PLUTARCH'S COMPOSITIONAL METHODS
IN THE *THESEUS AND ROMULUS* [1]

DAVID H. J. LARMOUR
Texas Tech University

It is a critical commonplace to say that the *Parallel Lives* are neither "history" nor "biography" in the modern sense. Plutarch's main interest is the character of his subjects, and his main aim is to draw moral lessons for his readers.[2] The juxtaposition of two *Lives*, one Greek and one Roman, serves this moral purpose: as C. P. Jones puts it:

> To study virtue in action, it was useful to observe two examples in different contexts: the observer could then distinguish what was essential to each virtue from what was accidental. A Greek and a Roman paired together made a particularly rewarding subject, since the difference of their backgrounds ensured a clear view of the virtue which they had in common. (106)

In addition, most pairs of *Lives* are followed by a *Synkrisis*, in which Plutarch assesses the behaviour and character of each protagonist under various headings and assigns moral superiority to one or the other.

Given this approach, a question naturally arises as to how far Plutarch's moral purpose led him to mould his apparently objective narrative in such a way as to facilitate the drawing of instructive comparisons and contrasts between two *Lives*. In other words, how many of the parallels and differences are fortuitous and how many contrived? To answer this fully would, of course, require an exhaustive study of all the pairs,[3] but the *Theseus and Romulus* may

---

[1] The following works will be referred to by the author's surname only: F. Brommer, *Theseus, Die Taten des griechischen Helden in der antiken Kunst und Literatur* (Darmstadt 1982); F. J. Frost, "Plutarch and Theseus," *CB* 60.4 (1984) 65–73; H. Herter, "Theseus," *RE Suppl.* 13.1045–1238; C. P. Jones, *Plutarch and Rome* (Oxford 1971); C. B. R. Pelling, "Plutarch's Adaptation of his Source-Material," *JHS* 100 (1980) 127–40; J. B. Carter in W. H. Roscher, *Lexicon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig 1924, repr. Hildesheim 1965); D. A. Russell, *Plutarch* (New York 1973). Citations from the *Lives* follow the Teubner edition of K. Ziegler (Leipzig 1960–80).

[2] Cf. Pelling, 135: "His interest is character, ἦθος...biography will often concentrate on personal detail, and may abbreviate its historical narrative; its concentration will be the portrayal of character, and its ultimate purpose will be protreptic and moral." See, for example, *Alex.* 1.1–2; *Pomp.* 8.6–7; *Cim.* 2.2–5.

[3] See P. A. Stadter, "Plutarch's Comparison of Pericles and Fabius Maximus," *GRBS* 16 (1975) 77–85, who raises the issue in general and discusses it with reference to a particular pair of *Lives*: he points out (77) that the purpose of the *Lives* is "to make clear the moral qualities of the heroes who are being described"

be expected to illustrate Plutarch's modus operandi more clearly than most, since, in dealing with two legendary figures, he was presumably less constrained than usual by the claims of widely-accepted and reliable historical data. Indeed, he remarks in the opening chapter of the *Theseus* that he is going to write of times which might be said to be the preserve of wonders and fables, poets and mythographers, doubt and obscurity (1.3).

The similarities between Theseus and Romulus are set out in a kind of Prooemium (*Th.* 2). These are six in number: each man (1) had a mysterious and uncertain parentage and was reputed to be of divine descent; (2) performed warrior deeds; (3) was responsible for the foundation (or synoecism) of one of the world's two great cities; (4) perpetrated the rape of women; (5) suffered domestic misfortune and the resentful anger of a relative; and (6) came into conflict with his fellow-citizens in later years. The two *Lives,* moreover, follow the same basic pattern: birth—rearing by foster-parents—prodigious youthful behaviour—warrior deeds—death of a close relative—foundation (or synoecism) and organization of a great city—more warrior deeds—unpopularity—death— veneration. On the moral plane, each *Life* charts the rise of a warrior and statesman, through his strength and virtue, and his subsequent fall through pride and the abandonment of his former ways (cf. *Rom.* 26.1).

A parallel pattern is also discernible in certain important episodes. For example, the synoecism of Athens and the foundation of Rome (*Th.* 24–26; *Rom.* 9–13) both take place after the death of a close relative (Theseus' father and Romulus' brother), directly or indirectly caused by the protagonist of each *Life*. Each hero attends to the utterances of the Delphic oracle (*Th.* 24.4–5; *Rom.* 9.3) and each institutes religious festivals (*Th.* 23.2–3; 24.3–4; 25.5; *Rom.* 21–22.1). Both rulers receive outsiders willingly (*Th.* 25.1; *Rom.* 9.3) and divide the population into groups, taking care, at the same time, to ensure that the relationship between the groups is harmonious (*Th.* 25.2; *Rom.* 13).

Such similarities and parallels as these are not contrivances of Plutarch. Nevertheless, there are a couple of peculiarities. For instance, the statement (*Rom.* 9.3) that it was in obedience to an oracle from *Delphi* that Romulus threw open the sanctuary of the god of Asylum to all comers is rather surprising. Parke and Wormell believe that this oracle was not a Roman

and comments (78) that "we might expect each life to be influenced and subtly shaped by its mate, as Plutarch searches to bring out the similarities and differences of his heroes." Pelling discusses Plutarch's manipulation of detail in six of the Roman *Lives* (those of Antony, Brutus, Caesar, Cato, Crassus and Pompey): he finds devices for (a) abridging source-material (the conflation of similar items, chronological compression), (b) expanding inadequate material (fabrication of circumstantial details or of contexts) and (c) organizing the narrative in a pleasing manner (chronological displacement and the transferal of items from one character to another); see also his "Plutarch's Method of Work in the Roman Lives," *JHS* 99 (1979) 74–96; D. A. Russell, "Plutarch's Life of Coriolanus," *JRS* 53 (1963) 21–28; C. P. Jones, "Plutarch," *Ancient Writers: Greece and Rome* (New York 1982), 2.961–983, esp. 969–71; 973–77.

tradition;[4] Jones (89) notes that there were many attempts by later historians to strengthen the mythological and historical links between the Romans and the Greeks, and sees this as a typical example. It is also possible, however, that Plutarch chose to include this detail—or even invented it—simply as a device to link the two *Lives* in some way in the mind of the reader, since there are so many references to the Delphic oracle in the *Theseus* (3.5; 5.1; 18.3; 24.4–5; 26.5).[5]

There is another, much more obvious, use of this technique of assocation by Plutarch. The role of Heracles in the *Theseus* is large and important, so much so that it almost causes an artistic imbalance in the early sections.[6] Heracles is, of course, connected with Rome, even if not directly with Romulus, through the tradition that he fought with Cacus on the future site of the city[7] and that he was the father of Pallas and Latinus;[8] thus it is no surprise that Plutarch includes a reference to the tradition that Roma was the daughter of Telephus, the son of Heracles, in his discussion of the origin of the name of Rome. In two other places, however, references are made to Heracles on what seem to be the flimsiest of pretexts: at 9.6, after recounting the omen of the vultures, Plutarch notes that Herodorus Ponticus says that Heracles too was once very glad to see a vulture, and then launches into a digression on birds. Another jarring importation of Heracles occurs in 5: Acca Larentia was the foster-mother of the infants and so the Romans sacrifice to her; but, we are informed, they also pay honours to another Larentia, namely the one who was visited by Heracles. The story is then told at length.[9]

---

[4] *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford 1956) 1.65–66; R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy books 1–5* (Oxford 1965) 62 notes that Cos and Cyrene were prompted by Delphic oracles to establish places of asylum. See also Carter 4.184–85.

[5] Note also at *Rom.* 28.4–6, Plutarch compares Proculus' story of his meeting with the divine Romulus to the Greek tales of Aristeas of Proconnesus and Cleomedes of Astypaleia, the latter of which includes a consultation of the oracle at Delphi.

[6] He appears at 6.5–9; 7–8.2; 11; 26.1; 29.3–5; 30.4–5; 33.1–2; 35.1–3. The close connection between Theseus and Heracles appears to be traditional: Diodorus Siculus, for instance, remarks at 4.59.1 that, now that he has described the deeds of Heracles, he will speak of Theseus, since he emulated the labours of Heracles and went to Athens by land, ζηλωτὴς ὢν τῆς 'Ηρακλέους ἀρετῆς. Cf. Isoc., *Helen* 23: the highest praise that can be given to Theseus is that he won a fame rivalling that of his illustrious contemporary—οὐ γὰρ μόνον τοῖς ὅπλοις ἐκοσμήσαντο παραπλησίοις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασιν ἐχρήσαντο τοῖς αὐτοῖς, πρέποντα τῇ συγγενείᾳ ποιοῦντες.

[7] Also mentioned at *Mor.* 315C (from Dercyllus); cf. Livy 7.3–15; Virgil, *Aen.* 8.185–275; Ovid, *Fast.* 1.543–86; Prop. 4.9.1–20; Dion. Hal. 1.39–42; Servius ad *Aen.* 8.190.

[8] See Dion. Hal. 1.43; Livy (1.7.1) notes that the worship of Heracles at the Ara Maxima was the only foreign worship adopted by Romulus (cf. Virgil, *Aen.* 8.185); see Ogilvie (above, note 4) 55–56.

[9] Cf. *Mor.* 272F–273E (= *Quaest. Rom.* 35); Livy 1.4.7; Dion. Hal. 1.84; 87; Macrob. 1.10. 1–17; Aul. Gell. 7.7.8; Tzet. ad Lyc. 1232.

Such references to Heracles in the *Romulus* may well have been introduced
in order to preserve that balance of similarity and difference between the *Lives*
which is necessary for the success of the project and its moral lesson. To have
Heracles play such an important role in the *Theseus* without some
corresponding mention, at least, in the account of Romulus, would create an
awkward asymmetry. These references serve to join the two *Lives* by yet
another, albeit rather thin, thread in the reader's mind and to enhance the
parallelism. They appear, moreover, to be characteristic of Plutarch's method—
there are similar, apparently unmotivated, references to Socrates in the *Aristides
and Cato Maior*, to Agamemnon in the *Agesilaus and Pompey* and to Plato in
the *Lycurgus and Numa*.[10]

Having outlined the similarities, we may now consider the differences
between the two *Lives*. The categories of similarity set out in *Th.* 2 are picked
up in the *Synkrisis*, where they and they alone, form the basis of the discussion
of the differences between Theseus and Romulus.[11] H. Erbse has established the
importance of the *Synkrisis* with regard to Plutarch's compositional method.[12]
He concludes:

> die in dem Rahmenparten zusammengestellten Gemeinsamkeiten
> und Verschiedenheiten...gleichsam das Gerüst beider Lebens-
> geschichten bilden. Sieht man von Exkursen und gelehrten
> Zwischenbemerkungen ab, so läßt sich behaupten: jede der in
> Prooimion und Epilog genannten Kategorien wird im Verlauf der
> Darstellung erläutert, und umgekehrt fungiert jeder tragende
> Bestandteil der Bibliographie als Manifestation der genannten
> (oder vorausgesetzen) Charakteristika. (409)

Detailed examination of the narrative of the *Theseus and Romulus* indicates
that it is, to a significant extent, written with the *Synkrisis* in mind. Plutarch
frequently paves the way for the formal presentation of the differences between

---

[10] I am grateful to Prof. David Sansone for this observation; *Arist.* 1.9; 27.3–4
and *Cato Mai.* 7.1; 20.3; 23.1; *Ages.* 5.6; 6.7; 9.7 and *Pomp.* 67.5 (cf. *Syn.*
4.4); *Lyc.* 5.10; 16.6; 29.1; 31.2 and *Numa* 8.2; 20.8–11.

[11] Category (2) is dealt with in *Syn.* 1 and 4.2; (3) in *Syn.* 4; (4) in *Syn.* 6; (5)
in *Syn.* 3. 5 and 6.5; and (6) in *Syn.* 2. Only category (1) is not taken up in
detail in the *Synkrisis,* for the obvious reason that it (obscure parentage and
reputed divine descent) has relatively little to do with the differences in lifestyle
and character discussed therein.

[12] "Die Bedeutung der Synkrisis in den Parallelbiographien Plutarchs," *Hermes*
84 (1956) 398–424; in general, the *Synkrisis* has been woefully neglected by
scholars; Jones, in his essay on Plutarch (see above, note 3), comments (969)
that the *sykriseis* deserve more attention: they are "not mere appendices to the
Lives, but vital to understanding their moral purpose. Moreover, they have their
part in the architecture of the *Parallel Lives* and are designed to show the
differences between the heroes just as the prefaces show their similarities." Apart
from Erbse's article, which includes a survey of the contributions of previous
commentators on the *Lives*, see especially F. Focke, "Synkrisis," *Hermes* 58
(1923) 327–68; S. Costanza, "La synkrisis nello schema biografico di Plutarco,"
Messana 4 (1956) 127–56; and the comments of Russell 110–16.

the Greek and the Roman by a careful moulding of the biographical narrative. He recounts particular incidents in a tone designed to arouse approval or disapproval in the reader.[13] He also pronounces on the motivation behind various actions and thereby tries to colour our view of the hero's behaviour in advance of the explicit moral statements in the *Synkrisis*.[14] More specifically, he controls the narrative by choosing certain traditions and versions from the mass of material at his disposal and then presenting these as the accounts most worthy of credence and acceptance.[15] If he mentions alternative versions to the ones he prefers, he usually rejects them explicitly[16] or, more often, implicitly (either by telling them in an unconvincing manner,[17] or by placing them second,[18] or by referring back to only one particular version later in the narrative[19]).

In spite of the loss of most of the sources mentioned in the *Lives*, we may go some way towards proving that Plutarch's narrative represents a rather tendentious gathering and presentation of "the evidence." Different versions of many of the events described in the *Theseus and Romulus* appear in the works

[13] E.g. the description of Menestheus' activities in Athens while Theseus was absent, in which the authorial preference for Theseus is quite apparent: see 32.1–2 and the discussion (with note 37) below.

[14] E.g. the suggestion that Romulus took no action against the killers of Tatius because he was glad to be rid of his co-ruler: see 23.4 and the discussion below.

[15] The suggestion that Plutarch deliberately chooses to include or emphasize certain versions and to omit or play down others is not new: for example, Jones (88–94), in his discussion of the *Romulus*, argues that the choice of the more favourable accounts of particular events (the death of Remus, the foundation of Rome, the rape of the Sabines etc.) indicates that Plutarch was basically sympathetic to Rome. Frost contends that Plutarch's careful selection of material for the *Theseus* was dictated by a fundamentally rationalist approach to history.

[16] E.g. the discussion of the rape of Helen (*Th.* 31), where he first notes that Hellanicus says Theseus ἔπραξε τὰ περὶ τὴν Ἑλένην and then cites two alternative versions in which Theseus is not the aggressor; he concludes, however, that the tradition in which Theseus is the instigator of the rape is the more probable and that it has more witnesses in its favour.

[17] E.g. the Megarian writers' views of Sciron (*Th.* 10.2): οἱ δὲ Μεγαρόθεν συγγραφεῖς ὁμόσε τῇ φήμῃ βαδίζοντες καὶ ᾧτῷ πολλῷ χρόνῳ,ᾧ κατὰ Σιμωνίδην, ᾧπολεμοῦντες,ᾧ οὔθ᾽ ὑβριστὴν οὔτε λῃστὴν γεγονέναι τὸν Σκείρωνά φασιν.

[18] E.g. the tradition that the Crommyonian sow was really a female robber (*Th.* 9). Unless the second or third version of an event is given special emphasis, the first is likely to take root more firmly in the reader's mind, as Plutarch was doubtless aware.

[19] In *Th.* 20, Plutarch offers four different accounts of the fate of Ariadne: (1) Theseus abandoned her and she hanged herself; (2) Theseus left her for Aigle and she was taken to Naxos; (3) Theseus' ship was driven off course and he put Ariadne ashore on Cyprus, but while trying to save his ship he was carried out to sea again. By the time he got back, Ariadne had died in childbirth; (4) there were two Ariadnes: one was married to Dionysus, the other was deserted by Theseus. At 29.2, however, Plutarch cites only the version that Theseus left Ariadne because of his passion for Aigle (cf. note 52 below).

of several other ancient writers: if these occur in writers whom Plutarch refers to
in this pair (e.g. ,Dionysius of Halicarnassus [*Rom*. 18. 8][20] or Philochorus
[see note 26 below]), or in writers he is known to have had access to (e.g.,
Apollodorus [*Lyc*. 1.3] or Livy [*Cam*. 6.2; *Luc*. 28.8; *Marc*. 11.8; 24.5 etc.]),
then it is possible, if not probable, that he deliberately chose not to use them in
his narrative.[21]

Let us begin with the warrior deeds of Theseus and Romulus. Theseus
fights several monsters (8–11), the sons of Pallas (13), the Marathonian bull
(14), the Minotaur (19), the Amazons (26–7), and the Centaurs (30). Romulus
battles Numitor's herdsmen (7), Amulius (8), the Sabines (16–18), the
Camerians (24), and the Veians (25). In general terms, Plutarch says that
Theseus punished the wicked, visiting upon them the violence they were
inflicting on others (κολάζων τοὺς πονηρούς...ἐν δὲ τοῖς τρόποις τῆς
ἑαυτῶν ἀδικίας τὰ δίκαια πάσχοντας, *Th*. 11.3); he likewise describes
Romulus and Remus as famous for driving off robbers, catching thieves and
rescuing the victims of violence (τὸ λῃστὰς ἀλέξασθαι καὶ κλῶπας ἑλεῖν
καὶ βίας ἐξελέσθαι τοὺς ἀδικουμένους, *Rom*. 6.5).

But, interwoven among the accounts of these exploits are certain details
which seem to betoken those very differences between Theseus and Romulus to
be pointed out later in *Syn*. 1—namely that Romulus acted out of fear and
necessity (δι᾽ ἀνάγκην), while Theseus set out to perform noble deeds *of his
own accord* (ἐκ προαιρέσεως, οὐδενός ἀναγκάζοντος...αὐτὸς ἀφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ).[22]
In *Th*. 6.6–9 and 7 (cf. 11), Plutarch relates how the young Theseus was fired
by the glorious example of Heracles to do similar deeds. This is dwelt upon at

---

[20] Cf. *Alc*. 41.4; *Pyrrh*. 17.7; 21.13.

[21] Similarly, versions in writers Plutarch probably did not use, or could not
have used, are valuable in that they testify to the existence of variant traditions,
with which Plutarch may have been familiar through some other source. Frost
(66) comments thus: "when he does not mention some incident or variant that is
found in Apollodorus, or Diodorus, or Pausanias, we should not conclude that he
does not know it, only that for some reason he decided to exclude it from his
narrative." On Plutarch's sources in general, see A. H. L. Heeren, *De fontibus et
auctoritate vitarum parallelarum* (Göttingen 1820); H. Peter, *Die Quellen Plutarchs
in den Biographien der Römer* (Halle 1865); G. Gilbert, "Die Quellen des
plutarchischen Theseus," *Philologus* 33 (1874) 44–66; K. Ziegler, "Ploutarchos,"
RE 21.1 (1951) 636–962, sect. 4.7; W. C. Helmbold and E. N. O'Neill,
Plutarch's Quotations (Baltimore and Oxford 1959); C. Theander, "Plutarchs
Forschungen in Rom," *Eranos* 57 (1959) 99–131; R. H. Barrow, *Plutarch and his
Times* (Bloomington 1967) 150–61; Jones, 81–7; Russell, 42–62; F. Frost,
Plutarch's Themistocles (Princeton 1980), esp. Ch. 2. Ziegler's edition (vol. 5)
contains indices of Greek and Roman authors cited in the *Lives*. Useful summaries
of material on the legend of Theseus are to be found in Brommer, Herter and
Roscher, 5.678–760. For Romulus, see Carter, 4.174–209 and C. J. Classen, "Zur
Herkunft der Sage von Romulus und Remus," *Historia* 12 (1963) 447–57.

[22] Cf. Pelling 131–32 on Plutarch's different treatment of the motivation for
the same actions in different *Lives* and on how in *Pomp*., for instance, he tries to
illustrate the protagonist's εὐλαβεία by showing his alertness (53.9; 54.2; 57.6
etc.).

some length, with an explanation of how Theseus and his idol were related
(7.1). We are told that by night, Theseus dreamed of his cousin's achievements
and, by day, grew more and more determined to follow his example (6.9). He
thought it an "awful and intolerable" (δεινόν...καὶ οὐκ ἀνεκτὸν) state of
affairs that Heracles should do all these things while he disgraced himself, his
reputed father and his real one, by not displaying similar manifestations of his
true birth (7). He therefore refused, in spite of warnings and pleas from Aethra
and Pittheus, to take the safer sea-route to Athens, preferring to go across the
monster-ridden land, a fact mentioned no fewer than three times within the space
of two chapters (6.2–3; 7–8; 7.2). Why all this emphasis on the fact that
Theseus was "raring to go," so to speak? Because Plutarch is going to argue in
the *Synkrisis* that this distinguishes Theseus from Romulus on the moral level.

This is confirmed by details in the accounts of other incidents: in 9.1,
Plutarch tells us that Theseus "went out of his way" (ὁδοῦ πάρεργον) to find
and kill the Crommyonian sow—no mean creature she, by the way (οὐ φαῦλον
ἦν θηρίον)—so that he would not be thought (by whom?) to perform all his
exploits "under compulsion" (πρὸς ἀνάγκην).[23] In 14.1, Plutarch says that
after his arrival in Athens, Theseus was "eager to get busy" (ἐνεργὸς εἶναι
βουλόμενος) and went off to fight the Marathonian bull. Apollodorus, however,
reports that it was at the instigation of Medea that Theseus had to do this (*Ep.*
1. 5.6).[24] In 17.2, Plutarch describes how, when the time came round for
drawing lots to see who would enjoy the melancholy privilege of being sent to
Minos, Theseus volunteered to be included in the group—he thought it wrong
not to share in the misfortune of his fellow-citizens. We are given Hellanicus'
alternative version that Theseus was personally chosen by Minos (17.3),[25] but
this has less impact by virtue of being placed second. Once again, Theseus'
enthusiasm for the fray is emphasized: τοῦ Θησέως τὸν πατέρα θαρρύνοντος
καὶ μεγαληγοροῦντος ὡς χειρώσεται τὸν Μινώταυρον (17.4).

As for the war with the Amazons later, Plutarch writes (26.1) that
Philochorus, whom he cites frequently in the *Life*,[26] and some others (whom he
does not name) think Theseus joined Heracles on *his* campaign and received
Antiope as a reward,[27] but himself chooses to follow "the majority of writers,
including Pherecydes, Hellanicus and Herodorus," who report that Theseus made
the voyage on his own account (ἰδιόστολον), after the time of Heracles, and

---

[23] As mentioned above (note 18), the rationalized version that "the sow" was
actually a strikingly awful female robber is placed second and given less
emphasis (Frost does not mention this); presumably, for Plutarch, no woman
could be as impressive an opponent for Theseus as an angry sow.

[24] Cf. 1st. Vat. Myth. 1.18.48; Diodorus, like Plutarch, has Theseus go on his
own initiative; see Brommer 35–37.

[25] Cf. Diod. Sic. 4.61.3; Apollodorus (*Ep.* 1.7) gives both versions and Schol.
ad *Il.* 18.590 appears to suggest that the lot simply fell upon Theseus together
with the other victims. Otherwise, the consensus seems to be that he volunteered:
see Brommer 35–37; Herter 1111–12.

[26] 14.3; 16.1; 17.6; 19.4; 26.1; 29.4; 35.3.

[27] Eur. *Heracl.* 215–18; Aristides 38.486 (2.723 Dind.); Zenob. 5.33; see
Brommer,119–23.

took the Amazon captive with his own hands.[28] Nor, he adds, should we think that the war with the Amazons was a trivial (φαῦλον—the same word used of the Crommyonian sow at 9.1) or "womanish" (γυναικεῖον) enterprise.

In 29.3–4, we are told that Herodorus does not credit Theseus with participation in any of the other great events of the day, except for the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs.[29] Plutarch goes on to mention, however, that others say Theseus was with Jason at Colchis,[30] helped Meleager kill the Calydonian boar[31] and, moreover, performed many glorious deeds on his own, without asking for any ally (αὐτὸν μέντοι μηδενὸς συμμάχου δεηθέντα).[32] As a result, the phrase "Look! Another Heracles!" became current with reference to him. He also states as fact the tradition that Theseus helped Adrastus gather in the bodies lying around the walls of Thebes.[33]

The feeling that this repeated emphasis on Theseus' volunteering to undertake heroic tasks is designed to lay the ground for the *Synkrisis* receives some confirmation from the *Romulus,* where the characterization of the hero and the tone of the narrative are noticeably different. For example, the overthrow of Amulius is described (7–8) in a fashion which suggests that chance played a more important role in the matter than any desire on the part of Romulus and his brother to perform a noble deed. When Remus is captured, it is Faustulus who takes the initiative, calling upon Romulus to rescue his brother; Plutarch also hints that ambition was a motivating factor: πρότερον δ᾽ ὑπηνίττετο καὶ παρεδήλου τοσοῦτον ὅσον προσέχοντας μὴ μικρὸν φρονεῖν (8.1). When the showdown finally comes, Amulius makes no real attempt to save himself διὰ τὸ ἀπορεῖν καὶ ταράττεσθαι (8.8). In some other versions of the story,[34] the action is more planned, Romulus' leadership more assertive. As leader of the Romans, of course, Romulus does show himself to be a very capable warrior, but he is not portrayed as possessing the same kind of moral driving-force as that which directs Theseus.

Both Theseus and Romulus eventually came into conflict with their fellow-citizens. In *Syn.* 2, Plutarch distinguishes between them thus: each deviated from the proper form of monarchy—Theseus in the direction of democracy, Romulus towards tyranny; that is to say, they acted like a demagogue and a despot respectively. Theseus' error, however, arose from φιλανθρωπία and ἐπιείκεια, Romulus' from φιλαυτία and χαλεπότης.

With this neat distinction in the *Synkrisis,* we might expect the narrative to stress Theseus' democratic, and Romulus' tyrannical, tendencies. And, indeed,

[28] Cf. Apollod. *Ep.* 1.16; Paus. 1.2.1; and (apparently) Diod. Sic. 4.28. 1.

[29] Cf. Homer *Il.* 1.265; 2.742; Isoc. *Helen* 26; Diod. Sic. 4.70.3; Apollod. *Ep.* 1.21; see Herter, 1158–61.

[30] Cf. Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.9.16; Hyg. 14; Stat. *Ach.* 1.71–72; *Theb.* 5.431; see Brommer 133–34; Herter 1206–7.

[31] Cf. Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.8.2; Paus. 8.45.6; Zenob. 5.33; see Brommer 135–36; Herter 1205–6.

[32] See Brommer 124–41.

[33] Cf. Isoc., *Helen* 15.31; Dion. Hal. 5.17.5; Paus. 1.39.2; see Brommer, 124–25; Herter, 1208–10.

[34] Livy 1.5–6; Dion. Hal. 1.80–84; Diod. Sic. 8.3.

Theseus comes off rather better than Romulus. After the death of Aigeus, he succeeds to the throne and effects the synoecism of Athens apparently without violence. Potential objectors, we are told, "fearing his power, which was already considerable, and his daring (τὴν τόλμαν),[35] chose to be persuaded, rather than forced, to agree" (24.2). Apollodorus, however, reports (*Ep.* 1.11) that when Theseus became king of Athens, he killed the sons of Pallas, 50 in number, and all others who might oppose him, and thus secured the whole government for himself. In Plutarch's account, Theseus kills the Pallantids when he is declared successor by Aigeus, shortly after his arrival in Athens (13). Furthermore, a scholiast on Euripides' *Hippolytus* 35 quotes a passage from Philochorus which tells how Theseus went into exile for a year at Troezen to be purified for the killing of his cousins; he took his wife Phaedra with him.[36] Presumably this happened some time after the death of Aigeus. Another tradition, preserved in Pausanias (1.28.10), has Theseus stand trial for murder in the Delphinium, where he was acquitted on the plea of justifiable homicide. Plutarch does not mention the Pallantids in connection with Phaedra and makes no reference to the banishment at all. Since there is clear evidence that he knew of the tradition of the exile (he mentions it twice in the *Moralia* [112D; 607A]), we can be certain that he deliberately excluded it from the *Theseus*—perhaps because it would make Theseus appear in a bad light, or because there was no tradition of a similar period of exile in accounts of the life of Romulus.

The generally favourable depiction of Theseus' political actions continues after the account of the synoecism: Theseus is said (24.4–5) to have laid aside the royal power (τὴν βασιλείαν ἀφείς [cf. ἀφῆκε τὸ μοναρχεῖν, 25.3]), as he had agreed to do beforehand, and to have proceeded to arrange the government (διεκόσμει τὴν πολιτείαν). In so doing, he was acting in accordance with the wishes of the gods, for the Delphic oracle had advised him to counsel his people (βουλεύειν) only. When it comes to Theseus' rift with the Athenians, the activities of Menestheus are reported in a less than sympathetic tone (32.1–2). He was the first to act like a demagogue and get into the good graces of the mob (π ρ ῶ τ ο ς...ἐπιθέμενος   τῷ   δημαγωγεῖν   καὶ   πρὸς   χάριν   ὄχλῳ διαλέγεσθαι).[37] Plutarch also suggests that the war with the Tyndaridae greatly furthered his schemes and adds that some say *he* persuaded them to march against Athens. When Theseus, on his return, wanted to rule (ἄρχειν is used, not μοναρχεῖν) as before, and to direct the state (καθηγεῖσθαι τοῦ πολιτεύματος), he found the people "corrupted" (διεφθαρμένον) and

---

[35] Not, it seems, being used in a negative sense here: cf. *Rom.* 6. 3, where Romulus and Remus are described as courageous and τόλμαν ὅλως ἀνέκπληκτον ἔχοντες.

[36] *FGrH* 328 fr. 108 (Jacoby believes the exile was invented by Euripides); Eur. *Hipp.* 34–37; Paus. 1.22. 2; Pollux 8. 119.

[37] Note the difference between this and the terms used (25.3) to describe Theseus' courting of the multitude: πρῶτος ἀπέκλινε πρὸς τὸν ὄχλον. In fact, the whole account of Menestheus' activities is rendered in rather loaded language: he "stirred up" (συνίστη) and "provoked" (παρώξυνε) the chief men of Athens and "confused" (διετάραττε) and "made hostile" (or, perhaps, "misled") (διέβαλλεν) the mass of the people.

unreceptive (35.4). When he tried to impose his will upon them, he "was overcome by demagogues and factions" (κατεδημαγωγεῖτο καὶ κατεστα-σιάζετο) and, finally, despairing of his cause, he left the city and went to Scyros. The whole picture is one of a wise leader, anxious to do his best for his city, being forced out by opportunistic and unscrupulous demagogic elements.[38]

With Romulus, the case is rather different. Rumblings of the arrogant side of his personality are heard intermittently throughout the *Life*. In 6.3, we are told that Romulus as a youth gave the impression that "he was born to command rather than obey" and that he and his brother were on good terms with their neighbours, but regarded the king's officials as no better than themselves, paying no attention to their anger and threats (6.4). In 7.1, they are said to have ignored the displeasure of Numitor and taken into their band many poor men and slaves,[39] thus "inducing the beginnings of rebellious boldness and daring" (θράσους ἀποστατικοῦ καὶ φρονήματος ἀρχὰς ἐνδιδόντες). After the restoration of Numitor, Plutarch says the pair were not prepared to stay in Alba Longa unless they could be its rulers, so they decided to found a city of their own. Other possible reasons for this decision are given—the desire to live in the region in which they were reared[40] and the reservations of the Albans about having the brothers' motley band of followers as their fellow-citizens[41]—but the opening sentence of the discussion carries most weight by virtue of its position,[42] and thus contributes significantly to the characterization of the brothers as ambitious young men.

---

[38] Consider also the discussion of Theseus' death: there are various accounts, as Pausanias records (1.17.4). Several sources have him remain in the Underworld (e.g. Homer *Od*. 11.631; Polygnotus' painting *apud* Paus. 10.29.9; Virgil *Aen*. 6.617–18; Prop. 2.1.37), while others report that he died on Scyros (Aristotle *Ath. Pol.* fr. 4). Pausanias thinks the most plausible scenario is the following: when Theseus returned to Athens from the Thesprotians, Menestheus had him expelled. He set out for Crete, but was blown off course to Scyros, where he was treated with honour on account of his family and his achievements. For this reason, Lycomedes had him killed. According to Apollodorus (*Ep*. 1.24), Lycomedes himself threw Theseus over a cliff. In Plutarch's version, an additional element is present (35.6): the suggestion that Lycomedes killed Theseus as a favour to Menestheus (τῷ Μενεσθεῖ χαριζόμενος). This serves to blacken the latter further and, hence, to increase the moral stature of Theseus. Menestheus, moreover, ruled as king (ἐβασίλευσε, 35.7) after Theseus' departure.

[39] Plutarch emphasizes the numbers of poor and slaves: πολλοὺς μὲν ἀπόρους, πολλοὺς δὲ δούλους; Livy (1.8.6) describes the adherents as *turba omnis sine discrimine, liber an servus esset, avida novarum rerum*; Dionysius, however, says (2.15.3) that all fugitives *except* slaves were welcome. See Jones 91.

[40] Cf. Livy 1.6.3–4, who also cites overpopulation as a consideration.

[41] Cf. Dion. Hal. 1.85.2, who says Numitor was afraid that the newcomers might conspire against him.

[42] Jones, in the course of his argument that the *Romulus* is pro-Roman, also notes (90) that Plutarch chooses to promote this as the reason for the foundation of the city.

In 10, we learn that Remus was killed by Romulus or Celer.[43] Livy (1.7.2) says he died either in a riot or at the hands of Romulus. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.87) prefers the riot, but mentions Celer too. Diodorus (8.6.3) says Celer was responsible, but acted on Romulus' orders. It is also, perhaps, significant that in Plutarch's version Romulus does not show much sorrow at his brother's death—he simply buries him in the Remonia and gets on with the task of building his city. This is very different from Dionysius' account (1.87.3) of how Romulus was so afflicted by grief and repentance that he lost all desire to live and was only persuaded to go on by Larentia. Servius preserves a tradition in which the death of Remus is followed by a plague, which abates only when a curule chair, sceptre and crown are placed beside Romulus *ut pariter imperare viderentur* (ad *Aen.* 1. 276 [cf. 292]).[44] Significantly, Plutarch's brief account of Remus' death and its aftermath (together with the apparent nonchalance of Romulus) is also in stark contrast to his description of Theseus' reaction to the news of the death of Aigeus (*Th.* 22.4).

The same tendency toward subtly blackening Romulus in the narrative in preparation for the moral evaluations of the *Synkrisis* can be seen in Plutarch's account of the death of Tatius. The affair is somewhat complicated (*Rom.* 23–24.2): some followers of Tatius held up some ambassadors from Laurentum and killed them. Romulus wanted to punish the robbers, but Tatius used delaying and diversionary tactics. The friends of the slain ambassadors, therefore, killed Tatius while he and Romulus were officiating at a sacrifice in Lavinium. Romulus buried Tatius ἐντίμως, but "did absolutely nothing" (παντάπασιν ἠμέλησεν) about bringing his killers to justice. When the Laurentians handed them over, Romulus let them go, saying that murder had been paid back with murder. Some people thought he was glad to be rid of his colleague. After this, following the war against Fidenae, a plague fell upon the land and, when it also affected Laurentum, everyone agreed that it was a result of the miscarriage of justice for the death of Tatius and the murdered ambassadors. It abated only when Romulus finally punished both groups involved. Thus runs the Plutarchean account. Two points may be noted here:

(1) The other major account of the affair which survives, that of Dionysius (2.51–53.1), paints a more favourable picture of Romulus and a much more unfavourable one of Tatius. In this version, Romulus hands over Tatius' men to Laurentian representatives. Tatius rushes to assist his friends (one of them was actually a relation of his) and helps them escape on the way to Laurentum. Not long afterwards, when he and Romulus are sacrificing, the Laurentians kill

[43] Jones (90) argues that Plutarch "puts last, and lays most stress upon, the agency of Celer" and compares *Syn.* 5.1, but it is questionable whether this much can reasonably be extracted from the text; also, we might just as well compare *Syn.* 3, in which Romulus is the guilty party.

[44] Note also that Plutarch (*Rom.* 5) is one of only two writers (the other is Dion. Hal. [1. 86. 3]; see Carter 4. 180–83) who suggest that Romulus actually deceived Remus in the matter of the augury: "some say, however, that whereas Remus truly saw the birds, Romulus lied about his, but that when Remus came over to him, then he saw the twelve." Carter (181) sees this version as late and intended "den Charakter des Romulus zu schwärzen."

him.[45] Romulus forbids the killers fire and water and they are brought before him; when they plead, δικαιότερα, that they only avenged violence with violence, he sets them free.

(2)   Livy (1.14.1–4) makes no mention of the plague. Dionysius refers to a famine (λιμοῦ), during which the people of Fidenae attacked some Roman supply-boats (2.53.2), and to a later plague (νόσου λοιμικῆς),[46] during which the Camerians attacked a group of Roman colonists (2. 54. 1)—Plutarch also refers to this attack, but places it during the Tatius plague (24. 3–4). The link between the plague and the murder of Tatius is made only by Plutarch: whether he invented it, or found it in a source now lost to us, is pretty much immaterial; the point is that it serves to cast Romulus' actions in a very bad light, by suggesting that he had to be driven by superhuman forces to see justice done.[47]

In 26, Plutarch says that Romulus, like all those who have been raised to a position of power and authority, eventually became haughtier, renounced his popular ways and turned towards a monarchical form of government (εἰς μοναρχίαν).[48] His very appearance, in fact, made him unpopular—he wore a scarlet tunic and a purple-embroidered toga, and sat on a reclining throne. He was surrounded by the Celeres and Lictores. The patricians were treated with contempt (27.1–2) and they had only their name and regalia left and assembled in the council-chamber more from custom than for giving advice: εἶτα σιγῇ προστάττοντος ἠκροῶντο, καὶ τῷ πρότεροι τὸ δεδογμένον ἐκείνῳ πυθέσθαι τῶν πολλῶν πλέον ἔχοντες ἀπηλλάττοντο. In the end, Romulus insulted the Senate outright by dividing up land and returning hostages to the Veians without its consent.

---

[45] Dionysius also cites (2.53.4) the version of Licinius Macer, who reports that Tatius went to the town on his own, to persuade the Laurentians to show forgiveness; Plutarch perhaps chooses to have Romulus present at the sacrifice as a further illustration of his improper behaviour—in allowing the murder to take place at all.

[46] Perhaps the famine and the plague are one and the same—confusion may have arisen (particularly if Dionysius was using Greek sources) from the fact that λιμός and λοιμός are very similar. Alternatively, cf. Pelling 127–29 on chronological displacement.

[47]   Jones (93) is less than convincing when he asserts that "the story of the death of Tatius is told so as to absolve Romulus of all blame." The argument that Romulus failed to punish the killers of Tatius, not because he was glad to be rid of him, but in order to avoid causing an outbreak of faction-fighting among his subjects is somewhat tendentious: Plutarch does not use a purpose clause; he simply states the fact that there was no trouble: τῶν δὲ πραγμάτων οὐδὲν διετάραξεν, οὐδὲ διεστασίασε τοὺς Σαβίνους...(23.5). Also, the occurrence of the plague hardly supports the view that the story is told "so as to absolve Romulus of all blame."

[48] The terminology is significant: Theseus' desire on his return was to rule (ἄρχειν) as before and direct the state (καθηγεῖσθαι τοῦ πολιτεύματος), as reported in *Th.* 35.2; cf. Dion. Hal. 2.56.3.

Other sources testify to strained relations between Romulus and the Senate and to his unpopular behaviour,[49] but as far as the outward trappings of power are concerned, Livy mentions only the Celeres in connection with Romulus' later actions (the others are discussed earlier at 1.8 and are pronounced necessary for gaining respect for the law), while Dionysius describes the Lictores and the toga in his account of the reign of Tarquinius (3.61.2). Dio Cassius seems to have dealt with these topics, including Romulus' red shoes, but it is not clear that he did so in the context of Romulus' later conduct.[50] Plutarch's juxtaposing of the details of the outward symbols of royal power and the account of Romulus' degeneration to tyrannical ways looks very much like a device to intensify the reader's disapproval.

Then there are the rapes. In *Syn*.1, Plutarch criticizes Theseus on three grounds: (1) for carrying off so many women; (2) because, in the case of Helen, he was too old;[51] and (3) because he most probably acted "out of *hubris* and lust." Romulus, by contrast, took only one Sabine wife and treated her and all the others in an exemplary fashion. Moreover, the results of his actions were essentially good for Rome, whereas Theseus' involvements brought nothing but trouble to the Athenians.

This criticism of Theseus is foreshadowed in the narrative. At 29.1–2, Plutarch condemns the dishonourable acts which had unfortunate consequences (those with Anaxo, the daughters of Sinis and Cercyon, Periboea, Phereboea and Iope) and says that it was a passion for Aigle which caused him to abandon Ariadne—something μὴ καλὴν...μηδὲ πρέπουσαν.[52] The process begins earlier than this, however, with the sad tale of Perigune, daughter of Sinis, which is inserted, somewhat incongruously (but not innocently), into the account of Theseus' fights with the monsters on his way to Athens (8.3–5). The picture of the young woman supplicating the plants to help her hide is so touching and pathetic that it contributes much to the negative impression we form of Theseus when he impregnates her, gives her to someone else and goes off in search of new adventures. This incident, related early in the *Life* and in some detail, sets the tone for Theseus' future encounters with women. The

---

[49] E.g. Livy 1.15; Dion. Hal. 2.56.1–4; Dio Cass. 1.5.7.

[50] Cf. Zonaras 7.4; Ioann. Laur. Lyd. *De Mag.* 1.7.

[51] Cf. Isoc. *Helen* 18–19; other accounts make Theseus less than fully responsible: Diod. Sic. 4.63 (Pirithous persuaded him to do it); Paus. 1.41.4 (he wanted to be related to the Dioscuri); see Brommer 93–96.

[52] Cf. Theoc. 2.45–6; Cat. 64; Ovid *Her.* 10, *A. A.* 1. 527–64, *Met.* 8.172; see also Brommer 86–92; Herter 1133–41. It should be noted, however, that both here and in his lengthy discussion of the relationship between Theseus and Ariadne in *Th.* 20, Plutarch eschews mention of other traditions more favourable to Theseus—(1) that Ariadne was taken away by force from Theseus by Dionysus (Apollod. *Ep.* 1.9; Diod. Sic. 4.61. 5; Paus. 10.29.3); (2) that Athena told Theseus to leave Ariadne and go to Athens (Pherecydes fr. 148); (3) that Ariadne was killed by Artemis on Naxos for going with Theseus when she was already betrothed to Dionysus (*Od.* 11.321).

Perigune episode is, in effect, the first instance of the behaviour to which
Ariadne falls victim later.[53]

In contrast, the rape of the Sabine women is, as Jones (92–3) shows,
presented in as favourable a light as possible, by imputing positive motives to
Romulus well before the event. The idea that he simply wanted to go to war and
made an unprovoked attack is rejected (14.1).[54] In 9.2, we are told that the rape
was not an act of *hubris*, but of necessity, and that the women were treated
περιττῶς afterwards. At 14. 2, Plutarch says Romulus hoped to make the
outrage an occasion for some sort of union with the Sabine people, and at 14.7,
we are again reminded that the rape was committed, not out of *hubris* or
criminality, but "with the fixed intention of uniting the two peoples in the
strongest bonds" (συμμεῖξαι καὶ συναγαγεῖν εἰς ταὐτὸ τὰ γένη ταῖς
μεγίσταις ἀνάγκαις διανοηθέντας). Livy thinks the motive was to get
wives (1.9.1; 13.3.7). Dionysius (2.1.1) gives three possible reasons: scarcity
of wives, the desire for war and the hope of uniting with the Sabines, and, like
Plutarch, prefers the last-mentioned.

Finally, we may consider the domestic misfortunes. In *Syn.* 3, Plutarch
suggests that these calamities were, to some extent, caused by the characteristics
and passions of the men involved. Both Theseus and Romulus behaved with
unreasoning anger in dealing with a son and a brother respectively, but Theseus
"was overthrown by a heavier blow" and was driven to do wrong by three
powerful forces: "love, jealousy and the lies of a woman." Also, Romulus'
anger led to direct action and the most regrettable results, while Theseus'
consisted of "only abusive words" and "an old man's curse"—the rest was due to
"the youth's own bad luck" (something of an understatement of Theseus' role in
most versions).

In the narrative, too, the story of Hippolytus is mentioned in a remarkably
cursory fashion (*Th.* 28.2): there is nothing to add to what the poets say.
Plutarch even casts doubt on the authenticity of the name Hippolytus—and
hence moves us further away from Euripides' tragedy—by recording Pindar's
alternative appellation, Demophoön. References to Hippolytus in the *Moralia*
(28A; 314A–B) show that Plutarch was familiar with the canonical Euripidean
version, which makes its way into several other accounts of the life of
Theseus,[55] but, clearly, a more detailed account in his *Theseus* would make it
rather difficult to argue against Romulus so effectively in the *Synkrisis*.

Later, the discussion turns to how Theseus treated his father and mother
(*Syn.* 5.2; 6.5), and to Romulus' behaviour towards his mother and grandfather
(*Syn.* 5). This time the Roman comes off better, for he saved his mother from
death and helped his grandfather, "doing him no harm, either deliberately or

---

[53] The story does not appear in any other extant source; Brommer's suggestion
(6) that Paus. 10.25.7 contains a shortened version is not convincing.
    [54] At *Mor.* 268B, however, Plutarch contrasts the πολεμικὸς καὶ ἀρειμάνιος
Romulus with the εἰρηνικός Numa.
    [55] E.g. Diod. Sic.4.62; Apollod. *Ep.* 1.17–19; Paus. 1.22; 2.32.1–4; cf. Schol.
ad *Od.* 11.321; Ovid, *Met.* 15.497–505; Herter 1183–97.

accidentally." Theseus, however, by forgetting to change his sail, to all intents and purposes murdered his father. He may also have abandoned his mother.

Let us look at the narrative. We are told (9.1) that after the death of Amulius, Romulus and Remus, among other other things, "paid fitting honours to their mother"—a pious little detail which does not appear in other accounts.[56] Theseus' forgetting about the sail is usually attributed to his grief over the loss of Ariadne,[57] but Plutarch says he forgot on account of his joy (ὑπὸ χαρᾶς, 22.1) at his success in outwitting Minos. As for his mother, Plutarch says he left her with Helen in the charge of Aphidnus at Aphidnae, while he went off with Pirithous in search of Aidoneus' daughter (31.3–4). When the Tyndaridae stormed the town, Aethra was taken captive. Although he cites Hereas' statement that Theseus fought in the battle, Plutarch concludes that it is unlikely that he was present when his mother was captured (32.7), thereby emphasizing his neglectfulness. This parallels the carelessness which caused, albeit indirectly, the death of Aigeus.[58]

It is by the use of such devices as these, then, that Plutarch fashions a narrative which manages both to enhance the parallels between Theseus and Romulus and, more importantly, to display in their actions those traits of character and morality which are to be delineated in the *Synkrisis*. As we have seen, there is much subtlety employed in the process of "leading" the reader—a certain emphasis here, a hint or a suggestion there. The result is a polished veneer of objectivity which almost, but not entirely, succeeds in covering Plutarch's didacticism. Assuming that the same processes are at work in the other *Lives* (and, given Plutarch's well-documented practice of manipulating his sources in general, this is surely a valid assumption), it seems appropriate that due attention be given to the *Synkrisis*: there are at least as many reasons for reading it first, before tackling the narrative, as there are for reading it in its intended position.[59]

---

[56] Indeed, there was a version in which Ilia was killed by Amulius: Dionysius (1.79) cannot decide; Livy says (1.4.3) she was imprisoned; Dio (Tzet. ad Lyc. 1232) seems not to think she was killed.

[57] Cf. Apollod. *Ep*. 1.10; Diod. Sic. 4.61.10.

[58] Cf. Apollod. *Bibl*. 3.10.7, *Ep*. 1.23; Paus. 1.41.4. Diodorus (4.63.3–5) gives an account which is less hostile to Theseus: he left his best men behind to guard his mother and Helen and tried to dissuade Pirithous from going on his quest, but, when he insisted, was bound by his oaths to accompany him.