

The Historiography of Late Republican Civil War

Edited by

Carsten Hjort Lange
Frederik Juliaan Vervaet



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Plutarch and the Late Republican Civil Wars

Federico Santangelo

Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. 45–ca. 125 CE) had a wide range of intellectual interests, which are reflected in an extraordinarily rich and diverse body of work.¹ It is fair to say, though, that the civil wars of the Late Republican period were not a theme of central significance to him. To be sure, he devoted considerable attention to several major historical figures of the last century of the Roman Republic, and discussed at some length their involvement with the internal conflicts of the time. However, the fact that a series of civil wars led to the end of the emergence of the political regime under which Plutarch himself lived is never singled out as a major historical problem in any of his works.² He was, of course, well aware of the magnitude of that chain of events and of their long-lasting significance, but he did not devote any substantial discussion to it. The fact that he did not write an historical work, but was an author of biographies, is only part of the explanation.³ Even the *Moralia* lack any sustained engagement with the events of the Republican civil wars. While they include significant treatments of themes like ambition, anger, or violence, nowhere do they discuss the problem of civic collapse, the dynamics and the logic through which a political community falls apart, or how reconciliation may be brought about.⁴

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- 1 The best full-scale introduction to Plutarch in English remains Russell 2001. Moles 1985, 4–7; Pelling 1988, 1–10 and Heftner 1995, 1–19 offer informative and crisp overviews of his life and work. Scardigli 1979 provides an invaluable overview of the Roman *Lives*; Scardigli 1995 is a collection of classic essays.
 - 2 On Plutarch's assessment of the imperial regime and its long-term historical prospects cf. *Fort. rom.* 317b–c. See Dillon 1997 for a thought-provoking discussion, critically evoking Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history'; cf. Pelling 2000a, 262. On Roman hegemony and civic freedom see *Praec.* 813d–e, with Jones 1971, 133 and Desideri 2012b, 113–114.
 - 3 On this problem see esp. Moles 1985, 32–47 and Pelling 2010d.
 - 4 Ambition and anger are, in turn, prominent themes in the *Lives*, and their political implications are duly recognised (Duff 1999, 89–90; Pelling 2012). Plutarch is keenly aware of the potential of Thucydidean themes in narratives of civil strife: see Pelling 2010, 111–112. Civil war is an important focus of interest in the final part of the *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* (824a–825f): Plutarch goes as far as stating that pre-empting and resolving civic disputes (αἰ διαφοραὶ) is the chief duty of the good statesman. His standpoint, however, is the world of the Greek city state in Roman context (cf. 824e on the weakened political position of Greece), and the argument he makes in that context has no immediate bearing on late Republican Rome.

This fundamental shortcoming of Plutarch's oeuvre does not remove the obvious fact that it is central to any attempt to study the late Roman Republic, including the civil wars. Crucial aspects of the understanding of this period are chiefly shaped by the outlook adopted by Plutarch. The wider difficulties of Plutarch's approach to Roman politics have been very influential and have rightly received close attention – notably his tendency to focus and compress the treatment of Roman matters on the opposition between *δῆμος*, “people”, and *βουλή*, “Senate”, overlooking or overshadowing other significant actors.⁵ The different outlooks and sheer inconsistencies among different biographies also warrant attention. Considerable weight, however, must be lent to a crucial aspect, which significantly offsets other limitations: Plutarch had access to a wide base of information, in Latin and in Greek alike, he read widely, and he engaged thoughtfully with his evidence.⁶ Very bluntly put, he knew much more about the history of the late Roman Republic than we can possibly hope to do on the basis of the extant sources, and he thought hard about the material at his disposal. In fact, the range of different viewpoints that he adopted to serve the literary agendas of his works – the *Life of Caesar* has a very different outlook to, say, the *Life of Crassus* – afforded him the chance to reflect on the same set of material from different angles, and furthered his critical engagement with the sources: it is arguably the main element of originality of his project. Much as Plutarch hardly ever tells us what we would like to know about the history of the Late Republican civil wars, we can never afford to overlook the information he provides or the judgements he puts forward.

1 The Gracchan Turn

A first reason for dissatisfaction with Plutarch's account of the Civil Wars is his failure to convey any sense of how they should be periodised. In a central passage of the *Life of the Gracchi*, he accepts the view that the Gracchan period was a moment in which a fundamentally new political phase began in Rome.⁷ He is even keener, though, on arguing that the political course of action (*πολιτεία*) they chose brought immeasurable ill to the two of them (8.7). The

Cf. Dillon 1997, 235–236; Duff 1999, 296–298; Desideri 2012a, 74–76 and 2012b, 115–117 for valuable insights into this passage.

5 Pelling 2000b, 211–217.

6 Moles 1985, 40 issues an invaluable caveat: “More often than not, when people accuse Plutarch of naïveté, it is they who are naïve”. See also Pelling 2000c and 2000d, 144–152.

7 I follow the recent suggestion of Duff 2011, 266–268 that the biographies of the Gracchi form a “single unit”, like those of Agis and Cleomenes, and should be referred to as such.

role of violence in the developments of the period is of course considerable, but hardly central to Plutarch's concerns. The response of the two brothers to the outbreak of riots in Rome and the increasing significance of open clashes in the development of the political crisis of their time receives, in this connection, some sustained attention, and feeds into the wider assessment of their character and their political outlook, which, as has long been recognized, is broadly positive. The first occurrence of political violence in 133 BCE is the aftermath of M. Octavius' deposition from the tribunate. The whole affair is depicted as a tragedy of sorts.⁸ Tiberius is led to the decision to put forward a bill providing for Octavius' removal by the unwillingness of his colleague and friend to be persuaded otherwise. His overarching concern, however, is to avoid the war (cf. 11.3: ἀνευ πολέμου, "without war") that he reckons would inevitably ensue if they were to carry on holding office jointly. Hence the decision to put the matter to the people, and get them to decide which tribune they wanted as their leader and champion. That is the fundamental point of dissent with his opponents. The initial tactic of the wealthy (11.1: πλοῦστοι) against the land bill is to steal the voting urns. That is the first and most striking moment of a series of actions that betray their unwillingness to engage in any meaningful way with Tiberius, and eventually compel him to take drastic political action and put forward the bill for the deposition of Octavius. Still, just before the vote of the tribal assembly is due to come to an end, Tiberius makes a final plea to his colleague, which nearly persuades him to change his course of action, only to be deflected by the awe of the powerful that had steered Octavius' actions thus far.⁹

As the law is about to be passed, the first moment of open violence takes place. Tiberius orders his freedmen to remove Octavius from the Rostra. He routinely used his freedmen to conduct public business, we are told, but his choice to involve them with such a major act gave the whole scene a rather undignified appearance. The push for violence, however, does not come from the group surrounding Tiberius. Plutarch depicts a clash between the people (ὁ δὴ δῆμος), who wish to attack Octavius, and the wealthy, who seek to defend him and manage to rescue him with some difficulty. In the commotion, a slave of Octavius that is escorting him has his eyes torn out by a member of the crowd (12.5). That is the first act of political violence to occur in the Gracchan crisis,

8 On tragic elements in Plutarch's *Lives* see de Lacy 1952, esp. 159–168. Cf. Wiseman 2009, 54 for the suggestion that the account of Gaius Gracchus' final conversation with his wife Licinia (*C. Gracch.* 15.2–4) might derive from a "real tragic drama" (with further bibliography).

9 Roskam 2011, 217 stresses the positive characterization of Octavius (10.7–8), which in his view considerably problematizes the moral implications of the clash with Tiberius Gracchus.

and in the longer historical trajectory of the Late Republican period. It is surely significant that the man who is at the receiving end of it is a slave, rather than a member of the citizen body. There is a sense that the wars of the Late Republic are approaching, and that this is a prequel of something much larger and far-reaching.¹⁰ Tiberius' reaction to that early incident is revealing of his wider attitude towards violence. He firmly protests it and strives to bring the tumult to an end. The image of a Tiberius that is led by the ambition to serve the people and avert political violence is upheld throughout the biography. Some of the incidents that Plutarch relates, notably the repeated references to Tiberius' fears over his life and the risks to tribunician inviolability, may actually be read as instances of confrontational and incendiary rhetoric, and as evidence for an increasing readiness to sustain a full-scale clash. Yet that possibility is nowhere entertained or pursued by the biographer.

The aftermath of the riot in which Tiberius is killed receives especially close consideration. Plutarch states the same general assessment that one also encounters at the outset of Appian's *Civil Wars* (1.2; 1.17) and in Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* (1.6, 1.37). The events leading to Tiberius' death were the first major episode of political violence since the expulsion of the kings (20.1): on this count Plutarch's assessment is remarkably close to the view famously put forward by Appian at the outset of the *Civil Wars* (1.2).¹¹ He also invokes fear of the might of the people as the factor that kept the Senate from resorting to violence and led it to seek compromise when possible.¹² However, his reading of the events of 133 BCE is unequivocal. Tiberius would have yielded to the cause of reconciliation, had his opponents sought to engage in meaningful talks – had they sought to persuade him. However, they chose the path of repression, making the most of the strength of numbers. Plutarch suggests that their course of action is best explained with personal resentment, rather than political considerations (20.3–4). The way they treated the body of Tiberius, denying it a burial and throwing it into the Tiber along with those of the other victims of the clashes, is strong testimony to that. As we shall see, this is not the only instance in which bodies reveal strong and significant patterns at work in the political history of the Late Republic. The riot in which Tiberius loses his

10 Pelling 2012, 64–65 argues that the biography of the Gracchi prefigures a number of key aspects of the late Republican Lives; Affortunati and Scardigli 1992, 113–115 draw attention to some thematic links between the *Life of the Gracchi* and the *Life of Publicola*.

11 The Coriolanus episode might be regarded as a precedent: see App. *B Civ.* 1.1–2, with Pelling 2012, 62 n. 15 and Welch in this volume (443). On the periodization of Roman moral decline see ten Berge in this volume (chapter 17).

12 *Tib. Gr.* 20.1. See Schropp 2017, 721.

life is a moment in which politics is temporarily abolished. Shortly afterwards, the Senate realizes that a balance is to be restored somehow, and agrees to continue the implementation of the agrarian law and replace Tiberius with a new member of the committee in charge of the land assignments (21.1–3).

The same destructive dynamics that led to the demise of Tiberius also occur at the end of Gaius Gracchus' life. From the outset of the biography Plutarch emphasizes that Gaius is as committed to the principles of decency and rule of law as his brother, much as some regarded him as overly ambitious and unduly prone to violence (1.4–5).¹³ Like Tiberius, he is not prepared to support or condone violence; like him, he is overridden by popular pressure, and by the mounting hatred of the rich, which the events of 133, notably the treatment of Tiberius' body, have only exacerbated. In his case, things are further complicated by the involvement of a close associate, M. Fulvius Flaccus, who is committed to the cause and more radical in his approach than Gracchus. It is Flaccus' supporters that kill Antyllus, an attendant of the consul L. Opimius. Gaius readily understands that the episode is soon going to be turned into a pretext to take action against him; Opimius rejoices, and shrewdly exploits the display of Antyllus' body as an opportunity to denounce the violence of Gracchus' men and promote a reaction against them. The reactions of Flaccus and Gracchus to that turn of events are sharply different. While Flaccus enthusiastically prepares for an armed struggle, Gaius looks somber and austere in equal measure, in full knowledge of what awaits him; their conduct is mirrored by their respective groups of followers. Flaccus approaches the day of the final confrontation in a drunken stupor; Gracchus makes the lucid, conscious decision to go unarmed, wearing his toga and carrying only a small dagger (36.1). He is still hoping for reconciliation. Flaccus' elder son addresses the Senate on behalf of his faction, but Opimius resists any settlement, just as the opponents of Tiberius had done a decade earlier. Gaius is willing to address the Senate himself and pursue one last chance for a political settlement, but is denied the chance to do so. When the clash breaks out, he finds shelter in the temple of Diana, avoiding the fray.

His death comes at the end of an escape to which he has been compelled by his friends, who stopped him from taking his own life. The sheer determination of his pursuers is partly determined by the rewards that have been set for who will join the struggle: immunity for those who are switching sides, and a prize in gold for anyone who will bring Gaius' head to Opimius. The scene

13 See Roskam 2011, 219–220, who regards the portrayal of Gaius as considerably more positive than Tiberius. Russell 1966, 140 singles out Gaius' decision to enter politics on an emotional impulse as the example of a principle set out in the *Præcepta gerendae rei publicae* (798c).

eerily anticipates the age of the proscriptions, and with it the distinctive combination of fierceness and fraudulence that pervades it. Septimuleius fills the severed head with molten lead, as he knows that he will receive as a reward an amount of gold equal to the weight of the head. Plutarch is aware of several versions on the killing of Gaius, which all corroborate the overall account of a merciless attack on him and his opponents, and in which Gaius stands out as a fair, committed citizen. The presence of the Cretan archers deployed by Opimius also conveys the sense that a central role was played by foreign elements; at its core, though, the clash between Gracchus and his opponents is civil strife, rooted in the breakdown of the Roman political community.¹⁴ The only moment in which Gaius loses his restraint and composure, which he otherwise impressively retains in the face of adversity, is in turn revealing (16.4–5). As he is confined in the temple of Diana, he addresses the goddess, begging her to make sure that the Roman people may live in servitude forever. Their treacherous and ungrateful conduct has led them to fall short of the most basic civic duties. They now deserve to be treated as slaves.

2 Unrestrained Violence and Failed Leadership: Gaius Marius

Plutarch shows no interest whatsoever in the altogether different legal backgrounds of the events of 133 and 121 BCE; the decree of the Senate that backed the actions of the consul Opimius receives no mention in his account.¹⁵ He shows a similar lack of concern for the legal arrangements in his account of the crisis that led to the killing of L. Appuleius Saturninus and C. Servilius Glaucia in 100 BCE: the passing of an emergency decree of the Senate (the so-called *senatus consultum ultimum*) simply goes unmentioned, and the emphasis is placed on the alliance between Senate and equestrians to stop Saturninus' radical policies.¹⁶ The main focus of interest, however, is the political and personal connection between Marius, Saturninus and (to a lesser extent) Glaucia. The elder statesman resorts to their support during his fifth consulship, as he is determined to orchestrate the exile of Q. Caecilius Metellus Numidicus

14 Cf. Armitage 2017, 48, who argues that the “murders” of the Gracchi were “civil acts’ because they took place within the citizen body, but none of them could be designated as ‘war’”; he shows no comparable concern for terminological accuracy in calling Plutarch a “historian” and Tiberius a “populist tribune of the people”.

15 However, Thommen 2017, 63–64 notes that in this biography Plutarch shows good understanding of the role of the tribunate, notably in the legislative process. Cf. Chrysanthou 2018, 123–127 on the integration between the *Life of Marius* and its Greek counterpart, the biography of Pyrrhus.

16 On the *senatus consultum ultimum* see Golden 2013, 104–149, with ample doxography.

(*cos.* 109 BCE), with whom he has a bitter enmity since the days of the Jugurthine War. That ambition leads Marius to collude with fundamentally dishonest and ruthless political allies, and eventually to take part in a series of violent actions. Plutarch is here avowedly following the hostile account of P. Rutilius Rufus (*FRHist.* 21), whose well-known hostility to Marius he explicitly acknowledges. By this point, political violence has become an inevitable feature of the landscape: the assassination of Nonius, a rival of Saturninus, is briefly mentioned as one of the early instances in which Marius took part in an evil deed (29.1).

In fact, the integration between violence and politics is now close to inextricable. Saturninus masterminds an agrarian bill that has the twofold aim of providing for land assignments for Marius' veterans and for compelling Metellus to swear allegiance to it; the latter provision will in turn lead to Metellus' exile. The main focus of Plutarch's interest is the moral dimension of that political arrangement, and what it might reveal about Marius' character. At first he displays an unprincipled acceptance of Saturninus' tyrannical ways, and then he emerges as a deviously duplicitous individual, unable and unwilling to lend his support to either side, in awe of the nobility and still keen to secure the backing of the populace. However, treachery – the breakdown of *fides* – is an issue of wider import. When Saturninus and his followers are surrounded by Marius' soldiers, they surrender unconditionally and offer themselves to public faith, but their call to clemency proves ineffective: they are slain en masse in the forum (30.3–4).¹⁷

Marius unequivocally emerges as a force of political disruption and disgregation. He is overwhelmed by a deadly combination of ambition and spitefulness. Even his connection with Sulla, which dated back to the war against Jugurtha, comes to a traumatic end, when the controversy over the monument put up in Rome by Bocchus flairs up. The Social War, which in Plutarch's view nearly brought the Roman hegemony in Italy to an end (32.3), intervenes as a delaying factor: the imminent *stasis* is put off until the end of the conflict. Plutarch's chief interest is in the human dimension to the controversy over the Mithridatic command. However, the narrative angle he chooses is also highly productive from an analytical viewpoint. He constructs the clash with Sulla as that between two men that belong to two different generations, and whose career trajectories are sharply opposed. Marius is heading for a decline that reflects both on his moral credentials and his political standing, and is matched by his declining physical forces. Plutarch insists at some length on the awkward spectacle of Marius training in the Campus Martius, putting his ageing

¹⁷ Cf. the reference to “the so-called public faith” at 30.3 (διὰ τῆς λεγομένης δημοσίας πίστεως).

body in full display (34.3–4). Conversely, Sulla is emerging as the leading political force of his generation.

Plutarch attaches a periodising value to the events of 88: that is the moment in which a long-standing disease of the community becomes apparent.¹⁸ Marius' role is decisive, but the proposal to grant him the command comes from the tribune Sulpicius, who is said to have put it forward unilaterally, without prior consultation with the beneficiary of his measure. There is, in fact, a level of unresolved tension in Plutarch's account. On the one hand, Sulpicius is singled out as the instigator of the violence that leads to the killing of Q. Pompeius Rufus' son, and as a political operator who has the energy and resolve that Marius by now lacks; on the other, he is denounced as the tool that Marius badly needs to bring about the destruction of the *res publica*. A clear pattern is invoked. Sulpicius is pursuing the same tyrannical aims that Saturninus had set himself a decade earlier, and Marius' backing is again a significant, if perhaps no longer quite as crucial, factor. Marius is the beneficiary of Sulpicius' measure and tries to organize the resistance to Sulla's march on Rome. The loss of his moral and political center is further shown by his attempt to draft some slaves into his troops by promising them freedom (35.5). Only three come forward: an incident that further reveals how badly undermined his standing is. A large section of the ensuing narrative is taken up by the account of Marius' spectacular escape from Rome, which takes him to North Africa, after numerous perils.¹⁹ Upon his return to Italy in 87 BCE, after the rise to power of L. Cornelius Cinna, he docks in Etruria, and revives the pledge to grant freedom to the slaves in exchange for their military support. The demise of civic and republican governance is the only aim to which Marius ostensibly aspires, and the only discernible factor informing his actions: it is also the reason that leads him to embrace the cause of Cinna against Octavius. The final section of the biography, in which Marius' involvement in the events of 87 is recounted, is strongly unidimensional. Marius is bent on bringing about as much civic disruption as conceivably possible.

The disorder that he wishes to create is closely matched by his physical appearance. He turns up in Rome displaying the signs of old age, with his hair overgrown, having not cut it since his departure; he seeks to inspire compassion, but his conduct inspires fear, as it presents those who see him with the

18 That year fulfils a similar function in Appian (*B Civ.* 1.60) and Cassius Dio (52.16.2); see Lange 2017, 135–136.

19 *Mar.* 35.5–40. Nerdahl 2008, 116–121 posits a number of deliberate connections between Plutarch's account of Marius' escape and the *Odyssey*.

extent of what he has lost and the magnitude of his anger.²⁰ His attack on Ostia is not just a major step in the attempt of Cinna and his army to regain control over Rome. It is also an occasion on which the Urbs is treacherously attacked and the food supply of Rome is severely threatened. When the Senate eventually reaches out to Cinna and him for a negotiation, he pointedly demands for an act of rehabilitation to be passed in order to cancel the *hostis publicus* ruling instigated by Sulla in the previous year. The massacre that follows their return to Rome sees Marius indulging in full-scale retaliation, unlike Cinna, who seems content with having defeated his enemies. Plutarch produces a list of scenes from the massacres, in which the death of the orator Marcus Antonius stands out, which suggests that a tradition had taken shape on that period, foreboding that of the Sullan proscriptions. Again, the body of the victims play a prominent role: stories of their mutilation, concealment, and disguise loom large. In that context of murderous disorder, Marius' slave militia, the so-called *Bardyaei*, plays an especially prominent role. Cinna and Q. Sertorius, who slaughter them in a nighttime attack, end up playing a stabilizing role, which might be striking in some respects, but is not altogether surprising in light of the account developed in the *Life of Sertorius*.²¹

Anger and revenge, however, are not the only factors that steer Marius' disorderly and merciless conduct in the last few months of his life. Fear also creeps in as soon as news of Sulla's victories in the East reaches Rome. Marius dreads the prospect of another civil war, which would likely lead to a new banishment, and to his final defeat. His final days are spent in drunkenness and recrimination, voicing his frustration over his inability to obtain what he had long aspired for. The civic disorder that Marius has created and fomented is now mirrored, and fatally exceeded, by his mental turmoil, and by the subsequent illness that leads to his death. In this case, Marius' involvement in civil strife turns into an invaluable opportunity to reflect on his character, its development, and its debasement, which is a fundamentally moral problem. Marius was not equipped with the education and the intellectual tools to soundly reflect upon his qualities and his standing in the *res publica*, and eventually proved unable to restrain his ambition.²² He thus sought aims that were not commensurate with his talent and his position in old age: hence his growing

20 *Mar.* 41.4. This is a development of the established tradition whereby it was customary for an individual who had been charged with a capital offence to put on sullied clothing (*uestes sordidae*) and grow his hair and beard: see Olson 2017, 97–101.

21 *Mar.* 44.6. See Konrad 1994, 71–73.

22 *Mar.* 2 is the key passage; Russell 1966, 145 brings out its wider significance to the understanding of Plutarch's biographical outlook and the "deterministic attitude" that informs it. For a fuller discussion of this problem see Swain 1990a, 138–140; Duff 2008, 16–18.

frustration with his contemporaries and his own achievements, and the erratic political conduct that first led him to abandon his ally Saturninus because of his regard for the nobility, and then saw him recruit an army of slaves to enable his comeback to Rome.

3 The Wars of the Eighties

Plutarch's reservations about Marius, his character, and his impact on the history of Rome are not just apparent from his own biography, or indeed from the other Lives in which he features as a character.²³ Two mentions he receives in the *Moralia* are much more specific and abrasive than those reserved to the other great figures of the Late Republican period. In the *Praecepta gerendae rei publicae* (806D) Marius is singled out in a wider discussion of the relationship between experienced and junior political figures. Plutarch stresses his jealousy of Sulla, in stark contrast with the latter's benevolent attitude towards Pompey. The events of 88 are unequivocally imputed to Marius; the strictly binary pattern of the discussion means that no mention is made of Sulpicius. Marius' later return to Rome after the exile is even compared to the rule of Phalaris at Akragas in *De sera numinis vindicta* (553A): their tyrannical rule proved a medicine for their peoples, whose ways had long been corrupt, and they came to a demise when their historical function was thus fulfilled.²⁴

Although the overall judgement on Marius remains severely critical, different aspects of it are explored and voiced in different contexts. However, no other Late Republican figure receives a comparably negative assessment in Plutarch's oeuvre. Even Sulla, Marius' main opponent and himself a central figure in the history of the civil wars, is placed on a rather different footing. Unlike Marius, he is not led exclusively by ambition or anger, but is also the proponent of an idea of *res publica* and of a set of political reforms. Plutarch emphasizes the might of his rise to political prominence from a rather inconspicuous background: the two factors that enable it are his early connection with Marius, which is turned into enmity by Marius' jealousy, and his signal military achievements; it is, in fact, a successful transition from the military sphere into the political one. This assessment flies in face of the view that Sulla put forward in his own autobiography, to which Plutarch had access, where he

23 On the place of Plutarch's Life in the historical tradition on Marius see Scardigli 1977.

24 Moral corruption is a theme that underlies much of Plutarch's account of Roman Republican history and is not confined to the late Republic: see Jones 1971, 99–100.

claimed that he was more predisposed towards Fortune than to war (*Sull.* 6.5 = *FRHist.* 22 F12: πρὸς τύχην).²⁵

There is also scope for criticism. Plutarch does not deny that Sulla's actions were led by sheer personal ambition, and had harmful consequences.²⁶ He relaxed the standards of discipline in the army he led in the Social War because he was already aspiring to the Mithridatic command and was gearing up for the clash with Marius over it. In this important respect, Plutarch contradicts the account of *Marius*, where the command is proposed by Sulpicius, rather than openly coveted by the elder statesman.²⁷ Sulla is depicted as the victim of the machinations of the two men; his response, however, is swift and firm, and is preceded by the reaction of his soldiers, quartered in Campania, who stone to death the military tribunes that were sent from Rome to take charge of their contingent. Although Plutarch has access to a tradition that goes back to Sulla's autobiography, he also insists on some highly negative features. The behaviour of the consul after his arrival is intemperate, both in leading the military action in Rome and in arranging the banishment of his enemies – a choice of radical political division that alienates both the Senate and the people, through which Sulla navigates his way skillfully by not further exasperating tensions. His chief aim is to have the chance to lead the campaign in the East. He shows the same ability to think beyond immediate short-term aims in the final part of the Mithridatic conflict, when the prospect of the civil war that awaits him back in Italy is at the forefront. Securing the continuing loyalty of his army is the first, crucial step: as the return to Italy approaches, he fears that they might decide not to continue the fight. He is pleasantly surprised by their offer to contribute with their own financial resources to the war effort, which he duly turns down: as Sallust noted, Sulla preferred having people in debt towards him over having any obligations to anyone (*Iug.* 96.2).

The dominant trait of Plutarch's account of the war of 83/82 BCE is the mismatch in the size of the forces of Sulla and his opponents. The fact that the war is a clash between one man and a complex chain of command is strongly emphasized at the outset (27.5), although Sulla readily manages to form a coalition of capable backers, from Pompey to Crassus and P. Servilius Vatia. The

25 On Plutarch's engagement with Sulla's autobiography cf. Lange & Vervaeke in this volume (chapter 2); on the theme of divine favour in Sulla's work and Plutarch's alertness to it cf. Westall in this volume (59–60).

26 Cf. Swain 1989a, 288 on Plutarch's reluctance to invoke any role for providence in the Lives of the Gracchi, Marius, and Sulla. The *Life of Sulla* is very well served by the excellent commentary of Angeli Bertinelli 1997; Duff 1999, 161–204 provides an invaluable close reading of the work, showing its strong integration with the *Life of Lysander*.

27 *Sull.* 8.1–2; cf. *Mar.* 34.1.

narrative of the first part of the campaign is a series of successes for Sulla's forces, in which organizational talent, dissimulation (especially in the talks with Scipio Asiagenus near Capua) and divine favour emerge as powerful driving factors. The critical moment of the civil war is the battle of the Colline Gate, in November 82, where the enemy is still an external one, even after the end of the Social War: the Samnites led by Pontius Telesinus. The massacre of the prisoners at the Villa Publica following the battle, which Sulla dismisses in a quip addressed to Senate (30.2–3), is an unmistakable sign of what is to come. The people realize that Sulla has not freed Rome, but set up a new tyrannical regime. More importantly to Plutarch's purposes, his character has morphed into that of a ruthless, desiccated political operator, no longer worthy of the good reputation he had earned with the Roman people.²⁸ Again, a clear difference is drawn between him and Marius, who, unlike Sulla, had always had a harsh temper; however, they are both affected by the debasing might of power. Plutarch does not offer a conclusive answer on whether power actually corrupts, or merely reveals personality traits that are otherwise latent.

4 New Forms of Violence: from Sulla to Sertorius

The Villa Publica massacre of November 82 BCE marks another point of discontinuity. It is the opening act of the proscriptions, a distinctive phase of the civil war in its own right. That round of organized massacres reveals two familiar aspects of Sulla's personality: ruthlessness towards his enemies and reluctance to restrain or displease his associates. Paradoxically, they could be understood as the outcome of an attempt to restrain violence. Producing a list of lawful targets is a step that can lead to the end of uncontrolled massacres, and of a phase of uncertainty for those who feared to be affected by violence. Tellingly, the request for it comes from a young Metellus, and is made on the Senate floor.²⁹ Sulla accepts it, but he then oversees its implementation in a personal capacity, and publicly states in a speech to the people that he will include more names in the list as he deems fit. The massacres are singled out as the most striking aspect of the aftermath of his victory, closely integrated with his political strategy: one of conscious centralization of power, in which the

28 For sensitive readings of Sulla's character change in Plutarch see Gill 1983, 478–481 and Swain 1989b, 67–68.

29 That appears to be Plutarch's preferred version: *Sull.* 31.1–2. However, at 31.3 he reports a different version, whereby the request came from a far less distinguished man: Fufidius, one of Sulla's closest associates.

sale of the assets of the proscribed is an aspect of a wider pattern of arbitrary rule. The war has come to an end, but the option of resorting to political violence remains open. His order to assassinate Q. Lucretius Ofella in plain sight, when he put forward his candidacy to the consulship against his advice (34.4), is a stark reminder of his firm control over the sources of political violence – the soldiery and the veterans.

The impact of Sulla on the *res publica* receives hardly any attention in the biography, where the military dimension of his political success is singled out as the leading theme, along with his strong connection with Fortune. In the same vein, the civil wars in which Sulla takes part are hardly at all singled out as significant factors in their own right. Plutarch is also uninterested in pursuing the impact of the civil war of the Eighties in which a new generation of leaders shaped its political outlook. The rivalry between Crassus and Pompey, for example, took shape as they were both competing for Sulla's favour, and Pompey's military prowess shone in stark comparison with the greed and inexperience of Crassus. The involvement in the civil conflict enabled the two men to display their talents and their flaws: it was not, however, a factor that shaped their worldview in any meaningful sense.

The same may be said of Sertorius, whose whole life is shaped by involvement in civil war, and whose long tenure in Spain marks the beginning of an extraordinary conflict, which is civil and foreign at the same time.³⁰ The early stages of his career reveal him as a man of outstanding talent, both military and political. He tries to exert a moderating influence on Marius and Cinna, and reveals an independence of judgement that eventually persuades him to set off for Spain when it becomes apparent that the cause of Sulla's opponents is lost. His long-term plan, right from the outset, is to create a base overseas for those who have lost to Sulla; the prospect may well have been that of organizing a comeback in due course. There is, however, a further level of explanation. In the *Comparison* between Sertorius and Eumenes, Plutarch remarks that Sertorius did not want to have any role in the civil wars, and that tranquility and peace were what he coveted the most (29.1: ἡσυχίας δὲ καὶ πραότητος οἰκέτος). The decision to step up his military presence in Spain is presented as a defensive move, inspired by the imminent arrival of Sulla's forces. His later campaign against the forces of Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius is fought in the same spirit: Plutarch casts him as a reluctant, if admirably well-equipped war hero,

30 Plin. *HN* 7.96 shows that the tension between external and civil conflict – between the conquest of Spain and the crushing of the civil war – was apparent in Pompey's triumph of 71 BCE; see Lange 2016, 106–107.

who had to resort to war if he was to survive in a violent world. His quiet, unstated aspiration was all along to return to Italy (22.5).

Plutarch is developing a tradition that is as strongly favourable to Sertorius as conceivably possible.³¹ Even the decision to form an alternative Senate is constructed as an act of magnanimity towards the senators that had sought his protection, and his negotiations with Mithridates are presented as a further example of his integrity (23–24). Only towards the end of his life does he deflect from this pattern of behaviour, inflicting harsh punishments on some hostages he had captured at Osca: an episode on which Plutarch reflects as an instance of the interpretative problems presented by character change, and as a possible illustration of Sertorius' limitations, notably his inability to withstand bad fortune.³² Sertorius becomes a thought-experiment on what his generation could have been had it rejected civil war and sought different strategies of negotiating and resolving conflicts. Even those who join him, however, fail to meet his moral standards, and end up developing envy and jealousy towards him. They soon embark on a path that takes them to creating a pattern of discord and disruption that eventually leads to a successful attempt on Sertorius' life.

The potential for further political disruption unleashed by the conduct of Sertorius' associates is considerable. When Perperna is captured by Pompey, he seeks to negotiate his way out by offering to show him papers that allegedly proved the contacts between Sertorius and some senior figures in Rome (27.2–3). Pompey, however, refuses to pursue the matter, as he is readily aware of the risks that it may pose to civic stability in Rome. Plutarch explicitly singles out and praises his ability to conduct himself with restraint and maturity. The final comment on Pompey's ability in averting the risk of civil war chimes meaningfully with the running theme in the biography: Sertorius' unwillingness to become involved in civil strife. By way of a paradox, the life of an individual that rejects the dominant vision of domestic conflict as the chief method of resolving political controversies becomes an invaluable vantage point on the age of civil war: Sertorius stands out as the exception that explains the rule. The logic of civil war, on the other hand, drives both Pompey and Caesar, and plays out in the wider setting of a cycle of biographies that are both self-contained projects and texts that lend themselves to, and indeed call for, an integrative reading in the pursuit of strong leading themes: personal ambition, large-scale violence, consuming greed, and the tension between individual choices and overarching historical order.

31 See the commentary on this section of the work in Konrad 1994, 180–202.

32 *Sert.* 25.3–4 and esp. 10.3–4, with the commentary of Konrad 1994, 117–121, 206–208 and the important discussions of Gill 1983, 478–481 and Swain 1989b, 67–68.

5 Pompey's Rise and Fall

Pompey owed his rise to prominence and an extraordinary set of distinctions and honours to having skillfully navigated his way through a long age of civil wars in which he lived his formative years. The distinctive factor of his success was his boldness, with which he took on Sulla and asserted his entitlement to a triumph for which he lacked any legal qualification whatsoever.³³ However, he was not someone who sought civil war as a way of developing and expanding his power base. The restraint he showed in handling Sertorius' papers after his death (*Pomp.* 20.4; cf. *Sert.* 27.2–3) is indicative of a wider commitment to what may be termed the legal political process, and is most emphatically shown by his decision to disband the army upon his return to Italy from the East. That decision was by no means to be taken for granted. A number of people, including Crassus, had made preparations for the arrival of Pompey's soldiers; conversely, the enthusiasm with which his decision was greeted across Italy is a sign of how strong fears were.³⁴ It marked the beginning of a special connection with the municipal communities that grew especially strong in the late Fifties, when Pompey fell ill and prayers were made throughout Italy for his recovery (57.1–3). Plutarch identifies that moment as the turning point in the run-up to the war, as it persuades Pompey that Italy will be on his side whenever he calls for its support – hence the famous prediction that “in whatever part of Italy I stamp upon the ground, there will spring up armies of foot and horse” (57.5: “Ὅπου γὰρ ἂν τῆς Ἰταλίας ἐγὼ κρούσω τῷ ποδί τὴν γῆν, ἀναδύσσονται καὶ πεζικαὶ καὶ ἵππικαὶ δυνάμεις). Plutarch understands it as an instance of unbridled arrogance: the accomplishment of a process of which one could take an early glimpse when he declared the support of his troops to Caesar's agrarian law in 59 BCE (47.4–5). Ironically, though, his haughty reliance on Italy in the late Fifties is contrasted with the good sense and restraint he had shown a decade earlier upon his return from the East.³⁵

Pompey's decision to fight the civil war is as much a moral failing as it reflects a misguided assessment of the loyalty of Italy to his cause. He might to some extent be excused for making that assumption: even when the tide of

33 On Pompey's first triumph see Heftner 1995, 325–334; Seager 2002, 29; Vervaeke 2014, 132–136. On Pompey's career in the Seventies see Vervaeke 2009; see esp. 406–407, 425, 432 for close discussion of the evidence of Plutarch's *Life*.

34 On this passage see Heftner 1995, 156–157. For a thorough and engaging discussion of Pompey's decision see Ridley 2006. The triumph of September 61 marks the peak (ἀκμή) of his trajectory in Plutarch's biography: see *Pomp.* 46.1–2, with Polman 1974, 175.

35 See Jacobs 2018, 269–271 on the role of overconfidence and its interplay with ambition in the *Pompey*.

the civil war is turning, and Caesar is approaching Rome, there is still general goodwill towards him. That widespread favour, however, comes at a hefty price. Pompey is the sort of leader who covets fame and cannot face the prospect of disappointing his friends: that leads him to an unwelcome change of strategy in the early, crucial phase of the civil war. The familiar medical metaphor that is so often deployed in ancient discussions of Late Republican politics takes a thought-provoking turn: Pompey is the sort of physician who is unwilling to impart the correct remedies on a sick patient for fear of causing offence to them (67.5; cf. 55.3).³⁶ He will in turn show a comparable degree of indecisiveness after Pharsalus, when he contemplates options on where to direct his escape, and he is given conflicting and mostly ill-informed advice from the members of his inner circle. His death by the treacherous action of Ptolemy XIII is the final point of his fall from fortune, and of a life that, while marked by remarkable political achievements and driven by relentless ambition, was first and foremost lived in a Republican setting.³⁷ The treatment of his body, however, takes us right into one of the fundamental themes of the Late Republican civil wars in Plutarch's account. The beheading of his corpse is the peak of a tragic tale of treason. Caesar's intervention in Egypt plays out as a normalising factor, which brings about a degree of retribution – the killers of Pompey are duly punished – and stability – the remains of Pompey are handed over to his wife Cornelia, who arranges for their burial in his villa on the Alban Hills: an orderly return to Italy.

6 Caesar's Ambition

The links between the portrayal of Sertorius and that of Caesar are as far-reaching as those between Caesar and Pompey, but take a different twist.³⁸ Sertorius is exceptional because he is prepared to forsake his standing in exchange for his return to Italy (*Sert.* 22.5); δόξα, on the other hand, is singled out as the fundamental reward that Caesar yielded from a whole life of political struggle (*Caes.* 69.1). The connections with other aspects of Late Republican history, however, are even deeper, and more disturbing: Caesar's pursuit of

36 On the flaws of Pompey's leadership in Plutarch see Vervaeke 2006, 951 n. 82. On the body politic theme in the late Republic see Wiseman 2012. Cf. Osgood in this volume (156) on the moral failings that led to the outbreak of the civil war in Plutarch's account.

37 See Swain 1989a, 289–290 on the role that Plutarch attaches to τύχη in Pompey's demise; cf. *Pomp.* 75.4–5 on πρόνοια, "providence" (a *hapax* in the *Lives* in this meaning: Swain 1989a, 301).

38 See Beneker 2010, 113–115.

δόξα puts him in a strong line of continuity with Marius, who is even accused to have been led by his δόξομανία (*Sull.* 7.2) – and his strategy, as we saw above, is informed by misguided principles and priorities. Even the connection between Marius and Caesar that Sulla suggests with his “there are many Mariuses in the boy” comment (*Caes.* 1.4: πολλοὺς ἐν τῷ παιδί τούτῳ Μαρίους) might be seen as a hint to this very point: there is something fundamentally misguided about his conduct, which threatens to bring much harm to the Republic.

Against this background, it is not quite surprising that the Life which identifies civil war most clearly as one of its leading themes should be the biography of Caesar. In fact, Plutarch suggests that the problem should be reframed altogether. The discord between Caesar and Pompey was not the cause of the civil wars (13.5: τοὺς ἐμφυλίους ... πολέμους); their friendship was a far more deeply destabilizing factor, as it led to the political marginalization of the senatorial nobility.³⁹ It was the development that paved the way for a competition whose fundamental stake was monarchic rulership. Plutarch claims that by 52 BCE both Caesar and Pompey had firmly decided to take on each other (28.1). What interests him most, though, is the moral background of the contest: Pompey is increasingly fearful of Caesar, who in turn is increasingly ambitious, and has worked out a complex strategy well in advance. That line of explanation, however, also enables the biographer to shed light on an important historical aspect. Caesar shrewdly exploits the opportunities presented to him by the mounting instability in the city of Rome and by the endemic levels of political violence, which are leading some to openly invoke the advent of a monarchic regime. Although Pompey is initially regarded as the obvious contender to such a role, the climate will prove favourable to Caesar’s strategy. After Munda, the Roman people accept to surrender to the good luck of Caesar (πρὸς τὴν τύχην τοῦ ἀνδρός), and come to regard monarchy as a relief from the civil wars (57.1). Although they are quite clear that the new setup is tyrannical, they are prepared to grant Caesar a perpetual dictatorship. The negotiations preceding the outbreak of the civil war are duly reported, and Plutarch does note that Caesar’s demands were fairly moderate and in principle conciliatory: this conduct is left unexplained.⁴⁰ His actual motives, however, are second-guessed by

39 The devastating consequences of that friendship are also evoked at *Cat. Min.* 30.6, where part of the blame is also laid at Cato’s door: his refusal to form a marriage connection with Pompey led him to side with Caesar, unleashing a chain of events that brought about the demise of the Republic (Jacobs 2018, 410–411). See Swain 1990b, 200 for further instances of Plutarch’s low concept of Cato’s political ability.

40 On the evidence for these negotiations and the different outlooks of Suetonius, Plutarch, and Appian cf. Wardle in this volume (chapter 16).

some of his contemporaries. When Caesar, after his arrival at Rome, instructs some senators to approach Pompey with the offer of an agreement, they do not follow up on the request, partly because they are unsure whether it is genuine. P. Servilius Vatia Isauricus (*cos.* 48 BCE) makes the case against a settlement with Pompey in order to please Caesar; Plutarch notes they jointly held the consulship shortly afterwards, strongly suggesting that his earlier course of action was in keeping with Caesar's unstated plan (37.2).

The crossing of the Rubicon is of course a moment of deep significance, but also proves an opportunity for Caesar to reflect on the magnitude of the enterprise that awaits him. The decision to leave Cisalpine Gaul in arms is preceded by much silent deliberation and extensive conversations with friends. Asinius Pollio is among them, and Plutarch is certainly making use of his first-hand account (32.5–9).⁴¹ What is foremost in Caesar's mind is the reputation that the decision he is about to take will leave to future generations: the uncertainty that Plutarch's Caesar openly manifests here is nowhere to be seen in Suetonius' depiction of this event, nor does the biographer include the apparition of a "figure of extraordinary size and beauty" (*quidam eximia magnitudine et forma*) at the scene, which plays a central role in Suetonius' account (*Iul.* 32) and gives decisive endorsement to Caesar's decision.⁴² In Plutarch the crossing of the Rubicon is an opportunity to signal and explore the moral implications of the war that is shaping on the horizon, and their significance to the wider exploration of the impact of ambition that Caesar's life prompts.

It is also an event that readily has very tangible consequences. It unleashes a commotion and disruption that affects Italy as a whole, and proves wrong Pompey's prediction on his ability to draw widespread support across the peninsula. The confusion, however, does not just affect Pompey, whose judgement proves increasingly less sound.⁴³ It also involves the consuls, who flee Rome without having fulfilled their religious obligations, and to the senatorial order as a whole, irrespective of political allegiance. The only individual who can see clearly in a garbled context in which no one is able to speak the language of truth is Caesar himself, whose conduct might be reprehensible on the moral level, but is politically lucid. When the tribune L. Metellus seeks to prevent him from drawing money from the *aerarium*, Caesar instructs him to withdraw his opposition, as war does not allow for

41 On Pollio's evidence for the late Republican civil wars see Turner in this volume (chapter 3).

42 See Beneker 2011, 85–88, 95–96. Cf. Pelling 2011, 312–315; Santangelo 2013, 236–237; Wardle in this volume (chapter 16).

43 *Caes.* 33.1–5. See Pelling 2010, 111–113 and 2011, 320–323, who stresses the Thucydidean motifs of this section of the biography (cf. above n. 4).

unfettered speech (*παρρησία*): he shall have to wait until the end of the war to revive his demagoguery (*δημαγωγώσεις*).⁴⁴ Civil war entails the suspension of politics. In fact, Caesar notes that even bothering to warn Metellus is an unnecessary concession: he has unfettered rights over the city of Rome, which he has just conquered, and over all the opponents that he has captured. When Metellus continues his opposition, Caesar threatens to have him killed, and warns him that for him it is harder to say than to do so: an ambiguous statement, which stresses his position of force, but also indirectly alludes to the long-standing deployment of clemency in his dealings with internal enemies. Plutarch directly engages with the significance of that theme in Caesar's political strategy as he comments on his "blameless record" (57.3: *ἀνέγκλητον*) in the aftermath of his rise to sole power: the decision of the people to dedicate a temple to *Clementia* is strong confirmation of their gratitude. The picture, however, is somewhat qualified by a not fully resolved tension between the military and the political domains. Caesar celebrates a triumph over his fellow-citizens that he had defeated at the end of the war, and that choice is regarded as unduly harsh and inappropriate by many of his fellow-citizens. Moreover, the ambition to obtain further military distinction keeps playing an important role in his decision-making, and leads him to plan further endeavours and covet greater achievements, first and foremost a campaign against Parthia. Although the connection is not openly stated, it is hard not to see the same theme that is developed at length in the final section of the biography of Marius.⁴⁵ Caesar does not quite display a comparable moral failure, but a lingering sense of unsettledness and apparent disorder marks his final months. Moreover, the imminent Parthian campaign has the unintended and not negligible outcome of encouraging the rumour that the Sibylline Books state that the Romans would be able to defeat the Parthians only under the leadership of a king (60.2). The story of course has a hostile slant towards Caesar, and corroborates a climate in which his enemies find a margin to take action against him. One is left with the impression that, having fully worked out what was required of him in a phase of civil war, Caesar did not prove prudent and vigilant enough when his newly gained power had to be consolidated and defended.

The account of the war takes up a significant section of the biography, as it is a defining moment in *Caesar* (28–46) – more so than is the case in the

44 *Caes.* 35.6–8.

45 See above, Section 3. Swain 1990, 133 points to an important difference: no connection is established between Caesar's ambition and his education. On "internal *synkrisis*" linking different biographies see Beck 2002 (esp. 469–470 on the links among the Lives of Marius, Sulla, and Lucullus) and esp. Stadter 2015a. Mewaldt 1907 remains valuable reading.

biography of Pompey: a lengthy summary of the operations is given, which is also one of the most thorough surviving discussions of the conflict. Pharsalus is of course the endpoint of the campaign, and the moment when Caesar spells out the rationale for his choice to embark on civil war:⁴⁶

Τοῦτο ἐβουλήθησαν, εἰς τοῦτό με ἀνάγκης ὑπηγάγοντο, ἵνα Γάϊος Καίσαρ ὁ μεγίστους πολέμους κατορθώσας, εἰ προηγάμην τὰ στρατεύματα, κἄν κατεδικάσθην.

They would have it so; they brought me to such a pass that if I, Gaius Caesar, after waging successfully the greatest wars, had dismissed my forces, I should have been convicted.

The focus is then shifted towards his movements and the process through which the victory in the civil war is managed. The campaigns in North Africa and in Spain receive some discussion, but in both instances the main focus is the way in which Caesar treated those he had defeated: his frustration at Cato's suicide, which had deprived him of a chance to pardon one of his greatest enemies, and the ruthlessness with which he celebrated a triumph after defeating the sons of Pompey in Spain.⁴⁷ Caesar's triumphs are in fact the main political and moral problem that his victory raises. The triumphs he celebrates upon his return from Africa are a powerful indicator of the extent of his power, and an opportunity to display his generosity towards the people (55.4–6); the one he holds upon his return from Spain causes deep discontent, and is widely perceived as a celebration for the woes that had befallen Rome (56.7–9). Those ill-feelings do not prevent Caesar's contemporaries from regarding his victory as welcome respite from the season of the civil wars, and as a result of his good fortune. The tyrannical nature of the regime is openly stated and apparent to everyone. It soon proves unbearable for many. The climate of oppressive honours decreed in favour of the monarch creates the conditions that raise support around Brutus to lead the conspiracy.

46 Plut. *Caes.* 46.1. On these words, which Plutarch claims were uttered in Greek and later reported in Latin by Pollio, see Stadter 2016, 207–208, Chrysanthou 2018, 79–80, and Wardle in this volume (387, n. 45); cf. Suet. *Iul.* 30.4 (*hoc uoluerunt*).

47 Cf. *Cat. Min.* 72.3 for the suggestion that Cato may have wanted to deprive Caesar of an opportunity to further his reputation; see Zadorojnyi 2007, 220 (the whole paper is an invaluable close reading of Plutarch's account of Cato's suicide).

7 Civil War and Republican Freedom

Plutarch establishes a close connection between Brutus and his uncle and mentor Cato, in the *Life of Caesar* and elsewhere.⁴⁸ Their involvement in the age of the civil wars is defined as a moment at which considerations of principle prevail: the point is strongly stated in the *Life of Brutus*. When the civil war broke out, Brutus was expected to choose Caesar against Pompey, who had killed his father; however, he firmly chose the latter's camp, in spite of his own connection with Caesar. The same resolve to do justice to his principles is asserted until the bitter end. He rejects the option of sole rulership (29.3–7), while all those who had taken a leading role in the civil wars of that generation had clearly been pursuing monarchic aims, albeit without confessing it. Even Cassius, his closest associate, operated within those terms of reference. The spirit of Brutus' actions was duly recognised by Antony, who noted that he was the only conspirator who was led by conviction, rather than by hatred. In turn, Plutarch relates Brutus' bitter criticism of Antony, who had the chance to bring that monarchic spiral to an end in reaching an agreement with the assassins of Caesar, but chose to form an alliance with Octavian. Commitment to his principles entails clairvoyance. Precisely because he rejects the competitive, and ultimately self-destructive, paradigm within which they are acting, Brutus can accurately predict that the two allies at Philippi will soon be taking on each other in another fratricide war.⁴⁹

The same commitment to Republican freedom and the same rejection of the link between civil war and monarchy are also apparent in Cato, with an intensity that is hardly matched by any of his contemporaries. The urge for tyrannicide – the moral and political resolve that it requires – are already in Cato since his youth. Plutarch reports that, when he visited Sulla's house as a boy and saw the severed heads of many victims of the proscriptions there, he formed the plan to kill the man who was holding Rome in slavery. Only the good sense of his tutor Sarpedon stopped him from committing the deed. The biography provides a signally rich set of information on the African campaign, notably of the events leading up to, and immediately following Thapsus (56–65). The position of Cato in the conflict matches his increasingly influential standing in the politics of the Late Republic, but is, in some important respects, in sharp contradiction with it. Cato had long been warning his contemporaries against Caesar's intentions, and was no uncritical admirer of Pompey: in fact,

48 See Swain 1990b, 201–202 on the close comparability between the two characters.

49 Cf. however *Caes.* 62.8, where Brutus' ambition is said to have played a role in prompting his decision to join the conspiracy against Caesar. See Pelling 2012, 59, 65.

he lamented the predicament of the Senate, which was now compelled to concentrate all its hopes on one man. Nonetheless, when Pompey flees Rome Cato decides to follow him, but a crucial detail reveals his deeper attitude: from the day of his departure, he did not shave or cut his hair, and retained a disheveled and melancholy attitude to the end of his life.⁵⁰ His outward disorder becomes a symptom of the wider political predicament: again, as is the case in the *Lives of Marius and Sulla*, the body of a political leader reveals less evident aspects of the surrounding political dynamics.

Cato's appearance appears to reflect, in fact, a further aim. His hope is to protract the conflict so that an accommodation might become possible, and so that Rome and her citizens might be spared unsustainable losses. His specific ambition is to confine the struggle to the battlefield and restrict its impact on civilians. The events of Dyrrhachium show that ambition to be beyond reach. The same principle, however, also informs the final part of his African campaign, when he abetted the flight of many of his associates, whilst refusing any approach to Caesar, and especially the prospect of seeking his pardon as a suppliant.

8 Antony between Virtue, Fortune, and Failure

Plutarch appears to be more keenly interested in Caesar's enemies than in his friends. Even the connection with Antony does not receive as thorough scrutiny as one might expect. His role in Caesar's victory is recognized as significant, but receives little attention. In the *Life of Antony* his major contribution to the breakthrough of Caesar's forces at Pharsalus is singled out (8.2); however, he does not take part in the following stages of the war, but is shortly afterwards sent to Rome to act as Caesar's master of the horse. The turning point of Antony's political trajectory is the immediate aftermath of the Ides of March, when the struggle over Caesar's legacy begins. Until that point he had earned a bad reputation in Rome, as the haughtiest and least competent exponent of Caesar's inner circle. His attitude towards his fellow-citizens had played an important role in setting a hostile climate towards the new regime, regardless of Caesar's merits. When the Dictator is killed, though, Antony pursues a conciliatory approach towards the Liberators that readily establishes his reputation with the people as a force for concord and peace. It turns out to be a short-lived development. His newly gained popularity persuades him that there is margin for gaining supreme power, and that Brutus is the only obstacle

⁵⁰ *Cat. Min.* 53.1. On this episode cf. Osgood in this volume (139–140).

he needs to overcome.⁵¹ Its push for reconciliation turns out to be the factor that unleashes civil war.

Plutarch's overall assessment of Antony leaves little room for mitigation: he is driven by a violent and tyrannical instinct, and his aim is to overwhelm and oppress his fellow-citizens. However, he has one important quality: he can focus his mind and display considerable valour when he is under pressure. In the aftermath of the war of Mutina, he proves a formidable guide for his soldiers, and a commander that can readily share their hardest toils (17.3).⁵² When necessary, he can turn into a crafty political operator. Persuading his longtime associate Lepidus to lend him assistance at that time proves crucial to his future prospects. When he realizes that there is no obvious appetite for his return, he seeks the option of moving his counterparts to pity, and turns up at the camp with long, disheveled hair and a long beard that he had grown for some time, since his defeat at Mutina (18.1). There is a superficial similarity with Cato's choice to let his hair grow after the outbreak of the civil war. What had been a principled decision by a man who was signaling an epoch-making change, though, in Antony's case becomes a ploy that is intended to serve a short-term goal, and duly pays off. Lepidus' soldiers are moved by his sight, and even initiate talks against the will of their commander.

Antony consistently stands out as a formidable military leader, whose worth emerges with notable strength during the war against the Liberators, in which his contribution was much stronger than Octavian's. What betrays him is a misreading of the wider strategic outlook. He should not have delayed the beginning of the conflict, and should have prevented Octavian from organizing his forces with calm, making the most of the turmoil in Rome (58.1–2). His connection with Cleopatra is dismissed as the virtually inevitable outcome of a strategic situation in which no other allied king could compete with the queen's ability and talent. Plutarch implicitly regards that bond as deeply damaging to Antony, and cursorily notes that the victory of Octavian was historically necessary.⁵³ There is, however, at least one circumstance that Antony should have handled differently. His long stay at Samos with Cleopatra as the civil war was raging did not do their standing any service among those who were suffering from the impact of the conflict (56.4). The development of the war shows

51 There is actually a good case for arguing that the game-changer was Octavian's arrival: see Jordan 2017, esp. 186–187; Matijević 2018, 225–232 is unconvinced.

52 Plutarch's account of the war of Mutina is heavily compressed (Pelling 1988, 160). Cf. Gowing 1992, 46–47, 69–70 and Osgood 2006, 8 on Plutarch's place in the tradition on the Triumviral period vis-à-vis Appian and Cassius Dio.

53 *Ant.* 56.3. A major theme in the Roman Lives: references and discussion in Jones 1971, 100–101 and Swain 1990, 291–298.

an apparent and steady decline of his standards of leadership. When he flees Actium, at the end of a battle that he was fully equipped to win, his men wait for him to reappear for seven days, showing a deep commitment to a cause that he had by then defected.⁵⁴ Their decision to join Octavian's ranks is a further step marking the end of the civil conflict, and the moment that reveals his willingness to accept the worthier elements of the enemy forces in the victorious coalition and in the settlement that the end of the war will bring about.

9 Hating Cicero

Plutarch constructs Antony's hatred of Cicero as one of the defining themes of his life and his political career: his connection with P. Cornelius Lentulus, the second husband of his mother, is singled out as its chief reason (2.1–2). In fact, Cicero can enable a valuable reading of Antony's role in the age of civil wars and in its immediate aftermath, and the *Life of Cicero* offers especially useful insights. Cicero approaches the civil war of 49 BCE with the attitude and ambition of someone who is hoping to act as the valued advisor of both parties of the conflict (37–38). His choice to join Pompey, after months in which he had tried to enable a settlement, was chiefly driven by Caesar's failure to write to him directly. He readily comes to disapprove of Pompey's strategy, but lacks the ability to influence it, except for making some comments in jest. Cicero does not quite reject the dominant logic of an age of civil war, but is not in a position to play a meaningful role in that context. His enmity with Antony is determined both by an element of personal hostility and by political opposition. The crucial factor, however, in Plutarch's assessment, is the shrewd manoeuvring of young Octavian, who managed to turn Cicero's vanity and ambition in his own favour. When he is met by his assassins, Cicero is also looking dishevelled (48.4), but his appearance is not a political statement, unlike Cato's, or a manipulative device, like Antony's: it is a detail for Plutarch's readers to notice and reflect on. The fate that Cicero's body encounters is well known, and has rightly received renewed attention in recent scholarship.⁵⁵ The way in which Antony deals with the body of his archenemy is telling of his political method – of what he is capable. That is not a set rule, though: after

54 *Ant.* 68.3. Lange 2011 has a thorough discussion of the evidence for the battle and defends the basic reliability of the ancient tradition; on Antony's flight see 610–611. On Plutarch's role in the ancient tradition on Actium see Osgood 2006, 373–375, esp. n. 98; *Ant.* 68.1 shows awareness of Augustus' autobiography (see Lange in this volume [197]). See Jacobs 2018, 362–363 on Antony's bond with his soldiers.

55 Richlin 1999; Butler 2002, 1–2, 122–123; Osgood 2006, 87–88.

Philippi he takes a direct interest in the burial of Brutus, and wraps his corpse in his own purple cloak (22.4).⁵⁶

The concern over ensuring a proper burial is clearly a constant theme in the history of this phase of the civil wars, and an issue on which Plutarch pointedly insists, in keeping with his wider interest in the role that bodies can play in politics. In the will divulged by Octavian, Antony had expressed the wish for his body to be delivered to Cleopatra, wherever he might die. That clause was used to construct a hostile portrait of Antony, but was eventually upheld: Octavian insisted on handing the body over to the queen, in the brief phase of talks that precede her suicide (82.1). The triple triumph of August 29 BCE, which marks the end of the civil war along with the victories in Egypt and Illyricum, features a portrait of Cleopatra being bitten by the asp (86.3): a way of bringing the body of the queen that had avoided captivity into the core of the celebration that marked the end of the war.⁵⁷ For a body that was forcibly brought into the City, another is posthumously ejected from it: the statues of Mark Antony are removed on order of the Senate.⁵⁸ Plutarch conveys this piece of information right at the end of the *Life of Cicero*, and for a significant reason. Octavian, ever attentive to the performative dimension of politics, made sure that the decision be taken in 30 BCE, when he was sharing the consulship with Cicero's son.⁵⁹

Plutarch does not explicitly identify a specific moment in late Republican history as the endpoint of the age of the civil wars, and that was surely beyond his concerns. If one wished to identify one, though, the incident with which he concludes his biography of a great loser of the Late Republican civil wars could be as good a solution as any. It restates the central role of great individuals in major historical processes, marks an attempt to bring about a degree of moral order and retribution after a long season of civil wars, and prompts some reflection on the ties between political involvement and intellectual work. Those three problems – unlike the Late Republican civil wars – certainly had a very prominent place among Plutarch's interests.

56 See also *Brut.* 53.4. Cf. Antony's resentment at how Cicero had treated Lentulus' corpse in 63 BCE: *Ant.* 2.2.

57 On the triumph of 29 see Lange 2009, 148–156; 2016, 138–139, 188–189. The snakes depicted may have actually been two: Pelling 1988, 322.

58 Cf. *Ant.* 86.5, where the fate of Antony's statues is contrasted with that of Cleopatra's. Cf. also Octavian's decision to allow the people of Milan to keep displaying a statue of Brutus in their forum: *Comp. Dion Brutus* 6, with Santangelo 2016, 144–146.

59 See *Cic.* 49.5: Cicero the Younger was in fact consul suffect. In *App. B Civ.* 4.51 young Cicero reads out the dispatch of Antony's defeat at Actium, from the very rostra where his father's head had been displayed; on this passage see Beard 2002, 142–143 and Welch in this volume (451).

10 A Wider World

A further theme must be addressed by way of conclusion. It is a point that deepens our appreciation of Plutarch's engagement with the civil wars of the first century, while framing it in a more ambitious and wide-ranging discourse. Plutarch shows a keen awareness of the impact of the late Republican civil wars on the Greek East. He is not interested in explaining the reasons that led to a shift from civil wars that were fought chiefly in Italy to wars that were fought across the Empire over supremacy in Rome. He is quite clear, however, that the war was part of a phase that had major consequences on the Greek East, notably on mainland Greece. Instances of such awareness are not confined to the biographies, and reveal a thoughtful engagement with the wider historical picture. In the *De defectu oraculorum* (413f–414a), Ammonius stresses the extent of the decrease of manpower (κοινή ὀλιγανδρία) that Greece suffered because of the “past upheavals and wars” (αἱ πρότεροι στάσεις καὶ οἱ πόλεμοι) that had affected the “whole world” (περὶ πᾶσαν ὁμοῦ τι τὴν οἰκουμένην). The reference is clearly to the age of the civil wars, and Plutarch's teacher claims that Greece has suffered the consequences of the conflict more than any other part of the world.⁶⁰

In places the process that led to the conquest of the Greek world is closely interconnected with the development of the civil wars. In the *Life of Sulla*, the confiscations suffered by the Panhellenic sanctuaries in the early phase of the First Mithridatic War feed into the discussion of a major theme in Roman history, notably the relationship between military commanders and soldiers. The need to please and reward the soldiery has led, in Plutarch's assessment, to grave consequences for the subject communities, after an initial phase in which the Roman commanders succeeded in enforcing high standards of discipline (12.4–9). The process predated Sulla, but he played a crucial role in deepening and accelerating it. Plutarch shares the same reservations as Sallust on the impact of Sulla on both Italy and the Greek East, and it is conceivable that they echoed, in their own different ways, the views put forward in a text or in an intellectual tradition to which they both had access (Posidonius is a distinct, though unverifiable possibility).⁶¹

However, Plutarch also has a more personal, far less abstract level of engagement with, and understanding of, the age of the civil wars and their place in the history of Greece. The *Life of Antony* records a remarkable incident. The biographer relates a story told by his great-grandfather Nicarchus: the sort

60 On this passage see Swain 1989a, 297; Desideri 2012c, 358–359.

61 Sall. *Cat.* 11.4–7.

of anecdote in which family traditions, small-town history, and a major moment in history powerfully intersect. Nicarchus was in the Boeotian town of Anticyra, a port on the Gulf of Corinth, while the battle of Actium was being fought. Like many (Plutarch says “all”, ἀπαντες) of his fellow-citizens, he had arrived there from Chaeronea, his hometown in inland Boeotia, carrying on his shoulders a set amount of wheat to the port where Antony’s ships were docked.⁶² Fulfilling requests for grain supplies to the army was a key task that the inhabitants of Greece were expected to perform for the new strongman. As soon as the news of Actium reached Anticyra, though, the scenario swiftly changed. Antony’s soldiers fled the city, and the good people of Chaeronea were free to keep their grain and share it among themselves (we are not told how evenly). For the city, in Plutarch’s view, it was nothing short of salvation. The text implies that Octavian let that arrangement stand: he had made a ruling to that effect at the beginning of the campaign. There might have been a providential side to his victory, but the support he commanded was rooted in genuine material considerations.

The tale is revealing testimony to the extent and quality of Plutarch’s engagement with the period. On the one hand, it roots it in the context of mainland Greece and its own memories of the civil wars. On the other, it goes to show that Plutarch’s evidence for the late Republican civil wars speaks of a significantly wider world than Rome and Italy. By situating more precisely Plutarch’s reading of the civil wars against its Hellenic backdrop, as well as against his familiarity with a rich set of Roman historical traditions, we can hope to attain a much fuller appreciation of its significance and impact in the longer term.⁶³

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62 Plut. *Ant.* 68.4–5. See Pelling 1988, 288–289, who draws attention to the “heightened language” with which Plutarch describes the plight of Greece, and Osgood 2006, 370–371.

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