

Study Guide on Plutarch's *Lives*: *Marcellus, Tiberius & Caius Gracchus,* *Caius Marius, Sulla*

Why read the “lives” of “noble Greeks and Romans” at all? What benefit does Plutarch propose to the readers of his *Lives*?

- Consider the following passage, from the *Life of Pericles*: “. . . [I]t becomes a man’s duty to pursue and make after the best and choicest of everything, that he may not only employ his contemplation, but may also be improved by it. . . . Such objects we find in the acts of virtue, which also produce in the minds of mere readers about them an emulation and eagerness that may lead them to imitation” (Volume I: page 201¹).
- How exactly is Plutarch’s purpose fulfilled in the life of Marcellus? In that of Tiberius Gracchus? Caius Gracchus? Caius Marius? Sulla?

Livy writes of how liberty arose in the Roman state. In these lives, Plutarch partially reveals how liberty passed away, and tyranny arose. From these readings in Plutarch, what are the essential changes that contribute to the passing away of liberty?

- What are the earliest hints that liberty is beginning to pass away?
- “An insignificant movement and change of posture, yet it marked no small revolution in state affairs, the conversion, in a manner, of the whole government from an aristocracy to a democracy . . .” (*Caius Gracchus* II: 374). Do these lives bear out that transformation?
 - If so, where does the transformation begin?
 - What are the essential steps along the way?

Did any of these men improve Rome? If so, who, and in what way?

Who is the best *general* in the *Life of Marcellus*?

- How does Marcellus compare with Fabius Maximus?
- How does he compare with Hannibal?

Who is the best *man* in the *Life of Marcellus*? How does Marcellus compare with Archimedes?

How does a man’s death reveal his character? Do the deaths of any of these men, as described by Plutarch, offer insight into their character?

¹ Plutarch. *Lives*. Translated by John Dryden. Edited by Arthur Hugh Clough. New York: Random House, 2001. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



Would *Sapiens* (“The Wise”), a name given to C. Laelius (II: 360), be a fitting name for Tiberius Gracchus? Explain why or why not.

Plutarch writes that Marius died “to the great joy and content of Rome” (I: 583). Explain why this was the case, and what it shows about Marius himself.

“In general, [Sulla] would seem to have been of a very irregular character . . . ” (I: 611). How does Plutarch manifest this “irregular character”?



Study Guide on Plutarch's *Lives*: *Caesar, Cato, Brutus*

In Plutarch's judgment, which of the three is the best Roman—that is, which behaves the most virtuously?

- What does Plutarch teach regarding the characteristic virtues of the Romans?
 - How are the virtues ordered?
 - Which virtue or virtues are foremost?
- Of Caesar, Cato, and Brutus, which is the most prudent?
- Do any of these men's "ends" reveal their virtue? In general, how does a man's "end" reveal his character?

Consider how the Lives of Caesar, Cato, and Brutus illustrate the transition from the "liberty" celebrated by Livy to the tyranny described by Plutarch.

- What are the early signs of liberty passing away?
- Recall that Livy describes the major role played by law and the Roman constitution in securing liberty for the Romans. Consider:
 - Concerning Caesar: "[H]is power at last was established and not to be overthrown, and now openly tended to the altering of the whole constitution . . ." (II: 201).
 - "Caesar was now not working mines, but planting batteries to overthrow the state" (II: 203).
 - In the life of Cato, observe the "plain conspiracy to subvert the constitution and parcel out the empire" (II: 296).
- Consider such elements of the constitution of Rome as consuls, the senate, the people, the army, etc.
 - How does the relation between the senate and the people change over the course of these lives?
 - How exactly does the army change? What difference do these changes make?
- "An insignificant movement and change of posture, yet it marked no small revolution in state affairs, the conversion, in a manner, of the whole government from an aristocracy to a democracy . . ." (*Caius Gracchus* II: 374). Do *these* lives bear out that transformation? How did we get from "democracy" to a "tyranny avowed" (II: 235) under Caesar?

What kind of relation between philosophy and statesmanship is exemplified in these lives?

- Consider Cato's comment near his death: "Now . . . I am master of myself" (II: 315). Which of these three men is most master of himself?
- Recall Socrates' statement in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is a preparation for death. Which of these men is best prepared for his death by philosophy?



The metaphor of the regime as a ship in need of a good pilot recurs in these lives. Who is the best pilot for Rome? What are the qualities of a good pilot of the ship of state? Account for the following:

- In Caesar's life, Cicero is described by the statement, "a good pilot is apprehensive of a storm when the sea is most smiling . . ." (II: 201).
- In Caesar's life: "they left the city without a government at all, to be carried about like a ship without a pilot to steer her" (II: 218).
- Again in Caesar: "It was a melancholy thing to see the city tossed in these tumults, like a ship given up by her pilots, and left to run, as chance guides her, upon any rock in her way" (II: 222).
- In life of Brutus, "But now, as in a ship, when the rudder is broken by a storm, the mariners fit and nail on some other piece of wood instead of it, striving against the danger not well, but as well as in that necessity they can, so Brutus . . ." (II: 604).

How do Junius Brutus and Marcus Brutus compare as defenders (or champions) of liberty?

- Compare the intentions of the two men. Is there a difference?
- Compare the actions of the two men. How exactly does each go about getting rid of a tyrant?

Do any of Cato's actions seem unjust? Do any seem imprudent? Can justice and prudence ever be in conflict? Consider:

- Was he right to take the oath mentioned on page 291 (I)?
- Was he right to advise Cicero to "give way to the times" (I: 292)?
- Why does Cato agree to "confer all on Pompey" (I: 301, 303–304)?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plutarch's *Lives*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

