THEMATIC CORRESPONDENCES
IN PLUTARCH'S *LIVES* OF CAESAR, POMPEY,
AND CRASSUS

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In this article I examine Plutarch's approach to his triumviral *Lives*, the *Caesar*, *Pompey*, and *Crassus*. Christopher Pelling has argued persuasively that Plutarch researched and composed most of the late-Republican *Lives* as a group,¹ and therefore, one may naturally wonder whether these Roman *Lives*, which are so closely related in their preparation as well as in their subject matter, are also related in other ways.² In particular, when we read the triumviral *Lives* together, we discover several close thematic connections between them. By exploring these connections, I hope to demonstrate that Plutarch has developed a composite view of the heroes' interactions with one another, and that he maintains this view throughout all three *Lives*. I suggest that, in Plutarch's conception, Caesar was the dominating contender, Pompey held the second position, and Crassus was subordinate to both of them, and even though Plutarch highlights the best qualities of the heroes where he can, he maintains their relative positions and pointedly describes the weaknesses that hindered Pompey and especially Crassus. In the course of the analysis, I will also suggest that some of the anecdotes presented in the three *Lives* are interrelated and that the *Lives* must be read together in order for these anecdotes to be fully appreciated.

We turn first to the connections between the *Pompey* and the *Caesar*, or, rather, between the *Pompey* and the *Alexander-Caesar* pair. Because Plutarch does not explicitly connect these *Lives*, we must examine them carefully in order to find the connections. The first indication of a relationship is, in fact, stated rather subtly in the introduction to the *Alexander-Caesar*:

We are writing in this book the *Life* of Alexander the king and that of Caesar, by whom Pompey was defeated. (*Alexander* 1.1)

¹ Pelling (1979) and Pelling (1980). I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Philip Stadter for his assistance in developing this article.

² Brenk (1992) 4377 n. 68 also makes this suggestion.

On its own, the opening is unremarkable: the mention of Pompey appears simply to identify Caesar, just as "the king" identifies Alexander.³ But a careful reading of the *Pompey* reveals that Plutarch's apparently passing association of Pompey with Alexander and Caesar also hints at something larger. In chapter 2 of the *Pompey*, Plutarch introduces a direct comparison not with Agesilaus, whose life is paired with Pompey's, but with Alexander.⁴ Plutarch writes that many likened Pompey's appearance to the images of Alexander, a comparison which, in Plutarch's view, was more imagined than real. As a result, many referred to the young Pompey as Alexander, and Pompey did not decline the honor (*Pompey* 2.2). Not everyone accepted his new identity, however. Plutarch reports that some of Pompey's contemporaries began to call him Alexander in order to mock him, and this mockery perhaps provides a basis for Plutarch's skepticism about the resemblance between the two men. On the other hand, Plutarch concludes the section with a supportive anecdote. He relates that Lucius Philippus, a man of consular rank, acted as an advocate for Pompey and said that "he was doing nothing strange if, being Philip, he loved Alexander". Later, Plutarch compares Pompey favorably to Alexander when he notes that Pompey routed the Iberians, a people who had escaped subjugation by both the Persians and Alexander (34.5).

Despite his skepticism, Plutarch introduces further similarities between the two men by echoing scenes from his *Alexander* in the *Pompey* without making the cross-references explicit, developing the image of Pompey as a potential new Alexander and suggesting that we should have the Greek *Life* in mind while reading the Roman, even though they are not a formal pair. For instance, while Pompey is pursuing Mithridates, he shows great restraint in dealing with captured women:

Of all the concubines of Mithridates who were brought to him, he was intimate with (ἔγνων) none, but he restored them all to their parents and homes (36.2).

Likewise for the Macedonian when he has captured Darius' women:

³ Hamilton (1999) 1, comments that Plutarch is distinguishing Gaius Julius Caesar from Augustus, and he identifies a similar reference at *Numa* 19.4, where Plutarch is explaining the names of the months and must also make a distinction between the two men. He notes that in *Brutus* 1.4, where the context makes clear that the first Caesar is meant, Plutarch uses Καῖσαρ only.

⁴ Plutarch also compares Agesilaus to Alexander at *Agesilaus* 15.4.

But Alexander, as it seems, believing mastery of himself more kingly than conquering enemies, neither touched these women nor was intimate with (ἔγνων) any other woman before marriage except for Barsine.

(*Alexander* 21.7)⁵

The similarities are strengthened by the continuation of *Pompey* 36, wherein Plutarch describes Stratonice, a concubine of Mithridates who became his favorite though she was of low birth. She was commanding a fortress, which was captured by Pompey, providing him the chance to treat her honorably (36.7), as Alexander had treated Darius' wife Stateira and her daughters (*Alexander* 21.5–6). Pompey's Alexander-like behavior is further highlighted in the following chapter, where Mithridates' undisciplined lifestyle, revealed by the discovery of lascivious (ἀκόλαστοι) letters in one of his captured strongholds, is in contrast to his own (37.2). Similarly, when Alexander captures Darius' tent, he witnesses the great luxury of the king's lifestyle, and exclaims, "This, so it seems, was what it meant to rule" (20.13).

The direct references to Alexander and the similarity of these anecdotes create the sort of parallelism that one would expect to find between paired *Lives*.⁶ For the first half of the *Life*, Plutarch appears to be writing an *Alexander-Pompey*. However, Pompey's association with Alexander is not maintained. The cause of Plutarch's earlier skepticism is revealed several chapters later, when Pompey is at the height of his power and glory but about to fall (46). Plutarch reintroduces his criticism of those who compare Pompey to Alexander, adding that Pompey would have been happier to have died at this time, while he was still enjoying the good fortune of Alexander (*Pompey* 46.1–2).⁷ He adds that the following years were only to bring success that stirred envy in others and misfortunes that were unbearable. Pompey's own power and glory were his undoing: he used them to strengthen others, including Caesar, and in doing so he diminished himself. At this point, where he puts to rest the comparison to Alexander, Plutarch begins to narrate Caesar's eclipse of Pompey. He writes:

⁵ Flacelière et al. (1973) 299, note the connection that ἔγνων makes between these two passages.

⁶ See Duff (1999) 249–251.

⁷ Cf. Livy 9.17.6: Pompey's long life allowed him to see bad as well as good fortune, something that Alexander escaped by dying young.

Thus by the power of Pompey was Caesar raised up against the city, and he overthrew and defeated the man through whom he had gained power over everyone else. (*Pompey* 46.4)

Thus the likeness of Pompey to Alexander has been proved false, and Caesar, Alexander's true Roman counterpart, has been introduced.⁸ When *Alexander* 1.1 is reconsidered, we can see that Caesar overthrew Pompey not only for control of Rome, but also for the role of companion to Alexander. Plutarch, it appears, is highlighting the fact that Pompey fails to become an Alexander by beginning to construct a parallel *Life*, suggesting a possible pairing, and then demonstrating the reason for its rejection.

The comparison of Pompey to Alexander in the first half of Pompey's *Life* sets the stage for the comparison of the hero with Caesar in the second half, wherein Pompey comes out the loser. Caesar is an important character in this part of the *Life*, as we would expect, knowing the history of their civil war. However, we can also notice several thematic correspondences between the *Lives* of Pompey and Caesar, correspondences which indicate that Plutarch must have conceived and planned these *Lives* together, and which also hint that he expected his readers to make connections between these two texts.

One thematic correspondence is found in the courage of the heroes and the presence of fortune. *Pompey*, chapter 50, and *Caesar*, chapter 38, relate similar stories. Pompey, who had been placed in charge of Rome's supply of grain, was about to set sail with his cargo, but a storm caused the ship's captain to hesitate. Pompey ordered him to put to sea, however, and, as Plutarch writes:

Employing such daring and enthusiasm, along with good fortune, he filled the markets with grain and the sea with ships. (*Pompey* 50.3)

Caesar faced a similar situation while in the course of the civil war he waited at Apollonia for additional forces to arrive. Having grown impatient, he embarked on a small boat disguised as a slave, planning to cross to Brundisium to fetch the rest of his army. The boat, however, entered rough water as it approached the mouth of the river Aous and the Ionian Sea, and so the captain ordered the sailors to turn back. Caesar then disclosed himself and bid the captain to take heart and go on:

⁸ Harrison (1995) 102 notes that Plutarch makes no mention of Alexander in the second half of the *Life* and rarely mentions Caesar in the first.

"Come, good man," he said, "be daring and fear nothing: you carry Caesar and the Fortune of Caesar as a shipmate". (*Caesar* 38.4)

Here, as in the *Pompey*, we have daring (τόλμη, τόλμα), which Caesar passes to the captain, and fortune (Τύχην, but not τύχη ἀγαθή as in the *Pompey*). Therefore, the ship was not able to overcome the storm, and Caesar was forced to return to land, unlike Pompey, without having accomplished his mission. However, the point of comparison lies not in the success of one hero and the failure of the other, but in the fact that both had identical reactions to nearly identical circumstances. Neither man was afraid in the face of nature's power, nor did either hesitate to assert his dominance while other men were surrendering.

Another point of correspondence between the *Lives* involves the heroes' interaction with pirates. In the *Pompey*, the pirates play a large role. Pompey grew powerful in part because he swiftly and completely rid the Mediterranean of their menace. But what is most interesting is Plutarch's description of the outrageousness of the pirates' actions (24.8–13). While they ruled the seas, they mistreated everyone they met, but they saved special insolence for Roman citizens. If a captive claimed to be a Roman, the pirates would pretend to be frightened, falling before him and begging his forgiveness. Then, after mocking him, they would dress him in senatorial clothes and force him to climb off the ship and into the sea to be drowned, pushing him if he refused to go voluntarily. Only one man does not succumb to this treatment, but we read about him not in the *Pompey* but in the *Caesar*. There Plutarch narrates Caesar's quick and easy dominance of the pirates (*Caesar* 1.8–2.7). Although a Roman citizen, he is able to treat them outrageously, a captive acting as if he were the master, so that in the end, he does not walk the plank but crucifies his former captors. Plutarch, however, does not describe the pirates' boldness when relating the episode in the *Caesar*. In order to appreciate the completeness of Caesar's dominance and the extent to which his own boldness surpasses that of the pirates, one must also read the episode in the *Pompey*. Once again, this is the sort of correspondence that one would expect to find between *Lives* that were written as a formal pair.⁹

The two *Lives* also correspond closely in their portrayal of the defeat of their subjects. In the *synkrisis* of the *Agessilaus-Pompey*, Plutarch faults

⁹ Caesar's capture by pirates also appears in the *Crassus*. As evidence of the rivalry between the triumvirs, Plutarch has Caesar exclaim, "You will experience great joy, Crassus, when you learn about my capture" (*Crassus* 7.5).

Pompey for poor generalship because he did not attack Caesar while he was weak, but rather engaged him inland at Pharsalus, where Caesar's army had the advantage of experience and he was separated from his navy (*Syncrisis Agesilaus-Pompey* 4). As was the case when the struggle with Caesar had first begun (*Pompey* 46), Pompey's defeat at Pharsalus was his own doing, a fact which Plutarch underscores by asserting that the divine will had not desired that place to be the site of Pompey's showdown with Caesar: "For god did not appoint the Pharsalian plain to be the stadium and theater for their contest over leadership" (*Syncrisis Agesilaus-Pompey* 4.6). Pompey, as he did when Caesar's power was rising, has again failed to use his strength for his own gain and has instead allowed Caesar to succeed at his own expense.¹⁰

It is interesting that Plutarch calls the Pharsalian plain the "theater and stadium of their contest for supremacy". By calling the site a theater, Plutarch has made a special connection between the defeat of Pompey and the death of Caesar. On the night before the battle, Pompey dreamed that the people were applauding him as he entered his theater and that he was decorating the attached temple of Venus Victrix with many spoils (*Pompey* 68.2). Thus even in the *Pompey*, Plutarch has associated the victory of Caesar, who claimed descent from Venus, with Pompey's theater. In the *Caesar* we learn that Caesar was killed while the senate was meeting in that very theater and that he fell dead at the base of Pompey's statue (*Caesar* 66), an unmistakable association of Pompey with Caesar's death, just as Caesar was involved in Pompey's. Pompey had celebrated the opening of his theater with athletic and musical contests, but the most impressive sight, according to Plutarch, was the ἐλεφαντομαχία (*Pompey* 52.9). This fight must certainly foreshadow the struggle between the two imposing generals, a struggle that would end ultimately in that very theater. However, the death of Caesar is only briefly mentioned but not described in the *Pompey*, and so, as with the episode concerning the pirates, the *Caesar* must be considered in conjunction with the *Pompey* in order for the scene of Caesar's death to convey its full meaning.

In reviewing these correspondences between the *Caesar* and the *Pompey*, we can make an important observation. Crassus appears to be missing. In fact the contest for supremacy in Rome is not, in Plutarch's

view, an equal struggle between all three members of the triumvirate, but rather a wrestling match to be held in two rounds. The first contenders, and the strongest, are Pompey and Caesar, and Crassus, the junior partner, waits to take on the victor but dies in Parthia before he can have his chance. This imbalance in the triumvirate is present not only in the *Pompey* and *Caesar*, but in the *Crassus* as well.¹¹

If we examine the *Caesar* first, we find that Plutarch has employed the terminology from athletic contests in narrating the struggle within the triumvirate. In chapter 3, Caesar is returning to Rome and stops at Rhodes to study rhetoric under Apollonius. Plutarch describes his skill in speaking, saying that he had exercised his nature so that he held second place without question (3.2). Caesar abandons his training in rhetoric, however, before achieving the first rank so that he may occupy himself with becoming first in power and arms (3.3). Caesar's training continues in chapter 28, where the contest takes on the character of an athletic event. Crassus becomes the *ephedros*, the third competitor in a contest who waits to fight the winner of the first round (28.1).¹² Caesar himself withdraws to Gaul, removing himself far from his opponents (τῶν ἀνταγωνιστῶν). There, like an athlete, he exercises his power and increases his glory, lifting himself by his deeds so that he can contend with the successes of Pompey (28.3). When Crassus dies fighting the Parthians, the *ephedros* is removed, leaving Caesar and Pompey as the only competitors.

Following chapter 28, Caesar returns to Rome and becomes enmeshed in the civil wars, and the contest is resumed when he meets his principal opponent at Pharsalus. In Pompey's final appearance in the *Caesar*, Plutarch has him withdraw from the fight. When Caesar's men have advanced all the way to his camp, Pompey cries out in disbelief and is forced to concede his defeat. Then he removes his clothing, that of a competitor and a general, dresses in a manner that befits a fugitive, and steals away (45.8). We can detect in Pompey's defeat a parallel with Alexander's final encounter with Darius in the *Life of Alexander*. Before sending him into battle at Gaugamela, Plutarch describes Alexander's majestic attire: he wore an iron helmet and collar, a vest and a linen breastplate, his sword was a gift of the king of the Citians, his belt

¹⁰ Caesar's death, on the other hand, was in accord with his destiny, as Plutarch demonstrates by listing, in the *Life of Caesar*, the many divine signs that preceded his assassination (*Caesar* 63).

¹¹ Cf. the assessment of Flacelière et al. (1972) 191 in the introduction to the *Crassus*: "Il [i.e. Crassus] fut certainement la dupe de César, et peut-être aussi de Pompée".

¹² LSJ ἐφεδρος II 4. This passage is cited. Cf. Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 792, where Sophocles is the *ephedros* in the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides.

was made by Helicon and was a gift of honor from the city of Rhodes (*Alexander* 32.7). Pompey's exit at Pharsalus is the mirror image: Plutarch has him undress and remove himself from the contest, pointedly calling his old uniform that "of a competitor and a general" in order to reflect the dual nature of Pompey's role. The parallelism continues as Pompey takes on the role of Darius: having fled from his rival when the battle was lost, he is ignobly murdered in Egypt (45.9).¹³ Caesar, like Alexander, laments the dishonorable death of his opponent (48.2).¹⁴

We can also detect a similar presentation of the competition between the two men in the *Pompey*. We have already examined the close correlation between the *Caesar* and the *Pompey* in other regards, but the similarities are especially strong where the contest is concerned. The terminology of athletics is applied to the triumvirate of Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus, just as it was in the *Caesar*. Crassus is once again the *ephedros*, and his death opens the way for unhindered competition between the two remaining partners (53.9). Plutarch reinforces the athletic tone of the two-man contest by providing a quotation from a comic poet: "the one wrestler against the other / anoints himself and sprinkles his hands with dust".

The two contestants finally meet in Greece. In this account from the *Pompey* there is much that complements the account in the *Caesar*. Caesar is of course victorious, and the events force Pompey to retire to his tent where he makes the same exclamation he made in the *Caesar*, and then changes into clothes that befit his present fortune (72.3).¹⁵ In narrating Pompey's escape, Plutarch emphasizes the lowly state of the defeated contestant by having him reflect on his lost power and glory, which he had increased through so many "contests and wars", and how he was now small and humbled as he slipped away without an escort (73.1). The phrase "contests and wars" has a pointed meaning. This combination of nouns had introduced Pompey when he was on the brink of greatness (8.6); now it marks the end of his career and his loss to the champion, Caesar.

One final occurrence of the metaphor of the contest appears in the *syncrisis* of the *Agessilaus-Pompey*. We have already discussed Plutarch's

designation of Pharsalus as a theater, but at the same time he calls it a stadium, the site of Pompey's final contest (*Syncrisis Agessilaus-Pompey* 4.6). The phrase "theater and stadium of their contest for supremacy" joins two metaphors that Plutarch has employed throughout both the *Caesar* and *Pompey* and which are reinforced by a joint reading.

Finally we turn to Crassus, who is introduced into the *Lives* of Caesar and Pompey primarily, it appears, to be dismissed. In his own biography, he fares little better as far as the triumvirate is concerned: he is clearly the weakest member of the group. Plutarch's assessment of his standing is not unique. Cassius Dio explains that when Caesar formed the triumvirate, Crassus understood that he was inferior to Pompey, that Caesar's power was rising, and that those two would become well-matched competitors, and so he courted both of them to his own advantage (37.56.4-5). Plutarch comes close to this characterization, making Pompey the champion of the "sensible and established", Caesar of the "hasty and reckless", and assigning to Crassus a middle position, which he constantly changed according to where his own advantage lay (*Crassus* 7.7).¹⁶ Suetonius notes Crassus' diminished position by remarking that after Pompey married Caesar's daughter, Julia, Caesar began to call on Pompey to speak first in the Senate, whereas he used to call on Crassus (*Divus Iulius* 21); Suetonius also includes Crassus' wife Tertulla in his list of noble women seduced by Caesar, adding Pompey's wife Mucia as well (50.1).

What is unique in Plutarch's portrait is that Crassus is never allowed out of the shadow of his allies, even in his own biography. This is best illustrated as Plutarch narrates the start of the ill-fated Parthian expedition. Crassus, Plutarch makes clear, intended to go to Parthia as *proconsul* in order to surpass the military successes of his predecessors in the east by taking his army beyond the boundaries of the territory he had been assigned, exactly what Pompey had done earlier in the same region and what Caesar had done in Gaul, both with great success and with no rebuke from Plutarch. But in this case, Plutarch calls Crassus "all puffed up and out of his mind" (16.2) as he considers this enterprise, noting that Crassus made empty and youthful boasts to his friends which were not fitting to his age and his nature (16.1). Moreover, Crassus was unable even to begin his expedition on his own. Caesar writes to him from Gaul to express his support, and, even more

¹³ Pompey's murder is not described in detail, but Plutarch refers the reader to his *Life*.

¹⁴ For the flight of Darius, see *Alexander* 33.8; for his death and Alexander's distress, see *Alexander* 43.

¹⁵ In both the *Pompey* and *Caesar*, Pompey exclaims: οὐκοῦν καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν παρεμβολήν;

¹⁶ See Pelling (1986) 161-163, for criticism of this characterization on historical grounds.

indicative of his low standing, Pompey must appear at the head of the party before the crowd will allow Crassus to exit the city. Even so, the tribune Ateius tries to arrest Crassus and calls down curses on him as he departs (16.3–8).¹⁷

Once again we can compare Plutarch's version to those of others and observe how he is working to characterize Crassus as inferior. In his survey of the various accounts, Adelaide Simpson notes that efforts to prevent Crassus' departure include the observation of adverse omens, an attempted arrest, and the invocation of curses.¹⁸ None of the other accounts, however, relates the presence of Pompey as necessary for mollifying the crowd. Only Plutarch has used the occasion to impress upon the reader the secondary status of Crassus, writing that "Crassus, having become fearful, begged Pompey to be present and to escort him; for he was held in high esteem by the people" (16.4–5). This episode is consistent with Plutarch's general characterization of Crassus' position relative to the other triumvirs. Politically, he occupies the middle ground, with no fixed or reliable power base, and moves toward Caesar or Pompey as necessary. While this makes him politically agile, it also makes him dependent on both of his partners.

Perhaps Plutarch's strongest statement of Crassus' inferior position is found in his assessment of the underlying motivation for the Parthian campaign, inserted into the narrative much later, when the war is lost and the Parthians are about to destroy the Roman army. The soldiers blame Crassus for their predicament but still would like for him to address them. Crassus, however, has hidden himself away and is lying alone in the dark, as Plutarch writes:

an example to some of the ways of fortune, but to those who are sensible, an example of foolish ambition. On account of his ambition, he didn't enjoy the fact that he was first and greatest among countless men, but because he judged himself inferior to only two, he felt that he lacked everything (27.6).

This statement underscores the fact that Plutarch saw Crassus' inferiority to Caesar and Pompey as real and inescapable, and that it was in

¹⁷ Simpson (1938) makes a case against the veracity of Ateius' curses in Plutarch and other non-contemporary accounts. Important for our argument, however, is how Plutarch has used the curses to depict Crassus in relation to Caesar and Pompey, not his historical accuracy.

¹⁸ Simpson (1938) 533. The other passages are Cicero *De Divinatione* 1.29; Velleius 2.46.3; Appian *Bella Civilia* 2.18; Cassius Dio 39.39; Lucan 3.126–127; and Florus 3.11.3. Some authors relate two or all three elements.

fact ultimately responsible for his demise. While we might have viewed the low standing of Crassus in the other two *Lives* as a technique for focusing the narrative on the heroes and not crowding the biographies with too many characters, we see from Crassus' own *Life* that his diminished role was actually part of Plutarch's assessment of his standing, and this assessment is consistent across all three biographies.

This consistent representation of all three heroes in all three *Lives* leads to a two-fold conclusion. First, in addition to researching and composing the triumviral *Lives* together as part of the larger group of late-Republican *Lives*, Plutarch also developed a single conception of the struggle between Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus, and he crafted their individual *Lives* to reflect this single point of view. That is to say, the three *Lives*, where the triumvirate is concerned, together tell a single story. This conclusion is perhaps not very surprising, given the close historical interaction of the three men and the commonalities in the composition of their biographies. However, a second point is perhaps more unexpected: the three *Lives*, and especially the *Caesar* and *Pompey*, are more informative, and their anecdotes richer, when they are read together. It is of course speculation to say that Plutarch intended that his audience would read the *Caesar*, *Pompey*, and *Crassus* as a sort of triad of *Lives*, but my analysis does suggest that he at least suspected that they might, and he certainly included much that can be appreciated by doing so.¹⁹

¹⁹ Mossman (1992) 92 expresses a similar sentiment with respect to the *Alexander* and *Pyrrhus*.