

# Critical Analysis of the *Life of Caesar* and *Life of Dion* in Plutarch's Parallel Lives

Plutarch is a famous Roman writer renowned for his compelling narrative in which he blends historical facts with moral and philosophical reflection. In both the *Life of Caesar*<sup>1</sup> and the *Life of Dion*<sup>2</sup>, Plutarch constructs his narratives in such a way as to focus on character development and moral dilemmas. His aim is to reveal to the reader the virtues and vices of leadership.

Plutarch's approach to biography is to prioritize facts that illustrate the qualities of the person he is writing about; the author does not necessarily aim to be chronologically precise. In the *Life of Caesar*, Plutarch chooses episodes that illustrate Caesar's exceptional qualities, such as his military genius, personal charisma, and political ambition. For instance, Caesar's daring crossing of the Rubicon is portrayed not only as a decisive historical moment but also as an act that shows his willingness to defy convention.<sup>3</sup> By framing events in this way, Plutarch presents Caesar as a larger-than-life figure who through the sheer force of his will was a master of his own fortune.

In the *Life of Dion*, Plutarch adopts a similar approach, selecting episodes that illustrate Dion's philosophical ideals and his struggle to implement them in the corrupt political environment of Syracuse. The narrative begins with Dion's education under Plato, establishing his intellectual foundation and moral vision.<sup>4</sup> This sets the stage for Dion's later actions, such as his exile and return to Syracuse, which are portrayed as a philosophical crusade against tyranny. Plutarch's focus on Dion's ideals and their practical application underscores his central theme: the tension between idealism and political reality.

One of Plutarch's greatest strengths as a biographer, something that I haven't noticed in many ancient authors, is his use of anecdotes to bring his subjects to life. In the *Life of Caesar*, these anecdotes are used to show Caesar's charisma and bravery. For example, Plutarch recounts how Caesar, captured by pirates as a young man, not only maintained his composure but also earned

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<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans, Caesar*, 1157.

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans, Dion*, 1546.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar*, 1181.

<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *Dion*, 1548.

the respect of his captors with his confidence, later returning to punish them as promised. This story not only entertains but also reinforces Caesar's image as a man of extraordinary resolve.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Life of Dion*, Plutarch employs anecdotes to emphasize Dion's moral character and commitment to philosophy. He discusses Dion's refusal to be part of the excesses of Dionysius II's court, and often speaking his mind before the tyrant, decisions that show his principled nature and set him apart from the corrupt environment he wanted to reform.<sup>6</sup> These anecdotes offer the readers an insight into the values and motivations of the protagonists.

Plutarch also often writes about the public achievements along with the private lives of his subjects in order to provide a better view of their character. In the *Life of Caesar*, Plutarch explores Caesar's public ambitions and his personal relationships, such as his well-known affair with Cleopatra. While this relationship is widely considered to be simply a political alliance, Plutarch portrays it as a reflection of Caesar's capacity to be both charming and to indulge himself, which reveals more about the character of the dictator.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, in the *Life of Dion*, Plutarch examines how Dion's philosophical ideals influenced his personal conduct. Dion's ascetic lifestyle and dedication to Plato's teachings stand in stark contrast to the decadence of Dionysius's court. This dual focus on public and private spheres allows Plutarch to explore how personal virtues (or vices) shape the political actions of the two heroes.

Plutarch employs the technique of foreshadowing as a narrative device to connect individual actions with their broader consequences. In the *Life of Caesar*, early episodes such as Caesar's lament upon seeing Alexander the Great's statue foreshadow his drive for greatness, which ultimately leads to his assassination.

In the *Life of Dion*, foreshadowing is used to highlight how blind adherence to idealistic principles is not the right approach in a hostile political environment. Plutarch portrays Dion's

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<sup>5</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar*, 1157-1158.

<sup>6</sup> Plutarch, *Dion*, 1549.

<sup>7</sup> Plutarch, *Caesar*, 1191-1192.

reliance on philosophy as both his greatest strength and similarly his greatest flaw suggesting that his inflexible moral principles alienated allies and left him vulnerable to betrayal.<sup>8</sup>

Plutarch's exploration of virtue is central to his moral judgments in both lives. He uses Caesar and Dion to contrast different approaches to leadership, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Caesar's virtues lie in his exceptional abilities as a military commander, politician, and orator. Plutarch portrays him as a figure of immense talent and resourcefulness, capable of inspiring loyalty and overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges. However, Plutarch critiques Caesar for failing to subordinate his personal ambitions to the common good, suggesting that true virtue lies in self-restraint and service to others.

In Dion, on the other hand, we see a different kind of virtue, one rooted in philosophical ideas and a commitment to justice. Plutarch emphasizes Dion's moral integrity and his dedication to Plato's ideals, contrasting him with the decadence and corruption of Dionysius II's court. Dion's refusal to be part of the luxuries of tyranny and his efforts to restore civic virtue to Syracuse are some of his positive sides. However, Plutarch also highlights Dion's limitations: his rigidity and inability to compromise alienated allies and contributed to his political isolation. Here Plutarch shows that idealism, while admirable, must be infused with a healthy dose of pragmatism otherwise things just don't work out.

The theme of tyranny is central to both lives, and this is what allows Plutarch to examine the ways one can use power. In the Life of Caesar, Plutarch portrays Caesar as a figure who is both a reformer and a tyrant. While Caesar's actions, such as his military campaigns and political reforms, are presented as transformative, they also come at the cost of the republican principles that Romans cherished so much. Plutarch thinks that Caesar's dictatorship for life, while perhaps necessary to stabilize Rome, was ultimately a betrayal of the very values he claimed to uphold. This tension between necessity and morality invites readers to reflect on whether the ends justify the means in the exercise of power.

In the Life of Dion, Plutarch addresses tyranny from a different angle; from the perspective of the opposition. Dion's efforts to overthrow Dionysius II and establish a just government are

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<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, Dion, 1551.

portrayed as a moral crusade against corruption and oppression. Plutarch highlights the ethical challenges Dion faces in resisting tyranny without necessarily using its methods. For example, Dion's initial success in liberating Syracuse is undermined by his inability to maintain unity among his supporters, leading to internal discord and his eventual assassination.<sup>9</sup> Plutarch uses Dion's story to illustrate the possibility that reforms could be reversed and the ethical dilemmas faced by those who seek to destroy an unjust system.

The *Synkrisis* (comparative essay) at the end of each pairing is a key feature of *Parallel Lives*. While not always present, these comparisons provide a main narrative that ties the lives together thematically. Plutarch does not compare Caesar and Dion directly, he actually compares Dion with Brutus and has some discussion about Caesar there,<sup>10</sup> but the *Synkrisis* explores other contrasting approaches to leadership and the moral dilemmas they faced. Caesar's life is an example of relentless ambition that disregards the traditional political norms for the sake of transformation and personal glory, while Dion's story serves as an example on the limitations of idealism in the face of political reality.

Plutarch's narrative techniques in the *Life of Caesar* and the *Life of Dion* reveal his mastery of biography that could also offer moral and philosophical reflections.

Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* and the *Life of Dion* offer timeless lessons on leadership and how humans handle such immense responsibility. Through Caesar, Plutarch warns against the dangers of unchecked ambition and the erosion of traditional values in the pursuit of power. Through Dion, he highlights the challenges of implementing high moral ideals in our flawed and corrupt world. Plutarch also manages to infuse in the narrative his personal beliefs in the importance of virtue, self-restraint, and civic responsibility as the foundations of ethical leadership.

I am obviously not able to write with the level of sophistication of Plutarch but could still offer some critique. His focus on moral character and individual virtue could be quite overbearing at times but I think he is doing that because he wants to offer an in-depth analysis of the ethical dimensions of leadership and what having power does to people. Also, his selective storytelling and philosophical biases take away some of the historical accuracy of the biographies. It is

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<sup>9</sup> Id, 1581.

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, *Comparison of Dion and Brutus*, 1629.

possible to think though that those are exactly the things that contributed to the enduring appeal of *Parallel Lives* as a timeless literary masterpiece.

Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* has had a profound impact on the fields of biography, historiography, and moral philosophy, influencing literary traditions and ethical discourse from antiquity to the modern era. The *Life of Caesar* and the *Life of Dion* are two prime examples of the timeless relevance of Plutarch's work, as they explore themes of leadership, ambition, and morality that remain central to political and philosophical thought to the present day.

The rediscovery of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* during the Renaissance was a decisive moment in the development of Western literature and philosophy. Translated in many languages, the work became one of the foundations of humanist education, because of its masterful exploration of individual character and moral virtues.

Plutarch's portrayal of Julius Caesar and Dion of Syracuse particularly appealed to Renaissance thinkers, who also had to face similar questions about power, reform, and the responsibilities of leadership. Caesar's ambitions and the ethical dilemmas they posed provided a case study for understanding the consolidation of political power, while Dion's philosophical idealism offered a model for leadership founded in virtue and wisdom. There was also the question about the balance between authority and liberty.

Plutarch's influence on literature is most famously seen in the works of William Shakespeare, who drew heavily on *Parallel Lives* for his Roman plays. The *Life of Caesar*, in particular, provided the foundation for Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, influencing its depiction of political ambition, betrayal, and the moral complexities of leadership. Plutarch's narrative style, with its vivid anecdotes and moral reflections, also deeply influenced Shakespeare's characterization of figures like Brutus, Antony, and Caesar.

The *Life of Dion* also had its fair share of admirers and was used in the literary and philosophical works of the Enlightenment, where it contributed to discussions on the morality (or lack thereof) in politics. Philosophers such as Rousseau<sup>11</sup> and Montesquieu admired Dion's commitment to justice and reform. To them his story was a cautionary tale showing how fragile virtue is in a

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<sup>11</sup> *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (*Discours sur les sciences et les arts*) and in *The Social Contract* (*Du Contrat Social*).

corrupt political environment. Dion's struggle to implement Platonic ideals resonated with Enlightenment thinkers who were looking for ways to reconcile abstract principles with the everyday problems of practical governance.

Plutarch's approach to biography, which combines historical narrative with moral and philosophical inquiry, set a precedent for later biographical and historical writing. His emphasis on individual character and ethical reflection influenced the works of later historians, including Edward Gibbon and Thomas Carlyle, who adopted a similar focus on the moral dimensions of leadership.

The *Life of Caesar* exemplifies Plutarch's biographical method, balancing detailed accounts of military and political events with reflections on Caesar's personal virtues and flaws. This approach has inspired subsequent biographies of Caesar, from Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* to modern works by Adrian Goldsworthy and others. Similarly, the *Life of Dion*, with its focus on philosophy and politics, influenced the development of biographical works that explore the moral challenges faced by leaders and thinkers.

Plutarch's exploration of ambition, power, and morality in the *Life of Caesar* and the *Life of Dion* continues to resonate even today in discussion about leadership and governance. Caesar's life serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the ethical dilemmas of consolidating power. His story raises questions about the balance between individual achievement and the common good, issues that remain relevant in modern political discourse.

The *Life of Dion* offers a different but equally important perspective, highlighting the challenges of translating moral ideals into practical governance. Dion's philosophical commitment to justice and his eventual failure shows the difficulties of implementing reform in a tough political environment that resists change. This theme is particularly relevant in modern contexts, where leaders often face the tension between idealism and pragmatism in addressing systemic challenges.

Plutarch's emphasis on character and ethical decision-making provides a guide through which ordinary people could evaluate their leaders, their values and motivations. His work also invites self-reflection for those in positions of power on what constitutes effective and ethical leadership.