

In the Backlight: Augustus on Plutarch

À contraluz: Augusto em Plutarco

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Abstract: A true synthesis of the richest classical tradition, positioned between Greek essence and Roman naturalness, Plutarch's work will always display a structural tendency to reconcile two changeable worlds. Although cited in the *Lamprias's Catalog*, the *Αὐγούστου Βίος* has not survived, and readers only know an indirect portrait of Augustus, in the shade of other historical figures, such as his predecessor Iulius Caesar, his opponent Antony, or his emulous Alexander. From this fuzzy portrait, it is nevertheless possible to capture the emperor's image and discern the influence he could exert on the conscience of a colonized.

Keywords: Augustus; Plutarch; *Αὐγούστου Βίος*; cultural tradition.

1. Plutarch: biographical account

Given the exceptional projection of Augustus as an important figure throughout the history of Rome, multiple authors have left several portraits of him, most of which have been grounded and persist with overwhelming force in the memory of times. Within the circle of those authors who shed light on him in the period of the Roman Principate, we have chosen to study Plutarch.

Born in Chaeronea, northern Boeotia, in Greece, in the middle of the first century of our era, Plutarch emerges as the legitimate heir to a great culture. Capable of the most amazing creations of the mind and considered a major cultural power in the Mediterranean world and particularly in Rome, Greece was however historically forced into an artificial political unity due to constant political turmoil. Plutarch is, therefore, Greek, at a time when Greece, in the back shadow of Rome for two centuries, had become accustomed to the tranquility of peace, which was clearly evidenced in the decline of her cultural production and the acceptance of the permanent loss of her national and spiritual independence.

Produced under the sign of bipolarity, belonging both to the Greek and the Roman worlds, the works of Plutarch demonstrate a clear structural trend

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towards contrast, an interest in expressing divergence, and an unsurpassed commitment to the reconciliation of opposites. This synthesis of two changing worlds, akin to the best and richest cultural traditions of antiquity, is visible in the bewildering multiplicity pervasive in the works of Plutarch, and in the particular set of the *Parallel Lives* — a revisit of the history of both Greece and Rome, through the biographical example of some of the most notable characters: namely those who were outstanding for their exceptional qualities, and whose memory survived death itself². The main aim of this collection is not to convey stories of a glorious past when Greece was free and Romans were virtuous, but rather to propose to human beings of all time a comprehensive reflection on moral philosophy, which might teach them how to live reasonably, 'as it would be appropriate'³, and enable them to live their lives in the best way possible.

2. The *Ἀυγούστου Βίος*, a lost historical narrative source

The oldest list, of 227 titles, of Plutarch's works, known as *The Lamprias Catalogue*⁴, included one *Ἀυγούστου Βίος*, but this book has not survived⁵.

Current research tends to date the collection of the *Parallel Lives* to the latest period of Plutarch's production, and it even considers the possibility this enterprise might have been inspired by a set of biographies of important figures of the Roman empire, from Augustus to Vitellius, possibly in a literary project similar to *De uitis Caesarum*, by Suetonius. *The Lamprias Catalogue* registered the *Life of Augustus* under no. 26: that is, immediately after the *Lives of Demetrius and Antony* (no. 25), and before the *Lives of Tiberius* (no. 27), *Claudius* (no. 29), *Nero* (no. 30), *Galba and Otho* (no. 30) and *Vitellius* (no. 33). The *Life of Augustus* is also placed after the book on the *Lives of Alexander and*

² The *Parallel Lives* were probably written between AD 100 and 115 and are a collection of 23 pairs of compared biographies of Greek and Roman illustrious men. In addition, there are four unpaired biographies (*Artaxerxes*, *Aratus*, *Galba* and *Otho*). It is likely Plutarch wrote the *Parallel Lives* following the suggestion of his Roman friend Sosius Senecio (to whom most of them are dedicated); later, works which were not designed as part of the *Parallel Lives* were added to it.

³ *Dem.* 1.4.

⁴ See IRIGOIN (1986).

⁵ See FLACELIÈRE/IRIGOIN (2003), p. ccciii ff., and IRIGOIN (1986).

Caesar (no. 22, illustrating the exemplarity of the great conquerors) and before a book on the *Life of Caius Caesar* (no. 31)⁶. Of these works, the *Lives of Tiberius, Claudius, Nero* and *Caius* do not survive, while only one fragment survives from the *Life of Vitellius* (fr. 16 FL).

Since the *Ἀγούστου Βίος* does not survive today, we are necessarily faced with the contingency of having to reconstruct Plutarch's representation of Augustus solely via indirect portrayals. In fact, to judge from comments included in other Plutarchan works, Augustus appears only in the shadow of other historical figures of exceptional relief; who set the social and political context of Rome, where Augustus would shine under his own light.

The collection *Parallel Lives* suggests an obvious conclusion: most Roman figures presented in opposition to Greek ones are closely connected to the difficult period of social, economic and political crisis, which led to the collapse of the Roman Republic and the birth of the Empire.

The set of six Roman biographies, of Pompey, Crassus, Caesar, Cato Minor, Brutus and Antony, stands out from the *Vitae* collection. Possibly based on the narratives of Asinius Pollio, and conceived as a structured literary project, these biographies display firm knowledge on the Roman reality and her history⁷, and here more than in any other earlier work of Plutarch.

3. Tracking Augustus in the *Parallel Lives*

Although we do not have a complete biography of Augustus by Plutarch, brief references to him have come down to us and are coherent with the usual pattern of several biographies in the *Parallel Lives*. Augustus is usually introduced by a regular set of recurring narrative topics. Specifically, Augustus is mentioned after the description of (a) the circumstances of the assassination of Caesar, being involved in the persecution of the murderers; in the same contexts also occur (b) genealogical references that link Augustus to his foster father, which may be reinforced through other family ties; the clarification of (c) the circumstances of his birth; references to some

⁶ There is no indication of the differences between the first version of the life of Julius Caesar, in which he is paired with Alexander and has survived, and the second, of which we know only the title.

⁷ See PELLING (1988), 4; 27.

(d) wonders that associate him to divinity; (e) explanations of his name, as carrying two affiliations, the natural and the adoptive one. Mentions of Augustus in the *Parallel Lives* also include details, such as (f) references to his physical aspect and descriptions of (g) his military exploits. Occasionally, there is an interest in (h) episodes revealing moral and intellectual qualities, sometimes by contrast (particularly with Antony) or association (with Julius Caesar); (i) explanations for his memorable sayings and references to (j) his outstanding achievements (e.g. literary).

A description of the circumstances of Caesar's assassination (a) provides for the appearance of the character of the young Augustus, genealogically kin to the foster father and involved in the persecution of his assassins (*Caes.* 68.5; *Cic.* 43.8; 16.1-8; *Brut.* 22).

Other reinforcement notes about (b) family ties follow, namely: in *Publ.* 17.5 (Augustus's sister is mentioned); *Marc.* 31.8 (about the notoriety of Claudius Marcelus, Octavia Minor's son and Augustus nephew and son-in-law); in *Cic.* 44.1-7 (mention of his mother, stepfather, brother-in-law and uncle)⁸; in *Ant.* 20.1-5 (with a reference to Augustus' marriage to Claudia, stepdaughter of Antony), and in 31.1-5 (Octavia and Antony's wedding). In *Ant.* 87.1-2 his succession is clarified. The link between Galba and Livia is noted in *Galb.* 3.2.

The clarification of (c) the circumstances of Augustus' birth occurs in *Cic.* 44.1-7, by the attested coincidence with the consulate of Cicero.

The prophetic dream of Cicero, narrated in the same episode, *Cic.* 44.1-7, sets the atmosphere for a (d) prodigy that links Augustus to divinity.

Several steps of the narrative use (e) the explanation of Augustus' name, as a sign of his two-fold affiliation (the natural and the foster one). *Cic.* 43.8 give details concerning Augustus' arrival from Illyria to claim his inheritance. *Ant.* 11.2 provide context for the description of the return from the first campaigns in Hispania. In *Brut.* 22 the arrival from Illyria and the claim for legacy are accounted for.

There are (f) references to physical appearance, including diseases, sometimes alleged (*Ant.* 23.1; *Brut.* 38.3-4, and 41) and other times acknowledged (note that in *Ant.* 24.1, he returns from a campaign on the verge of death).

⁸ See *Ant.* 87.1-2.

Moreover, the presentation of military deeds (g) eventually emerges in the biographies. Whilst *Cic.* 43.8 accounts for the arrival of Illyria of the heir who claims for his inheritance, in *Caes.* 68.5 the decision to give immediate death to the conspirators and the boasters is detailed. In Chapter 69.12, the victories of Antony and Octavian at Philippi are narrated; these will lead to the suicide of Brutus. Moreover, the *Life of Brutus* registers (23.1) not only Augustus' commitment to recruit armies but also his political maneuvering to institutionalize the second triumvirate (*Brut.* 27.1-6); the difficulties and failures in battle can be read in *Brut.* 42 and 50.2.

Because this narration presents in detail the gradual political process of the young Octavian, legal heir of Julius Caesar, in constant rivalry with his most important general, Mark Antony (the natural political heir), the *Life of Antony* is the most comprehensive source concerning Augustus' military exploits. The beginning of this book really provides important details concerning both Augustus' family history and the military education of Julius Caesar (*Ant.* 11.2), as well as his growing manifestations of autonomy, after the violent death of his guardian (*Ant.* 16.1-8)⁹. This is especially clear after the twentieth chapter, following the regulamentation of the second triumvirate¹⁰ and the descriptions of the several efforts of the triumvirate to take power.

In *Ant.* 17.1-2, Cicero uses his influence to inflame tempers against Antony, considered a public enemy, and grants Octavian both the *fasces* and the *praetoria insignia*. When Antony is expelled from Italy, Octavian and Antony fight one another in Modena and Octavian comes out winner. Defeated and fleeing amid setbacks, Antony shows signs of great dignity and courage, and thus gains the respect of the troops.

In *Ant.* 19.1-3, Octavian quarrels with Cicero, while preparing the second triumvirate with Antony and Lepidus. When dealing with eventual proscriptions, each one of them negotiates everything, including the lives of

⁹ See above *Caes.* 68.5.

¹⁰ PELLING (1988), 164 notes that Plutarch summarizes without digressions the facts prior to the formation of the Second Triumvirate, without explaining the reasons for the timely change of political trajectory of the young Octavianus, hypothesizing he would have had a sudden intuition of Cicero's real plans and their allegiance as short-termed. This would be detailed by other sources (Appian, perhaps inspired by Pollio).

kin and family (Octavian sells Cicero out; Antony sells his uncle Lucius Caesar out, and Lepidus, his brother Paullus)¹¹.

In *Ant.* 20.1-5, the agreements for the marriage between Caesar and Claudia are sealed with the ratification of a list of 300 people to be proscribed¹². The most miserable victim is Cicero, due to the horror surrounding his death and the subsequent mutilation of his corpse¹³.

Ant. 21 describes the growing discomfort among the triumvirs, and Octavian as having conquered public appreciation¹⁴. The descriptions of the battles against Cassius and Brutus, in 23, report the failure of Octavian, who having lost the first battle, barely escaped alive¹⁵. This is clearly in contrast with the renowned military fortune of Antony¹⁶.

In *Ant.* 24, the return of Octavian to Rome, it is reported that he seemed to be so ill that everyone supposed his end was near. This brightens the triumphal exit of Antony to the East, where he was able to win the respect and admiration of the Greek people. In *Ant.* 28, while Octavian exhausts himself in Rome, mainly because of his conflicts with Fulvia, the Parthian army, led

¹¹ To justify the comment of Plutarch that ‘Nothing, in my opinion, could be more savage or cruel than this exchange. For by this barter of murder for murder they put to death those whom they surrendered just as truly as those whom they seized; but their injustice was greater toward their friends, whom they slew without so much as hating them.’ (*Ant.* 19.3; transl. PERRIN [1988] 9.179).

¹² But in *Brut.* 27.6, the count amounts to 200; and *Cic.* 46.2 reports that there were more than 200; *App.* 4.5, mentions 300 senators and 2000 horsemen.

¹³ Plutarch underlines that, unlike the nasty attitude of the triumvirs, there were dignified reactions on the part of those who opposed them. One example of this is, in the context of the persecution of Antony’s uncle, Lucius Caesar, the defence of his sister, Julia, mother of Antony, who, facing the unfair condemnation of her brother, demands that she too be killed.

¹⁴ Accustomed to a life of leisure, surrounded by dissipated people, living in the house of the self-controlled Pompey the Great and managing the public wealth to his own personal benefit, Antony earns the hatred of all. Octavian negotiates the division of his resources and armies, and leaving Lepidus in Rome, goes to Macedonia with Antony to fight Cassius and Brutus.

¹⁵ Plutarch reminds us (*Brut.* 41) that Octavian registered in his *Commentaries* that he had run away influenced by a prophetic dream of a friend.

¹⁶ *Ant.* 23: Cassius, taking for granted Brutus’ defeat, asks a follower to kill him; but some days later, Antony defeats Brutus, who kills himself.

by Labienus, threatens Macedonia; indifferent to all things, Antony remains in Alexandria¹⁷.

In *Ant.* 30, after the news of conflicts between Fulvia, Antony's wife, and Lucius, his brother, with Octavian, and of the triumphs of Labienus, Antony decides to fight the Parthians. He first meets his family; his sick wife dies, thus offering him a pretext for the reconciliation with Octavian. Power is again divided: Antony has the East (up to the border of the Ionian Sea), Octavian the West, and Lepidus gets Africa.

In *Ant.* 31.1-5, Antony (the widower of Fulvia and now living with Cleopatra) gets married to Octavia, Octavian's sister. After a relatively calm period¹⁸, Antony, heated by the force of the circumstances and also urged by Cleopatra, he is willing to face Octavian (*Ant.* 33.1-5). There are rumours that neither of them would personally command their battles, but were instead represented by legates like Ventidius, victorious in the East (*Ant.* 34.9). By influence of Octavia, pregnant with Antony's second child, the peace of Tarentum is negotiated (*Ant.* 35), and afterwards the final pretext for war emerges (*Ant.* 53-58).

Fearing Antony's preparation for Parthia (*Ant.* 59.8) and the rumours concerning his testamentary dispositions in favour of Cleopatra, Octavian declares war on the couple, covetous of their might (*Ant.* 71-88); after Antony's defeat, Octavian orders the assassination of Marcus Antonius Antyllus, the eldest son of Antony and Fulvia (*Ant.* 87.1-2)¹⁹.

Plutarch's biographical narrations particularly focus on (h) attitudinal episodes which reveal moral and intellectual characteristics of the narrated figure. In the case of Augustus, such anecdotes reveal his fierce determination (in the context of criticism and abuses by Antony in *Ant.* 16.1-8)²⁰; or

¹⁷ See the testimony of a friend of Plutarch's grandfather Lamprias, the doctor Philotas (*Ant.* 28.3 ff.), who was in Alexandria during that period, on the pageantry existent in the palace's kitchens, and see the episode of Antonius and Fulvia's son wasting of precious objects.

¹⁸ In *Ant.* 32.2-3, Antony and Caesar partnered to assign to Sextus Pompeius a post in the fight of piracy in the Mediterranean.

¹⁹ In *Ant.* 87.1-2.

²⁰ *Ant.* 16.1-8.

his mercy (towards Cato's son, in *Cat. Min.* 73.5, and towards Straton and Messalla, in *Brut.* 53.1-3). On the opposite end of the scale, there are accounts of a tendency for incompetence and cowardice in military life (in *Ant.* 23.1); for stinginess²¹ towards the soldiers and lustral sacrifices (in *Brut.* 39.1); there are also mentions of Octavian's tyrannical attitude (in *Brut.* 22, and 29.10-11, and *Compar. Dion. et Brut.* 1-2); or of his flattery and disloyalty (namely in the context of the manipulation of Cicero, in *Cic.* 45.1-6; *Cic.* 46; *Cic.* 47.5-6; and *Ant.* 16.1-8, *Ant.* 19.1-3). As a counterpoint, there are rare demonstrations of his goodwill: for example, he spares the city of Alexandria after the victory of Actium (*Ant.* 80.2). There are also mentions of reports that during adulthood sometimes Octavian might have shown regret for his past excesses (in *Cic.* 49.5-6).

A couple of diegetic remarks concern (i) Augustus' memorable sayings: for example *Rom.* 17.3 (on traitors as despised)²², *Per.* 1.1 (on the discipline of natural affections), and *Compar. Dion. et Brut.* 7 (on the unconditional loyalty to friends, concerning the statue of Brutus in Milan).

Finally, (j) remarkable works are mentioned often. Examples range from the change in the calendar to the establishment of an exceptionally lasting peace (in *Num.* 19.6, e 20.2), and the criticism against the unexpected need for tax collection from the Romans, due to the civil wars against Antony (*Aem.* 38.1).

In terms of the description of Octavian' remarkable deeds, it is also worth mentioning a literary work of Augustus, to which only brief allusions survive (such as in *Marc.* 30.5-11, *Cic.* 45.1-6, the *Compar. Dem et Cic* 3; *Ant.* 22.1; *Brut.* 27.1-6, and 41).

²¹ The exceptional generosity of Julius Caesar is presented as opposed to the wasteful vein of Antony.

²² In *Rom.* 17.3, to contextualize the betrayal of Tarpeia (who handed the security of the fortress governed by her father to the Sabines in exchange for golden bracelets), Plutarch reminds the reader that the reaction of the Sabines, who punished her brutally, expressed an extreme rejection of the traitors from whose vile service they had actually profited. The same sentiment, Plutarch continues, was also expressed by Augustus at a banquet against the Thracian Rhoemetalces. The same allusion of Augustus against the Thracian prince is attested in the second *Apothegm of Augustus* (207 A).

The autobiography of Augustus was probably published ten years after his victory at Actium, and it told in thirteen books the military warfare of the Hispaniae, in 23 BC. The intent is clear: to vilify the memory of Antony²³ and present events in such a way so as to explain away some of the most obvious inabilities and villainies of Augustus²⁴.

4. The *Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata*, a way to reconstruct Augustus in backlight

In the Plutarchan production, the figure of Augustus reappears in a small book of the *Moralia*, the *Regum et Imperatorum Apophthegmata*²⁵. The authorship of this essay is considered doubtful by some specialists, being sometimes interpreted either as apocryphal, or as an anonymous collection in association to the Plutarchean *corpus*²⁶. It is well known that this type of collection had come into vogue, and it seems to have been used by many figures in the Roman world (e.g. Cato Major, Caesar, Domitius Marsus, Tiron,

²³ From what can be read in fr. 16 M, for example; see *Ant.* 58.4-59.1.

²⁴ For instance, his being absent from Philippi (fr. 10 M), his partnership with Cicero, renowned supporter of Caesar's murderers, and his subsequent disloyalty towards the same Cicero (fr. 9 M = *Vit. Cic.* 45.6).

²⁵ The 59th essay from the Planudes' Catalogue, 'Αποφθέγματα Βασιλέων καὶ στρατηγῶν; the *Lamprias Catalogue* mentions under no. 108 the title 'Αποφθέγματα ἡγεμονικά (or στρατηγικά, or τυραννικά); it is also possible that the title of the 125th essay, 'Απομνημονεύματα (*Memorable Facts*), may correspond to another variant of the same speech, as the dedication to Trajan, at the beginning of the composition (of widely discussed authenticity), uses the exact same word.

²⁶ Not only because the manuscripts do not contain the author's name (as it frequently happened with most of the ancient works), but also in virtue of literary criteria. In fact, it has been argued that the collection does not testify to the quality of other works by the same author: neither stylistically (as it is very poor), nor in terms of research (as he does not refer sources, neither does he outline a framework for the narrated facts, often mere anecdotes); finally, some authors have observed linguistic anomalies (such as the irregular use of the optative). Suspicions seem, however, to be excessive. In fact, it is not possible to take for granted that all the works by the author, dating from different periods of his life, manifest the same exemplary quality of his mature works; furthermore, the observations do not correspond to serious flaws, nor to indefensible problems. The style of those works is very similar to that of other Plutarchean works of the same genre, such as the *Apophthegmata Laconica*; those are well structured works.

Cicero's freed slave, and Cicero himself) as an aid, to enrich public speeches with erudite notes, for example, or to develop certain memorable passages in works of greater prowess. It is also possible that the collection, effectively by Plutarch²⁷, may correspond to a provisional set of annotations for other works (such as the ones suggested in *De tranq. anim.* 464e-f)²⁸, or, on the contrary, it might result from an ulterior synthesis of greater works written for a specific purpose²⁹; in the same way, one must also consider that the *Apophthegmata* might have been organized as a *uademecum* prepared for Trajan, as the foreword letter enables us to assume³⁰.

²⁷ Plutarch has, in fact, other works of the same kind, which have been concluded, such as the *Apophthegmata Laconica*.

²⁸ On the methodological challenges underlying an ancient work of history, vd. PELLING (1988), 32-36.

²⁹ From the historical figures addressed in the collection of the *Apophthegmata*, five Athenians (Alcibiades, Aristides, Pericles, Phocion and Themistocles), three Spartans (Agesilaus, Lycurgus and Lysander), one Macedonian (Alexander), three Diadochi or Epigoni (Demetrius, Eumenes, Pyrrhus), one Theban (Pelopidas), one Syracusan (Dion), one Persian (Artaxerxes), and ten Romans (Cato the Elder, Caesar, Cicero, Fabius Maximus, Flamininus, Lucullus, Marius, Aemilius Paulus, Pompey and Sulla) re-appear in the literary production of Plutarch. The *Lamprias Catalogue* allows us to conclude that four *Vitae* were lost: the one of Epaminondas, of Augustus, and the ones of the two Scipios. Several hypotheses have been put forward in order to explain the nature and role of the *Apophthegmata* within the literary production of Plutarch. Some suppose they were simply withdrawn from external sources, such as anonymous collections, already composed, of sententious sayings, which would be largely used as referents of the cultured tradition (like it would eventually happen with Plutarch's own collections, massively quoted by later authors, like Polyaeus, Aelianus and Stobaeus, besides medieval and modern lexicographers and collectors). Others, drawing attention to the multiple cross-references between the *Apophthegmata* and other works of Plutarch, particularly the *Lives*, argue that the *Apophthegmata* must have been extracted from other works of the author, as significant passages to be re-used in the future, or, on the contrary, as small outline-summaries that could later generate wider works, by thematic expansion.

³⁰ The authenticity of the letter dedicated to Trajan, at the beginning of the composition, has also been largely discussed among experts: it is generally accepted as original, but with reservations. In fact, that Plutarch might have met the emperor is merely an assumption, never truly confirmed. However, it is very likely that Trajan had met Plutarch the philosopher of Chaeronea and priest of Apollo. Plutarch's great friend and patron, Sosius Senecio (who might have suggested the literary project of the *Parallel Lives* to Plutarch, and to whom he usually dedicates them), was a high dignitary, counselor and kin to

In this background of profound uncertainty, the structural idea of the collection remains undeniable — that the characters of men and the principles that inspire them are better reflected in their intentions, not in their actions — fully corresponds, though perhaps in a more elementary and immature form, to the ‘historical’ conception of the author of the *Parallel Lives*³¹.

Comparing the amount of information conveyed by similar reports — both from the *Apophthegmata* and from the corresponding *Lives* — we realize that obvious parallels between narrative sequences tend to occur. A careful collation of the sixty-nine chapters of *Caesaris Vita* and the fifteen *Apophthegmata* dedicated to him, for example, allows one to observe that the common episodes³² obey practically to the same order of occurrence. The episodes mentioned in the *Apophthegmata* reappear in the *Life*, although expanded, or further detailed, with historical and geographical facts or even facts of other nature³³. The narrative segments, meticulously grounded in evidence and

Trajan, whom, according to the attestation of Suidas, the emperor bestowed with honours. It also seems probable that Plutarch had regularly expressed himself as favourable to the philhellene emperors, the Antonines. It is likely that the gifting of the work to Trajan took place between 98 and 117, that is at a late stage in his literary career.

³¹ ‘For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities’ (*Alex.* 1.2; transl. PERRIN [1919] 7.225).

³² *Apophth.* 1 – *Vit.* 1-2; *Apophth.* 2 – *Vit.* 7; *Apophth.* 3 – *Vit.* 9-10; *Apophth.* 4 – *Vit.* 11; *Apophth.* 5 – *Vit.* 11; *Apophth.* 6 – *Vit.* 31-32; *Apophth.* 7 – *Vit.* 31-3; *Apophth.* 8 – *Vit.* 35; *Apophth.* 9 – *Vit.* 38; *Apophth.* 10 – *Vit.* 38; *Apophth.* 11 – *Vit.* 39, 44; *Apophth.* 12 – *Vit.* 51; *Apophth.* 13 – *Vit.* 31; *Apophth.* 14 – *Vit.* 62; *Apophth.* 15 – *Vit.* 63.

³³ See, for example, the episode that presents his first escape: in his youth, Julius Caesar fled to hunt Sulla down, and was subsequently abducted by pirates, with the negotiations for his own ransom and the retaliation that followed summarized in the first two chapters of *Caes.* (and also in Suetonius *Vit. Div. Iul.* 4 and 74, by allusion; or, with important variants, in Velleius Paterculus 2.41-42; and briefly, Val. Maximus 6.9 and 15). Plutarch is careful enough to present referents of historical contextualization for the resentment of Sulla, detailing for instance his exile tour, from Bithynia, his passing near the island of Pharmacussa, to the Southwest of Miletus, and his noting that the Cilician pirates demanded a ransom of 20 talents. Such extensions possibly result from his creativity, rather than from the sources he used.

articulated, prepare the subsequent development of the story, via a proleptic surplus of information.

Assuming the remarkable episode sequences assigned to each of the *Apophthegmata* protagonists show in fact a descriptive summary of their personalities, we venture to propose, once again in backlight, an indirect portrait, as close as possible, of Plutarch's Augustus.

The first *Apophthegma* focuses on the occasion of Octavian's official presentation as legal heir of Julius Caesar, claiming before Antony the 25 million drachmas of Caesar's assets (entrusted by the widow to Antony after the murder), in compliance with the testamentary dispositions of Caesar³⁴. This seems to stress the idea that — unlike Caesar, his adoptive father and, more importantly, and unlike Antony, Caesar's commander — a very young Octavian seriously reshaped the flow of history, not for having shown any special talent, nor by playing a part in an important historical event, but out of chance: for coming to be the heir of a great revolutionary at a time of great political turmoil³⁵. The expanded note that after the refusal of Antony the young man put his own assets up for auction and sold them³⁶ indicates a feature unanimously recognized by biographers: the exceptional determination with which he took, despite his extreme youth, his role and responsibility of executor and political follower of his adoptive father in the first part of his public life. Let us also note that his pertinacious opposition to the violent animosity of Antony puts in relief, by contrast, his ability to be guided more and more by deliberate reason, rather than by exalted emotion; also, the observation that, with this gesture of (apparent) detachment, he earned the admiration of the people (as Antony earned their resentment) clearly suggests that his ability to manipulate others (and carefully conceal his intentions), emerged early, ensuring that his ambitions would be solidly successful.

³⁴ See *Caes.* 68.5 and *Cic.* 43.8, mentioned above.

³⁵ This conviction will, moreover, be manifested by Augustus himself, when, invoking the favours of the gods for his grandson Caius, he desires for the latter the moderation and audacity of his models, Pompey and Alexander, and his own Fortune (cf. *Apophth.* 10, below).

³⁶ While it cannot be read in any passage of Plutarch, the sale of the heritage by Octavian is attested in Appian, *B. Ciu.* 3.21.

In the second *Apophthegma* one can read how, at a symposium, to punish the offensive conduct of one of the guests³⁷, Augustus sarcastically said in a toast that he appreciated treason, but abhorred traitors. The comment, formulated in an adversative sentence of remarkable brevity, encapsulates the recurrent equivocal character of this man: being able to accept a wrongful act to his advantage, he expeditiously censors its agent. Moreover, as is occasionally reflected by Plutarch and other biographers, the Young Caesar's conduct was also determined by a remarkable ambivalence (particularly in his relations with Cicero): he is appreciative of the political advantages a fearless disloyalty can bring.

It is possible that the episode previously mentioned — corroborated by the facts narrated in the fourth *Apophthegma*³⁸ about the extravagant punishment inflicted on an imperial administrator — demonstrates the impatience with which Augustus would accept, in his adulthood, all manifestations of ingratitude. These he remembered, albeit with some regret, when recalling his life's journey. They seem to emerge in fleeting episodes of the *Lives*, such as in his praise of Cicero, when Augustus surprises his own grandson reading a book of Cicero in secret (*Cic.* 49).

The twelfth *Apophthegma* testifies to the proverbial talent he had, from an early age, to seduce others by manipulating their attention and will. It presents how, one day, while trying to pacify protests by young aristocrats, he said: 'Hear, O young, an old man that the elders listened when he too was young'³⁹.

The third and fourteenth *Apophthegmata*, set up by the narrative of the amazing magnanimity with which Augustus treated both the inhabitants of Alexandria, after the victory in Actium⁴⁰, and the Athenians, who had called

³⁷ Rhoemetaces, king of Thrace, who had been an ally of Antony in Pharsalus and Philippi, but after Actium he went over to Octavian. For a similar speech, this time assigned to Philip of Macedonia, cf. *Stob.* 4.13.64.

³⁸ Concerning the punishment inflicted on Eros, an administrator in Egypt, after he had confirmed the truth of a rumour that he had killed, roasted and eaten a pet bird of his own, which had earned him victories in several combats; outraged, Augustus had him tied to the mast of a ship.

³⁹ See in greater detail *An Seni* 784 D.

⁴⁰ See n. 65: cf. also *Precepts to dominate the republic*, 814 D, and *Ant.* 80.2.

guilt upon themselves⁴¹, suggest both the sympathetic treatment usually assigned to him, after his excesses as a youngster, and the ability to give his friends constant encouragement. Moreover, the unconditional friendship he had for the Alexandrian philosopher Areius is mentioned in the fifth *Apophthegma*⁴² — one that also reveals his clear tendency for an uncompromised equivocality of mind.

The sixth⁴³ and the seventh⁴⁴ *Apophthegmata* refer to the regularity of his affective bonds towards his friend Maecenas, and to the influence of the Stoic discipline of his master Athenodorus from Tarsus over his spirit, initially prone to intractability. This tendency, disciplined by effort, is also represented in an episode reported in the ninth *Apophthegma*: after having conceived

⁴¹ Considering the Athenians responsible for a serious offense against him, Augustus wrote to them from Aegina stating that he did not allow them to ignore his fury. But after that, he did not punish them further — neither by words, nor by actions. Experts note that, during the winter of 22-21, Augustus, after having stationed in Sicily, cleaned up Asia and stopped in Aegina, not Athens. It is not known in what ways the Athenians had failed Augustus. The *Apophthegm* does not comply in any way with Dio Cassius 54.7.2-3, who explains that Augustus took repressive measures against Athens (such as the interdiction of receiving taxes from Aegina), because he attributed to them the blame of having shown favour to Antony in the past. But he seemed to have quickly forgiven the Athenians, as in the following year, on his return home, he would reenter the city.

⁴² Augustus named Areius procurator of Sicily, to replace Theodorus upon whom a delation had fallen; but, when asked about the possibility of him being a thief, to the question ‘what do you think?’, he shortly answered ‘it seems.’

⁴³ Note that ‘From Maecenas, is bosom-friend, he used to receive each year on his birthday a drinking-cup as a birthday present’ (*Sayings of Kings and Commanders, Sayings of Romans, Caesar Augustus*, 6; transl. BABBITT [1968] 3.233). Historical attestations confirm that their relationship lasted until the death of Maecenas, despite a certain cooling after 23 BC.

⁴⁴ In his old age, the philosopher Athenodorus of Tarsus was allowed by Augustus to retire to Tarsus. Athenodorus had recommended that, when Augustus got furious, he should not act before repeating the letters of the alphabet. In his farewell, Augustus confessed that, in that case, he still needed his presence, and held him back for a year, adding that ‘No risk attends the meed that silence brings’ (*Sayings of Kings and Commanders, Sayings of Romans, Caesar Augustus*, 7; transl. BABBITT [1968] 3.233). The same anecdote, with some variation, is present in the *Excerpta Planudea*, and substantiates Dio Cassius (Dindorf 5.234). The recommendation of Athenodorus can also be found, anonymous and with variants, in *Gnom.* The final note (meaning that the silence of a master can be eloquent) reproduces a verse by Simonides (*Ant. Lyr. Gr.* 2) which has become proverbial.

a law on adultery, with sanctions to be applied, Augustus eventually forgot the legal sanctions he had enacted, and, driven by anger, he slapped a young man accused of having an illegitimate relationship with his daughter Julia. His own acknowledgement of how ungoverned his emotions could get caused him such regret that throughout the day he was not able to eat⁴⁵. The disproportionate reaction is again mentioned in the fourteenth *Apophthegma*, where one can read that before the rudeness of an accuser denouncing the abuses of the Spartan Eurycles (one of his most devoted generals and allies) the correction to which he forced himself expresses an equivalent attitude noted by the author: he was in fact able to moderate anger by reason. Indeed, Augustus would demonstrate in this circumstance such discernment that he recognized and accordingly sanctioned the crimes of abuse of authority and embezzlement committed by his ally⁴⁶.

Particularly relevant to Plutarch's presentation of Augustus' personality seems to be *Apophthegmata* eight, ten, eleven and fifteen. The last three, going back to his adulthood, seem to translate the ultimate synthesis that Augustus consciously made of himself and of his role as world conqueror.

In the tenth, it is reported that he asked the gods to favour his grandson Caius⁴⁷, who was going to campaign in Armenia, and grant him the moderation of Pompey, Alexander's audacity, and his own Fortune; this note is then an acknowledgment of the qualities of such models, inasmuch as he would

⁴⁵ The *Lex Julia de adulteriis et de pudicitia*, enacted in AD 18, was in force from Augustus to Trajan.

⁴⁶ An accuser of Eurycles (the general who led the Spartan troops against Antony in Actium, and thus became a dedicated ally of Augustus) suggested to Augustus that, if what he argued did not seem to him serious enough, he should request an explanation of the seventh book of Thucydides (thus intending to honour his illustrious ancestor Brasidas). Augustus, infuriated, had him expelled from the city, but knowing he was the only descendant of Brasidas, sent for him and had him re-integrated in Rome with a mild reproach. Let us note that the irritation of Augustus before the impertinence of the accuser did not prevent him from punishing and banning his friend and ally, accused of authority abuse and embezzlement.

⁴⁷ Caius Caesar, born in 20 BC, was the eldest son of Julia and her second husband, Agrippa, whom Augustus intended to name as his successor Caius left for Armenia in 1 BC, with an exceptional pro-consular power, and he was successful there until he was wounded in an attack and died on his return, in AD 4.

like to see them represented in his imperial successor. But he also wanted to assume before them that his life was above all a journey marked by chance. In the same prospective way, the eleventh *Apophthegm* presents his will to have as heir a man able to innovate and be daring⁴⁸. The fifteenth seems to suggest, in the irony with which he evaluated the scruples of a neighbouring builder, his inner desire that he would be eternally remembered for his work⁴⁹. The eighth *Apophthegm*, corresponding chronologically to his youth and reflecting upon his critical position on models, denotes the primal notion he had on his purpose and responsibility towards the world: knowing that at the age of 32, Alexander, lord and master of most of the world, did not know what he might do next, Augustus was disconcerted by the fact that he did not rejoice before the challenge of organizing a vast empire, as he certainly had in the process of conquering it. This episode, which denotes the fundamental appeal to Augustus of an organizer and conscientious administrator, able to work doggedly, without any sign of discouragement, is enlightening and meaningful, especially if compared to two similar notes from the *Apophthegmata*. Like Octavian, Julius Caesar, his adoptive father, was still young⁵⁰ when someone confronted him with the reading⁵¹ of illustrious achievements; he wept, noting that he had not done anything remarkable at the age Alexander beat Darius (*Apophthegmata Caesaris* 4). A similar attitude is also assigned to Alexander himself (*Apophthegmata Alexandri* 1), who, as a child, had bitterly lamented that his father had brought home many

⁴⁸ He told the Romans he would leave as successor a man who had never acted twice on the same subject — he meant Tiberius (who assumed the power in AD 14).

⁴⁹ When Piso (either Calpurnius Piso, consul in 7 BC, or his father) painstakingly built his home, Augustus confessed he was filled with hope, because the former was building a house as if Rome would be everlasting.

⁵⁰ Plutarch and Dio Cassius situate this episode in Hispania Ulterior, a propretorate of Caesar (in 61); Suetonius locates it in the *quaestura* period of the same province (68-69): a more plausible date, as Caesar would be about 30 (Alexander would have been 25 at the battle of Arbes and 33 when he died), not 40 years old.

⁵¹ Plutarch and Dio Cassius note that this did not happen because he had read it somewhere or heard it from someone, but because he had seen a statue of Alexander in the temple of Hercules, at Cadiz. The existing variations thus seem to attest to Plutarch's free interpretation and ordering of the information he had previously collected.

trophies, leaving none for him; when friends answered it was for him that his father had conquered all, the boy claimed he had no interest in possessing a lot, without conquering a lot himself.

5. Conclusions

Readers of Plutarch's work will find today only an indirect image of Caesar Augustus, under a discreet light. He appears in the shadow of other historical figures of exceptional importance, like his predecessor Caesar, his opponent Antony, or his model Alexander.

We realize that the traditional stories generally transmitted by the *Lives* (and other sources of other authors) regarding his insecurities and vices, depict him as an immature young man, who had inherited, with the sudden death of his adoptive father (and great uncle), much more than power: rather he was confronted with disputes, and thus had to conquer power by force, in a context of great political instability and violence. It is possible this focus has a natural explanation in the historical limitation that emerges therefrom: the narrative is often about a particular turning point in history, namely the political and social tribulations prior to his rise to power, when he was still particularly young and inexperienced.

Through historical remarks often so allusive and obscure that they leave the reader confused, the *Apothegmata of the Kings and Generals* confirm, via their schematic presentation, the image of Augustus presented in biographical narratives. In fact, in virtue of the nature of the work, the result is a synthesis of the Augustus' character, gestures and important words.

The *Life of Antony* appears as the most detailed source among the works of Plutarch for profiling Augustus. It adopts a particularly interesting observation angle. On the one hand, the figure of Augustus, the very young and inexperienced legal heir of Julius Caesar, becomes relevant in contrast with the complexity of Antony, the notable general and natural political heir. Chosen by Plutarch, as the Roman counterpoint to Demetrius Poliorcetes⁵², to

⁵² He was a particularly skillful king and general, who, after the death of Alexander (whom his own father, Antigonus Monophthalmus, had already served as faithful companion and general), tried to secure the rule of Greece over the whole of Asia.

provide an example for the tragic topic⁵³ of the variability of fortune, Mark Antony substantiates the dictum that excellent qualities may coexist with an abundance of flaws and vices in the same man, and that the explosive combination will push him clamorously and unequivocally into disaster. From Plutarch's description of Antony, talented and passionate, prone to extreme reactions, devious, theatrical and destroyed by his own enthralling generosity (which at times undermines others via the excesses of his inordinate extravagance), but also himself destroyed – emerges, by contrast, the figure of Augustus: methodical, cruel, dark, manipulative, and unscrupulous, sober-minded, and driven only by his own self-determination.

When he outlines the contrasts between Augustus and Antony, Plutarch presents the city of Alexandria as dominated by triviality and eccentricity, but of more heart than stern Rome, which is moved by all kinds of conspiracies and disloyalties. Likewise, lovers Antony and Cleopatra, who the literary tradition, responsive to imperial propaganda, had striven to vilify, are much more interesting than for instance Octavian, the conspirator.

On the other hand, from the clear sympathy Plutarch shows towards Antony⁵⁴, and the feeling he puts into the story of his overwhelming love for Cleopatra, we are able to perceive how the *Life of Antony* has as a main theme the shifting fate of Greece. As Pelling⁵⁵ has noted, the battle of Actium silently echoes in the nostalgic discourse of the colonized Greek, Plutarch. In fact, the

⁵³ According to Plutarch, disaster grants men (*Vit. Ant.* 17.4-5) the possibility of acknowledging what is truly meaningful in life, but it often prevents them from putting their ideals into practice and avoiding the attitudes they despise. For the frequent use of lexical references to theater, theatricality, tragedy and comedy in the two *Lives* see PELLING (1988), 21-22.

⁵⁴ Reconstructing Plutarch's narrations often means to separate them from the sources which may have been important reference points for him (PELLING (1988) 35). Note, for example, that, although based on Cicero's *Phil.* for the information on Antony's youth, Plutarch keeps his source at a distance, discarding all information concerning congenital depravities and homosexuality (*Phil.* 2.44-77). Instead, he interprets (*Ant.* 2.4-8) young Antony's behavior, essentially passive in nature and prone to all kinds of slyness and flattery, as being influenced by Curio and Clodius renowned debauchery. Likewise, his references to Antony's first episodes of delinquency give him instead an opportunity to stress his special abilities in warfare, namely in Philippi (*Ant.* 22).

⁵⁵ PELLING (1988) 1.

nothingness that would have changed the course of history, that is the private disaster of Antony the phillelene, also represents the agony of an enlightened dream: the one of dynastic betrothals between the West and the East, framed by an empire which would have changed the center of gravity of the world, and thus have its pulsating heart in Greece, in virtue of Greece's privileged location between Rome and Alexandria.

We believe, however, that even without access to more direct testimonies, in which Augustus might have been truly prominent, it is still possible, from this diffuse backlight, to capture both his image and the enigmatic influence he must have exercised — as an outstanding representative of a movement of imperial expansion — upon the conscience of Plutarch, a colonized Greek.

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Resumo: Autêntica síntese da mais rica tradição clássica, entre a essência grega e a naturalidade romana, a obra de Plutarco mostrará sempre a tendência estrutural para a conciliação de dois mundos mutáveis. Embora citado no *Catálogo de Lamprias*, a *Αὐγούστου Βίος* não sobreviveu e os leitores só têm acesso a um retrato indirecto de Augusto, à sombra de outras figuras históricas, como o predecessor Júlio César, o adversário António ou o émulo Alexandre. A partir desse retrato difuso é contudo possível captar uma imagem do imperador e da influência que ele poderia exercer na consciência de um colonizado.

Palavras-chave: Augusto; Plutarco; *Αὐγούστου Βίος*; tradição cultural.

Resumen: Verdadera síntesis de la más rica tradición de la Antigüedad, la obra de Plutarco, bajo el signo de la bipolaridad, entre la esencia griega y la naturalidad romana, siempre mostrará una tendencia estructural al contraste y una apuesta por la reconciliación de dos mundos cambiantes. Aunque el *Catálogo de Lamprias* cita un *Αὐγούστου Βίος*, la obra no ha sobrevivido, y los lectores solo tienen acceso a un retrato indirecto de Augusto, a la sombra de otros personajes históricos, como el antecesor Julio César, el adversario Antonio o el émulo Alejandro. Sin embargo, es posible, a partir de este retrato difuso, sorprender una imagen del emperador y de la enigmática influencia que podría ejercer sobre la conciencia de un colonizado.

Palabras clave: Augusto; Plutarco; *Αὐγούστου Βίος*; tradición cultural.

Résumé : Véritable synthèse de la plus riche tradition de l'Antiquité, l'œuvre de Plutarque, sous le signe de la bipolarité, entre l'essence grecque et la naturalité romaine, montrera toujours une tendance structurelle au contraste et un engagement à la réconciliation de deux mondes changeants. Bien que le *Catalogue de Lamprias* cite un *Αὐγούστου Βίος*, l'œuvre n'a pas survécu et les lecteurs n'ont accès qu'à un portrait indirect d'Auguste, à l'ombre d'autres personnages historiques, comme le prédécesseur Jules César, l'adversaire Antoine ou l'émule Alexandre. Il est cependant possible, à partir de ce portrait diffus, de percevoir une image de l'empereur et de l'influence qu'il pourrait exercer sur la conscience d'un colonisé.

Mots-clés : Auguste ; Plutarque ; *Αὐγούστου Βίος* ; tradition culturelle.