing down, and some in the rear ranks had given up fighting and were intent on getting out of range of the enemy, in front kept pouring up the hill and were pressing down on both flanks, he recognized that this was a crisis because there were no reserves available, so he snatched a shield from a soldier in the rear ranks - Caesar had no shield with him - and went forward to the front line, where he called out to all the centurions by name and shouted encouragement to the rest of the men, whom he ordered to advance and to open out their ranks so that they could use their swords more effectively. (Caesar, *Gallic War* 2.25.1.).

It begins amidst a scene of utter carnage, but his account reads as if it were given from some point overhead. As both narrator and subject, Caesar is calm, collected and entirely in control. He's a father figure to his countrymen, calls them "by name." But he's also otherworldly; he sees what others don't. Caesar's endlessly subordinating clauses would've left his speaker breathless; his sentence demands participation, mandates empathy. Stylistically, it's a brilliant piece of propaganda. He concedes the cowardliness of the troops, admits the strength of the Gauls, but all in order to emphasize the remarkable otherness of his own character, the courage and strategical brilliance that sets him apart from both countrymen and hostile alike. War is still hell, but even hell, it seems, can be endured when a man like Caesar is at the helm.

With the efficiency and matter-of-factness of a career fighter, Caesar unfolds the entire field of action with a few quick, impressionistic strokes of his pen. And similar to the heroes of the Homeric epics—who we see fighting as if alone among the inconsequential thousands—Caesar places himself at the battle's thematic center. The scene recalls Plutarch's highly impressionistic description of Alexander's final battle against Darius III:

The Persians gave way before the front lines had clashed, and a fierce pursuit began, with Alexander herding the defeated enemy into the centre where Darius was. For he had caught sight of Darius in the distance—just a glimpse deep into the centre of the ranks of the Royal Cavalry deployed to protect him—a tall, fine figure of a man, standing on a high chariot, and protected by many magnificent horsemen who were drawn up in a very tight defensive formation around his chariot . . . The bravest of them . . . were cut down in front of the king

and fell on top of one another until they formed a barrier against the Macedonians' charge, entwining themselves in their death throes about the men and horses. (Waterfield. trans).

In both instances, Caesar and Alexander rise above the rank and file. Plutarch, however, takes this even further: the whole field of battle seems to revolve around an axis between Alexander and Darius III, reducing entire armies to the mere appendages of the two god-like kings, as they meet for the last time, as it were, on an emptied stage. The particular brutality of both accounts is equally telling, for it's not only triumph that sets men apart, but also the suffering they are willing to endure. And, in the end, the bloodied hands of Caesar and Alexander only serve to make them more remarkable: they are fighters among fighters, staked in the same mud as their troops and yet somehow fighting on an entirely different plain, as if their presence were the only necessary condition for victory. In other words, if one believes the record, it seems it was Caesar alone who defeated the Gauls. And, in some part, Ptolemy must have claimed an equally exaggerated role in Alexander's own campaigns. The difference, however, is that Ptolemy appropriated a body of myth that had already existed in the common imagination for nearly two decades. His work was the work of revision and alignment. Caesar, on the other hand, began his memoirs on a more or less blank page. His story was his own. But what makes Caesar so vital to understanding Ptolemy's own memoirs is that both ultimately made a conquest of the common imagination. It's likely, then, that the publication of Ptolemy's memoirs had a similar effect in Alexandria as Caesar's would have in Rome two centuries later. Both worked, as it were, from the bottom up, first seizing the minds of people before the throne itself. And, like Alexander, the myths they created eventually served others, creating and tearing down empires in turn.

With his memoirs, Ptolemy won the hearts and minds of the Egyptians, securing his kingdom against Antigonus and establishing a dynasty that would rule for nearly three centuries after his death. In a sense, the Ptolemaic dynasty is the continuation of a story which began in Macedonia, when the pharaoh was still a childhood friend to the prince who would conquer the world, and which would only end in part after Roman conquest and the suicide of Cleopatra in 30 BCE. It's strangely fitting that Octavian, the adoptive son of Julius Caesar, and Cleopatra, a direct descendant of Ptolemy—one's political myth coming to an end, and the other just beginning—would eventually act out the conclusion of the Ptolemaic dynasty. In less than four centuries, the life of Alexander the Great had undergone so many transformations, had served so many purposes, that entire kingdoms had already come and gone under the banner of his legend. And all this, too, a century before Plutarch even heard his name or wondered who he was.

To understand Alexander's life, it seems necessary that we also understand the lives and ambitions of those who knew him. Their stories surround the king like leaves surround a tree, and the cover is thick; it was already thick by the time Plutarch began the *Parallel Lives* almost four hundred years after Alexander's death. From cross-referencing later writers, it's clear that Plutarch used primary documents—the lost works of Ptolemy, Callisthenes and Cleitarchus—but it's also clear that these documents were less authorities on Alexander *as he was* than authorities on what Alexander *could become*. And if we see these writers as mere propagandists, we miss the point; even if Ptolemy helped make Alexander a god, and even if Callisthenes made him seem like more than a man, it's hard to believe that either of these representations failed to portray something of Alexander's actual life. The record is exaggerated, but it seems this was inevitable. Alexander was, himself, an extraordinary person; he demanded extraordinary myth,

extraordinary explanation. His impact was too huge and too sudden to become a mere chapter in the histories; the “good” and “vulgate” traditions represent not only the different ways in which writers have answered the question of who Alexander was, they also suggest something true about past writing in general.

If we believe, as the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce has claimed, that “all history is contemporary history,” then the pursuit of chronicling the past is less a science than a form of art or poetry. There are, in other words, no right answers. And each generation of historians takes up the endeavor of interpretation, extracting their own causes and patterns from the ever-growing mass of history. But Croce’s claim is less weary or cynical than it might seem. He’s not saying that the past is irretrievable or that our historians are merely the writers of fiction, but that each generation takes up the threads like Penelope at her loom, and does the work of history, over and over again. When it’s not an act of cooperation—as it is with Arrian, who perpetuates the Ptolemaic account—it’s an act of revision. But ultimately the histories we write reflect the past just as much as they reflect the moment in which we write them. We see this in Ptolemy, Callisthenes, Cleitarchus—over and over again, the same story told anew. Perhaps, then, we can complicate Aristotle’s claim that “poetry utters universal truths” while history utters “particular statements” (*Poetics*). The stuff of history may very well be facts, deeds, or simply “things done,” but this doesn’t keep the historian or the biographer from taking up these threads in order to find new meaning in old material; it even seems necessary. Aristotle believes history to be dead, that to produce a particular, unchanging statement about it is work enough. In other words, history is an artifact, and can only mean one thing. But who would say that a statement—even if

it's about a thing already done, a life already lived—doesn't take on new meaning for new people and new eras?

On July 1st, 1798, as the ancient fortifications of Alexandria breached the horizon and the sunlight leapt atop the tide, General Napoleon Bonaparte took the quarter deck of his ship with might have been a feeling reverence for the city's founder, a conquerer like himself: Alexander the Great. When the general turned to address the company of officers and captains, and the defenders of Alexandria took their positions along the city's high walls, Napoleon gave a speech that might still surprise us:

The peoples we will be living alongside are Muslims; their first article of faith is "There is no other god but God, and Mahomet is his prophet". Do not contradict them; treat them as you treated the Jews, the Italians; respect their muftis and their imams, as you respected their rabbis and bishops. Have the same tolerance for the ceremonies prescribed by the Quran, for their mosques, as you had for the convents, for the synagogues, for the religion of Moses and that of Jesus Christ . . . You will here find different customs to those of Europe, you must get accustomed to them.

Although separated by more than two millennia, Napoleon Bonaparte knew Alexander well; and it was Plutarch, the Roman author of the *Parallel Lives*, who introduced them. Napoleon placed Plutarch above all other writers and historians; and he read his work voraciously, taking a predictable interest in the dual *Lives of Alexander the Great* and *Julius Caesar*. In fact, Napoleon was so steeped in Roman and Greek history that the Corsican rebel leader, Pasquale Paoli, once remarked to him, "There is nothing modern in you; you are entirely out of Plutarch."

It's not a coincidence then that Napoleon, upon arriving *en force* on the shores of Alexander's own city, would offer a speech—a whole social program even—which so clearly borrows from the ancient king's own policies of cultural fusion as outlined in Plutarch's work. It

was in Parthia that Alexander adopted “non-Greek clothing” for the first time and allowed his conquered subjects to lay prostrate before him as they did before Darius III, the defeated god-king of the Achaemenid empire. This inspired outrage and confusion among the Macedonians and Greeks who were unable to see Eastern customs as anything but backwards and barbaric. But the warriors’ protests did little to change Alexander’s mind, and the loudest among them were routinely rounded up for summary execution—a punitive policy that towards the end of Alexander’s life became more and more common.

In Plutarch’s own words, Alexander’s policy of cultural fusion was based, very simply, “on the grounds that the sight of what is familiar and congenial goes a long way towards winning people over” (354). In other words, being not only a brilliant military commander but also a perceptive governor, Alexander made public relations one of the top priorities of his empire. In the city of Susa, Alexander even went so far as to conduct a mass wedding ceremony between Persian noblewomen and Macedonian officers with the goal, as Diodorus relates, of “bringing the two major continents, by way of intermarriages and family bonds, into a common harmony and a brotherly affection” (*Library*). Alexander’s vision of a single-state spanning Europe and Asia, united by a program of “brotherly affection” and harmony was, and still is, a plan of singular ambition. And there is no doubt that Napoleon thought of this and the great king as his fleet lay siege to Alexandria.

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