

PLUTARCH'S *PYRRHUS* AND EURIPIDES' *PHOENICIAN WOMEN*: BIOGRAPHY AND TRAGEDY ON PLEONECTIC PARENTING

The principal concern of this paper is to explore the relevance of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* to Plutarch's *Life* of Pyrrhus. It will be argued that the relevance of the play is much more substantial than usually acknowledged: that its relevance goes beyond the two direct quotations from the play which occur in the *Life*. It is worth stressing at the outset that of the five quotations from the play in Plutarch's extant *Lives* as a whole, two are in the *Pyrrhus*: that may plausibly be claimed as a concentration (*Pyrrh.* 9 and 14; cf. *Demetr.* 14; *Sull.* 4; *Comp. Nic.-Crass.* 4). In what follows, I shall attempt to explain how and why the play matters to a reading of the *Life*. The essence of my claim is that the reader's knowledge of Euripides' play is made to provide what may be termed 'added value' to Plutarch's *Life*, with the further validation of Euripidean authority.

The general relevance to Plutarch's *Lives* of Athenian tragedy (and indeed of Homeric epic) has long been recognised. And Judith Mossman has explored tragic and epic elements in the *Pyrrhus* in particular. The aim of the present paper is to draw attention to the special relevance of a specific play to this *Life*. I shall argue that a reading of the *Life* should entail not only a broad awareness of tragedy (and epic), but a sustained memory of a particular play as the *Life* unfolds. Elsewhere, I have argued similarly for the significant relevance of a particular play of Euripides (the *Bacchae*) to another of Plutarch's *Lives* (the *Crassus*). The following discussion gains some further strength, in my view, from the fact that Plutarch can be seen (on my own account at least) to follow much the same procedure in two *Lives*.¹

Of course, as with the *Crassus* and the *Bacchae*, Plutarch's use in his *Pyrrhus* of the *Phoenician Women* is more than a crude transferral of matter from the play into the *Life*. Plutarch's method, rather, seems to have been to bring together the two broad examples of conduct that he finds in Euripides' play and in the biography of Pyrrhus. Herein, it seems, may reside a further instance of Plutarch's agenda of comparison: he compares not only a Greek *Life* with a Roman *Life* (here, the *Marius*), but as he writes he compares also

¹ J. M. Mossman, 'Plutarch, Pyrrhus and Alexander', in P. A. Stadter (ed.), *Plutarch and the Historical Tradition* (London, 1992) 90–108; D. Braund, 'Dionysiac tragedy in Plutarch, *Crassus*', *CQ* 43 (1993) 468–74, with bibliography on the role of tragedy in Plutarch's *Lives*. It is a pleasure to acknowledge my thanks to Chris Gill, John Moles and Peter Wiseman for various improvements. This paper was inspired by a sojourn in the land of Pyrrhus at Metsovo, under the aegis of the Tositsa Foundation.

the subject of his own *Life* with a *Life* or lives in drama. Implicit also, perhaps, is Plutarch's comparison of his own writing with that of Euripides.

Henceforth, the present paper is tripartite. After some preliminary discussion of the significance of the *Phoenician Women* under the early empire (Section 1), I offer an analysis of the principal strands of thought in the *Pyrrhus* (Section 2). In the final part (Section 3) I explore more fully the relevance of Euripides' play to Plutarch's *Life*.

I. Readings of Euripides, *Phoenician Women*, c. AD 100

The *Phoenician Women* may not be the best-known of Euripides' plays today, but it has been firmly identified as among his most famous works in Plutarch's time. For, as extant papyri and *testimonia* indicate, 'the *Phoenissae* of Euripides was throughout antiquity an exceptionally popular play'.² It is no surprise, then, that Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch's contemporary in the emerging world of 'the second sophistic', uses a quotation from the play as the centrepiece of a moral argument of his own, on the evils of *pleonexia*. As might be expected, that argument stands very close to the implied argument of the *Pyrrhus*. Dio stresses that *pleonexia* is neither expedient (*sumpheron*) nor fine (*kalon*), but is responsible for the greatest evils. Yet, he complains, no human being is willing to refrain from it or to have equal (*to ison*) with his neighbour (Dio 17. 6). Soon after, he continues:

Pleonexia is the greatest evil to a person himself, and it also harms those near him. And no-one feels pity at all for the pleonectic man (*ton pleonekten*) and no-one sees fit to teach him, but all are repelled and consider him to be their enemy ... And indeed Euripides, second to none of the other poets in reputation, brings Jocasta on stage, addressing Eteocles and advising him to desist from seeking to outdo (*pleonektein*) his brother—more or less as follows:

'Why do you desire the worst of deities,
Pleonexia, son? Do not. The goddess is unjust.
She enters many houses and cities prosperous

² M.W. Haslam, 'Interpolations in the *Phoenissae*: papyrus evidence', *CQ* 26 (1976) 4-10, at 4. D. J. Mastronarde and J. M. Bremer (edd.), *The textual tradition of Euripides' Phoinissai* (Berkeley, 1982), 402-29 list the *testimonia* and show how often Plutarch (largely in the *Moralia*) and his contemporaries, especially Lucian, drew upon the play. I have benefited, in considering such matters, from correspondence with both Dominic Montserrat and Peter Parsons. On the reader's moral engagement with Plutarch, see C. B. R. Pelling, 'The Moralism of Plutarch's *Lives*', in D. Innes, H. Hine and C. Pelling (edd.), *Ethics and Rhetoric: classical essays for Donald Russell* (Oxford, 1995), 205-20.

and leaves to the destruction of her followers.
 For her is your craze! This is best for mortals,
 equality to honour and friends to be to friends,
 to bind cities with cities, allies with allies.
 For the equal is proper for mortals by nature,
 the perpetual enmity of greater and lesser
 brings a time of hatred.'

I have quoted the iambic verses at length. For a sensible man should use statements that have been finely made. So in these verses occurs all that follows from *pleonexia*—that it neither privately nor publicly brings advantage, but on the contrary it subverts and destroys the prosperity of houses and of cities, and again, how it is proper for men to honour equality (*to ison*) and that this brings common friendship and makes mutual peace for all, and that disputes and civil hatreds and foreign wars occur for no other reason than because of the desire for more (*tou pleionos*) and in consequence each side loses even the sufficient that it has. Indeed, what is more necessary than life? What do all men hold more important than this? But nevertheless they destroy even this for possessions, while some have even destabilized their own countries (D. Chr. 17.7-11).

Dio's trenchant remarks are of particular interest for two reasons. First, they offer a contemporary review, however brief, of problems surrounding *pleonexia*. Dio stresses its futility. The man with *pleonexia* will put the desire for more ahead of all other goods, necessities and responsibilities. The demands of family, of homeland and (in reality) of self, including even life, are set aside in pursuit of more. The futility of that pursuit is shown when the *pleonektes* not only fails in his quest, but also loses in the course of his pursuit the sufficiency he had enjoyed before he began. He does not gain but loses, bringing warfare and destruction upon those around him. As such, *pleonexia* is firmly located by Dio at the opposite pole from equality, friendship, family and community.

Secondly, Dio also offers a reading (albeit partial) of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* which is contemporary with Plutarch. Dio stresses that, in his view, Jocasta's speech is a fine formulation of the problems of *pleonexia*. In what follows I shall argue that Plutarch's use of the *Phoenician Women* in his *Pyrrhus* shows that he understood and valued the play in much the same way. That argument gains particular strength from the fact that when Plutarch elsewhere philosophizes explicitly upon relationships between parents, children and brothers, there too he quotes from the *Phoenician Women*, indeed, from the speeches of Eteocles and Jocasta, including the very lines discussed by Dio Chrysostom (Plut. *Mor.* 481a).

However, Dio's quotation of Jocasta's speech is significantly at odds with the text which we have of the play.³ Indeed, the very popularity of the play through antiquity gave an impetus to such changes.⁴ There are four differences, of which three seem minor and to be designed to produce from Jocasta's speech a more generalized formulation, such as Dio requires in his oration. However, the fourth requires comment, for Dio has introduced *pleonexia* into the text. At first sight, its introduction may seem monstrous, for Dio brings to bear in glowing terms what he claims as a fine passage on *pleonexia*, when that passage evidently did not contain that word in Euripides' text. Yet, the substitution is indicative of Dio's reading: the key point must be that the adaptation of Euripides' text that appears in Dio constitutes the clearest possible demonstration that in the Greek east in Plutarch's day Jocasta's speech, if not the *Phoenician Women tout court*, could be read as a treatment of the evils of *pleonexia*. Indeed, in the *Sulla* Plutarch indicates that he read the speech in much the same manner as did Dio (*Sull.* 4). In what follows, it will be argued that Plutarch understood the play in terms of the opposition between *pleonexia*, on the one hand, and equality, friendship, family and community on the other. And, further, that therein resides much of the point of his allusions to the *Phoenician Women* in the *Pyrrhus*.

II. Approaching Plutarch's *Pyrrhus*

Pyrrhus' key trait in Plutarch's *Life* is his *pleonexia*: it is this that drives his whole approach not only to kingship but to life in general. He suffers from it even early in his reign (*Pyrrh.* 7. 2; cf. 5). Plutarch soon tells his readers that Pyrrhus' marriages too were driven by his ambitions: we should observe that when Plutarch quotes the *Phoenician Women* in his *Life* of Demetrius, he does so with regard to the theme of acquisition by multiple marriage.⁵ By nature, Pyrrhus cannot rest from campaigning (*Pyrrhus* 12. 5).

In a set-piece debate Pyrrhus is shown the futility of his *pleonexia* by his skilled adviser Cineas. The occasion of that debate is a brief lull before Pyrrhus' assault on Italy. The occasion was apposite for the exploration of so central an issue in the *Life* and may be suspected as the invention of Plutarch, if not of one of his sources. For Pyrrhus' significance, especially for the

³ D. J. Mastronarde (ed.), *Euripides: Phoenissae* (Cambridge, 1994), 299.

⁴ See D. Kovacs, 'Tyrants and Demagogues in Tragic Interpolation', *GRBS* 23 (1982) 31-50, esp. 42-5.

⁵ After Antigone, whose name is at least interestingly coincidental with her Theban namesake: *Pyrrh.* 9. 2; cf. *Demetr.* 14. 3, quoting Eur. *Phoen.* 396 (in the mouth of Antigonus, it should further be noted).

Greeks of the Roman empire in the second sophistic, lay primarily in his encounter with Rome. As Pausanias observes at some length, later in the second century AD, Pyrrhus was the first Greek to fight against Rome (Paus. I. II. 6-7). For a champion of hellenic culture under the Roman empire, such as Plutarch, that mattered deeply. Nor was Pyrrhus simply any Greek: as Plutarch and Pyrrhus himself were at pains to stress, he was a kinsman of Alexander the Great. For that reason, Pyrrhus' war with Rome evoked the familiar debate as to what would have happened had Alexander clashed with Rome.⁶ Indeed, if Pyrrhus was a new Alexander, then, as Plutarch troubles to note, Cineas was a new Demosthenes, both a pupil and in his oratory a representation of the Athenian (*Pyrrh.* 14. 1). While the new 'Demosthenes' was a servant of the new 'Alexander', their different approaches to life remain marked.

By dialectic, Plutarch has Cineas bring Pyrrhus to see that, even if he is successful in the chain of conquests that he envisages (Italy, then Sicily, then Carthage, then Macedonia, then all Greece), his reward will be a life of leisured happiness no better than the life he could enjoy now, without war:

'Then', said Cineas, 'what prevents us from carousing and being at leisure with each other, if we have these already and if we have to hand without trouble the rewards which we aim to gain through bloodshed and great toils and dangers, after we have both endured many ills and inflicted many upon others?' (*Pyrrh.* 14. 7)

Yet, although, thanks to Cineas, Pyrrhus realises the happiness that he is abandoning in his western adventures, he is unable to set aside his aspirations (*Pyrrh.* 14. 8). Subsequently, at Tarentum, Meton accurately represents the planned alliance with Pyrrhus as the end of leisure and freedom: his ruse of cavorting as a komast, flute-girl and all, underlines his words (*Pyrrh.* 13. 3-4). By contrast, Pyrrhus had no time for the flute (*Pyrrh.* 8.3): his was rather the 'joyless dance' of the *Phoenician Women*, without flutes, the dance of Ares, which Eteocles seems also to have preferred.⁷

Subsequently, Plutarch shows us a Pyrrhus who is frustrated by his inability to grasp all the opportunities for *pleonexia* that crowd in upon him (*Pyrrh.* 22). He leads his army this way and that, without achieving anything substantial beyond warfare and, at best, fleeting victories: as he does so, he

⁶ Note *Pyrrh.* 19. 1-2, with T. J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome* (London, 1995), 364 on Caecus. On Pyrrhus and Alexander, see below, note 9.

⁷ Eur. *Phoen.* 784ff. with A. J. Podlecki, 'Some themes in Euripides' *Phoenissae*', *TAPA* 93 (1962) 355-73, esp. 369-72; cf. M. B. Arthur, 'The choral odes of the *Phoenissae*', *HSCP* 81 (1977) 163-85.

damages his cause further by alienating allies who resent his lack of application to their particular situation, as at Tarentum (*Pyrrh.* 22. 3) or among the Samnites (*Pyrrh.* 25.1). Having achieved temporary success in Macedonia, he is drawn south, as Plutarch notes, eager to involve himself in Sparta (*Pyrrh.* 26. 7). And from Sparta he is drawn easily to Argos, at which juncture Plutarch underlines the general point for his readers:

He was always rolling out hopes after hopes: he used successes as springboards to further hopes, and when he failed, he wished to make up for it with fresh undertakings. He allowed neither defeat nor victory to restrict him in enduring and inflicting trouble (*Pyrrh.* 30 2).

The so-called Pyrrhic victory may be understood as a symptom of the disease of *pleonexia* from which, in Plutarch's view, Pyrrhus suffered so badly. Plutarch offers an anecdote in which Pyrrhus, after being congratulated for his victory in a particularly bloody battle with the Romans, responds, 'If we win another battle against the Romans, we shall be destroyed utterly' (*Pyrrh.* 21. 9). For the ultimate folly of *pleonexia* was its futility: victory was not worth its price, for it brought no gain, but rather, whether sooner or later, it brought loss. We have seen the point stressed by Dio Chrysostom and, in an appropriately more gentle fashion, by Plutarch's Cineas. What Pyrrhus gained by his deeds, he lost through his aspirations and in his passion for what he lacked, he neglected what he had (*Pyrrh.* 26. 1). Similarly, in the *Phoenician Women* futile victory has been identified in modern scholarship as a principal theme, particularly with regard to Oedipus, whose victory in defeating the sphinx and gaining the throne proves worse than futile.⁸

Of course, on Plutarch's analysis, Pyrrhus is far from being the only king to suffer from this folly. Commenting on the instability of a division of cities and land between Lysimachus and Demetrius, Plutarch, quite early in the *Life*, observes a general problem among kings of Pyrrhus' time:

This worked for the time being and stopped the war for them, but soon after they realised that by their distribution they had not established the end of their hostility but a beginning of accusations and dispute. For how may such men as take neither ocean nor mountain nor uninhabited wasteland as a limit of their *pleonexia*, such men as do not bound their desires with the limits that separate Europe and Asia..., it is impossible to say. Rather they are always at war; plots and envy are embedded in their natures. And as for the twin names of war and peace, like

⁸ Eur. *Phoen.* 1048-9; 1728-31 with Podlecki (n. 7) 367-9.

currencies, they use the one that suits expediency, not justice, when they are better men, at any rate, when they admit that they are warring, than when they term ‘justice’ and ‘friendship’ their resting and taking leisure from injustice. And Pyrrhus showed as much ... (*Pyrrh.* 12. 2-4).

Plutarch proceeds to recount some of Pyrrhus’ scheming diplomacy, encouraged by Lysimachus, against Demetrius and the cities of Greece, including Athens. It seems that in Plutarch’s judgment, Pyrrhus is exceptional not so much in the ‘fact’ of his *pleonexia* as in the scale of it. This is a very busy *Life* in the sense that intrigue follows hard upon intrigue and battle upon battle: Plutarch sweeps his readers along and lets them feel the whirlwind of Pyrrhus’ ambitions. In battle proper, Pyrrhus can maintain a cool head and a broad view (*Pyrrh.* 16. 7-8), but out of battle such powers seem to desert him in his passion for more. As Meton warns the Tarentines (*Pyrrh.* 13. 2-6: cf. 22.3), and as Caecus also suggests at Rome (*Pyrrh.* 19. 3), you cannot deal with a Pyrrhus. We have noted Dio Chrysostom’s observation that agreements are impossible with the victim of *pleonexia*.

Plutarch’s Pyrrhus takes a doggedly narrow view of kingship. Plutarch tells his readers early on that Pyrrhus regarded military matters (on which he even wrote, notes Plutarch) as ‘the most kingly of studies’ and that he gave all his thought and attention to those studies, while he dismissed all else as merely polish (*Pyrrh.* 8. 2-3; cf. 21. 8). And that attitude, says Plutarch, was visible in his appearance ‘having more of the fearsomeness than of the dignity of royalty’ (*Pyrrh.* 3. 4). In warfare, Pyrrhus was at his best, not only a new Alexander, but a new Achilles.⁹ Again and again in the *Life*, Pyrrhus distinguishes himself in battle, not only as a general but as a warrior (e.g. *Pyrrh.* 4. 3; 7. 4; cf. 15. 4). Like a Homeric hero, not least Achilles himself, Pyrrhus fights duels, with devastating effectiveness (7. 4; 16. 8-10; 24. 2-3). However, such militarism is a facet of his *pleonexia*, as is the emulation of Achilles and Alexander which it entails: like Achilles, he could not endure leisure.¹⁰ Throughout, there is only scant indication of the other concerns of the king, away from the field of battle, such as concern for subjects, justice

⁹ See Mossman (n. 1), though I do not see it as obvious in Plutarch that Pyrrhus is diminished by the comparison with Alexander, however short he may fall. On the real Pyrrhus’ pose as Alexander, see now A. Stewart, *Faces of power: Alexander’s image and hellenistic politics* (Berkeley, 1993) esp. 284-6; R. R. R. Smith, *Hellenistic royal portraits* (Oxford 1988), 64-5.

¹⁰ *Pyrrh.* 13. 1; cf. 8. 1 on Alexander, with Mossman (n. 1), though, unlike her (esp. 97), I see no contradiction between military glory and *pleonexia*: the former seems to be a goal and an expression of the latter.

and the like.¹¹ Rather, Pyrrhus is very much an individualist, again like Achilles and Alexander. Accordingly, there is a particular point to Pyrrhus' adaptation of *Iliad* 12.243 (*Pyrrh.* 29.2): Plutarch has him call upon his army to fight not for their country, as in the Homeric line, but for Pyrrhus.

Yet not all the kings of Pyrrhus' day are so afflicted: there is a foil to Pyrrhus in the *Life* in the person of Antigonus. There is something of the wisdom of a Cineas in Plutarch's Antigonus, a positive depiction doubtless encouraged by Plutarch's use of Hieronymus of Cardia (cf. Paus. 14.1). Plutarch claims that Antigonus, commenting upon the futility of Pyrrhus' *pleonexia*, used to compare him to a dice-player who made many fine throws, but who did not know how to use them when they were made (*Pyrrh.* 26. 2). Towards the beginning of the *Life* Plutarch had earlier attributed to Antigonus a judgment of Pyrrhus' military qualities which was both an appreciation of Pyrrhus' strengths in that regard and a suggestion of the shortcomings that surrounded those strengths. For, when Antigonus was asked who was the best general, says Plutarch, he replied 'Pyrrhus, if he lives to old age' (*Pyrrh.* 8. 2). Of course, Pyrrhus' *pleonexia* ensured that he would not live to a great age. Finally, towards the end of the *Life*, Antigonus offers further wisdom along the same lines, directly to Pyrrhus on this occasion. For when Pyrrhus challenged him to battle—perhaps even to a duel—Antigonus replied that 'for him generalship was less a matter of arms than of choosing the right time, and that for Pyrrhus there were many roads open to death, if he did not have the leisure to live' (*Pyrrh.* 31. 2). This exchange is located in Argos, where Pyrrhus soon does meet his death. As we have seen earlier, in the discussion with Cineas and throughout the *Life*, his *pleonexia* encompasses an inability to live at leisure: he must always be striving for more, not enjoying what he has already. Here again, Plutarch's Antigonus offers an accurate interpretation of Pyrrhus' *pleonexia*, as events shortly prove.

It is appropriate that Antigonus closes the *Life*. An ending may be expected to be especially significant in any text, as in this *Life* it proves to be. For we are shown Antigonus' attitude to kingship and particularly, as part of that, his education of his son in the values of kingship. First, his son (Alcyoneus) grabs the head of the decapitated Pyrrhus, though he had no obvious right to do so, since he had not had a part in killing him. Alcyoneus proudly presents the head to his father Antigonus, evidently expecting the king's approval. Yet, contrary to that expectation, when Antigonus saw Pyrrhus' head, he drove away his son, beating him with a stick and calling him accursed and barbarian (*enage kai barbaron*). Then Antigonus cloaked his head

¹¹ Pyrrhus could accept criticism and might even be generous (*Pyrrh.* 8. 4-5), though even in this he is excessive and perhaps most keen to ensure his superiority; cf. 20. 5

and wept at the reversal of fortune that Pyrrhus' head represented for him, particularly that of his grandfather and father. He proceeded to give the head and body of Pyrrhus proper funerary rites. Meanwhile, Alcioneus had learnt his lesson in principle. When he found Pyrrhus' son Helenus in a wretched state, he did him no harm. Instead, he treated him kindly and brought him before Antigonus. This time the king gave his approval, though he noted that Alcioneus should have given Helenus appropriately grand clothing. Antigonus now did just that, showed kindness to Helenus and sent him back to Epirus. Moreover, he showed similar kindness to Pyrrhus' friends and to his defeated army (*Pyrrh.* 34. 4-6).

With that, the *Life* ends. Abruptly so, one might think, but with purpose. Plutarch has chosen to close in such a way as to highlight the shortcomings of his subject, Pyrrhus, and thereby to confirm the central moral of the *Life*. The closing vignette of Antigonus and his son shows Plutarch's readers that the wise king (and therefore the wise person) takes a broader view of his position in the world. The Roman Fabricius had already given a blunt hint that Pyrrhus was not the best of kings (*Pyrrh.* 20. 4): Antigonus' example offers some detail. Antigonus recognises that his current good fortune is no more than provisional, for it may easily be reversed at any time. As part of that broad view, Antigonus practises clemency: he gives full honours both to Pyrrhus' remains and to Pyrrhus' son, Helenus. Pyrrhus might show a measure of tolerance, but, as we have seen, the *Life* presents Pyrrhus' whole philosophy (by contrast with Antigonus') as narrowly militaristic, imperialist and destructively self-centred. It is worth observing that the *Marius*, with which the *Pyrrhus* is paired, ends on a similar note, showing that Marius' *pleonexia* drove him on until his death, while his homonymous son has learned nothing from the roller-coaster fortunes of his father, who was, like Pyrrhus, more at home on campaign (*Mar.* 45. 2-46. 6).

Indeed, in a sense Antigonus treats Helenus better than Pyrrhus had treated him. For the closing vignette shows Plutarch's readers not only Antigonus the king, but also Antigonus the father. Antigonus not only understands kingship, but seeks to educate his son in such a way as to bring about that understanding in him. If a son of Pyrrhus had brought him the head of an enemy, we may suspect that he would have received praise, not a beating and a lesson in clemency (cf. *Ant.* 20. 4; *Cic.* 49. 1). Pyrrhus' philosophy of parenthood has been seen to be as narrow as his understanding of kingship.

Plutarch chooses to bring the issue of parenthood to the attention of his readers early in the *Life*:

He brought all his sons up as good in arms and fiery, whetting them from birth to that end. For it is said that when he was asked by one of them, still a child, as to whom he would leave the kingdom, he said,

'Whichever of you has the sharpest sword'. And that is nothing short of the tragic curse, that the brothers should 'with whetted iron divide the house'. So undiluted and bestial is the nature of *pleonexia* (*Pyrrh.* 9. 2)

The contrast with Antigonus' parenting at the end of the *Life* could hardly be stronger. Pyrrhus offers his young son only an education in personal *pleonexia*. It is perhaps ironic that the infant Pyrrhus had benefited from the paternal kindness of a king, Glaucias of Illyria (*Pyrrh.* 3. 2). A good king, by contrast with Pyrrhus, might have been expected even to have sought to arrange his succession for the benefit of his kingdom by the instrument of a will.¹² Pyrrhus' pleonectic tunnel-vision pays no attention to the future beyond his death. Indeed, while Antigonus (with characteristic propriety) is careful to bury his enemy (Pyrrhus) at the end of the *Life*, by contrast Pyrrhus himself, whatever his reasons, shows no concern when his Gaulish forces ransack the tombs of the Macedonian kings at Aegae. Burials were no concern of his.¹³

Moreover, Plutarch's closing sentence in the quoted passage serves to indicate how issues of parenthood may be seen to be bound up with *pleonexia*. For Plutarch, the *pleonektes* has no concern beyond acquisition itself. The observation is close enough to that of Dio Chrysostom, for whom the tunnel-vision of the victim of *pleonexia* takes no account of the fate of family, friends and community. Indeed, Plutarch skilfully brings together the issues of *pleonexia*, verbal deception and the education of sons in his account of Pyrrhus' tactics against the Spartans. Pyrrhus, says Plutarch, announced that he had come to free the cities subject to Antigonus and swore by Zeus 'that he would send his younger sons to Sparta, if there were no hindrance, to be brought up in Laconian customs, so that by this they might have more than all kings' (*Pyrrh.* 26. 10). The reader is reminded of Pyrrhus' very limited concern for his sons' education. Here their education serves merely as a ploy in the king's *pleonexia*. And even Pyrrhus' deceitful argument hints at his pleonectic outlook: his expressed aim is that his sons should have more than their rivals, not only something that is a good in itself. Moreover, this is deceit under oath: Pyrrhus' *pleonexia* takes no more account of oaths than it does of burials.

¹² See D. Braund, 'Royal Wills and Rome', *PBSR* 51 (1983) 16-57

¹³ *Pyrrh.* 26. 6-7, with Stewart (n. 9) 286 n.73. It may be significant that an upshot of the *Phoenician Women* is the issue of Polyneices' burial.

III. The *Phoenician Women* in the *Pyrrhus*

Like Dio, Plutarch chooses to quote from Euripides' *Phoenician Women*. That play could scarcely be more relevant in its broad themes, which centre upon *pleonexia* and parenthood. The 'tragic curse' to which Plutarch alludes was the curse of Oedipus, made in anger against his sons. He at least had had a reason: his sons had tried to cover up his killing his father and marrying his mother by keeping him shut away. Pyrrhus has no such motivation, as Mossman observes.¹⁴ Plutarch seems to suggest that *pleonexia* was Pyrrhus' only driving force. If kingship was militarism for Pyrrhus, it might follow that he would consider the succession a matter of conflict and the survival of the fittest, in a fashion that Plutarch terms 'bestial'. From birth, Pyrrhus wants them to be no more than warriors, narrow like himself and, while he lives, serving his own ends. Here again, the *Life* intersects with a well-known theme of the *Phoenician Women*, wherein the bestial is several times identified as the threat to the city of Thebes, not least in the persons of Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polyneices.¹⁵

The *Phoenician Women* resonates through the *Life*: while key issues of *pleonexia* and parenthood are explored in both play and *Life*, the character of Pyrrhus particularly echoes both that of Oedipus and that of Eteocles in the play. In the early chapters of the *Life*, Pyrrhus has more in common with Oedipus than simply a version of his curse. The beginning of the *Life* describes both the turmoil of succession to the throne in Epirus and, more specifically, the expulsion of the infant Pyrrhus. The circumstances of his expulsion are quite different from those of the infant Oedipus, but the outlines of their stories have something in common: both infants, having been expelled, came to be brought up by a neighbouring ruler and to gain their ancestral throne.

At the same time, however, Pyrrhus' relationship with the younger Neoptolemus echoes that between the sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices. Like Eteocles and Polyneices, they form an agreement to share power (*Pyrrh.* 5. 1): on what basis is not stated, but Pyrrhus (characteristically, no doubt) is convinced by those who represent his share as small and urge him 'to follow nature and grasp greater things' by killing Neoptolemus, which he does (*Pyrrh.* 5. 7: the agreement is presented as shaky from the first). Again, the circumstances do not match those of the *Phoenician Women* in detail, for the Epirote agreement to share the realm seems not to have involved an annual transfer of power. Further, the murder of Neoptolemus is far

¹⁴ Mossman (n. 1) 96.

¹⁵ See Eur. *Phoen.* 1296; 1380-1; 1573-4; Podlecki (n. 7) 362-7; Mastronarde (n. 3) 535-6; cf. 504-5.

from the cataclysmic siege of Thebes in Euripides' play. Yet, for all that, the outlines of the two stories entail the same broad themes: an agreement to share power, and the willingness to break that agreement in a spirit of *pleonexia* and with a claim to be following nature. Moreover, while Pyrrhus and Neoptolemus are not brothers as are Eteocles and Polyneices, they do represent two fraternal blood-lines, as the opening of the *Life* has explained.

Later in the *Life*, its only other quotation from tragedy is again from the *Phoenician Women*. Plutarch characterises Cineas as an example of Euripides' thought that 'logos seizes everything/which even the iron of enemies might attain' (*Pyrrh.* 14. 1; *Eur. Phoen.* 517-18). Accordingly, Plutarch shows Cineas acting as Pyrrhus' skilled adviser and agent (notably *Pyrrh.* 14.1; 18; 22.3). However, Euripides had put that thought in the mouth of Eteocles. In the *Phoenician Women* (for all the weaknesses in Polyneices' position) Eteocles is the most overtly pleonectic figure, not least in the speech from which Plutarch drew this quotation. In that sense, Eteocles is the character in the *Phoenician Women* who has most in common with Plutarch's pleonectic Pyrrhus. The simple observation gives particular point to Plutarch's insertion of the Euripidean quotation here in his text. Cineas not only embodies Eteocles' claim, but is seen to realise that claim for a latter-day Eteocles in the person of his master, Pyrrhus. Without labouring the reference, Plutarch allows his readers to make the connection, if they will: as we have seen, the text of the play was well enough known for that to be a significant consideration for Plutarch.

As earlier, Plutarch was careful not to put Euripides' version of Oedipus' curse into Pyrrhus' mouth verbatim, so here he stops short of having Pyrrhus utter Eteocles' words, but, once again, not far short. For he immediately reports Pyrrhus' own sentiments, which, once again, express the essence of the Euripidean original: 'at any rate, Pyrrhus used to say that more cities had been brought over through words by Cineas than through arms by himself' (*Pyrrh.* 14. 2). Modern readers of the *Life* have observed the theme of deceit and treachery that runs through it.¹⁶ Of course, that theme is itself a function of *pleonexia*: pleonectic Pyrrhus will stop at nothing. It is in that sense that Cineas' skill with words is a principal weapon in his armoury. Similarly, the 'diplomacy' between Eteocles and Polyneices is characterised—beyond Eteocles' quoted claim—by the fear and expectation of treachery (*Phoen.* 261ff.; 357ff.).

In the play, Eteocles dies, in a duel with Polyneices, through his eagerness to strip his dying brother (*Phoen.* 1416-24). Pyrrhus dies in a similar spirit of excessive confidence: it is tempting to see that over-confidence as an ex-

¹⁶ Notably Mossman (n. 1).

pression of *pleonexia*. Having fought many a duel through the *Life*, Pyrrhus seemed sure to defeat a lowly Argive who had wounded him. Yet, Pyrrhus had reckoned without the Argive's mother, a poor old woman on a roof-top, who feared for her son and brought about the king's death by hitting him with a tile (*Pyrrh.* 34. 1-2). The poor Argive and his poor mother (not to mention the poor weapon, the tile) had proved more than a match for the wealthy, pleonectic Pyrrhus. This was a twist of fortune that Antigonos' philosophy could accommodate, while it was also the final demonstration of the futility of Pyrrhus' acquisitiveness. The old woman's motive was maternal or parental love, which, as Plutarch had observed earlier in the *Life*, was only narrowly understood or felt by the pleonectic king.

Soon after, Plutarch closes the *Life* with the vignette of Antigonos and his son. Whereas, in the *Life*, it is Antigonos and the Argive mother who offer counterpoints in parenthood to Pyrrhus, in the play it is Creon and Jocasta. Creon tries to save his son Menoecus, even against the interests of himself and his city, while Jocasta strives to reconcile her sons and finally kills herself over their bodies.¹⁷

Like many a misguided figure in the Greek historical tradition (notably pleonectic kings in Herodotus), Pyrrhus makes the classic mistake of the rich, powerful and pleonectic: he looks down upon the lowly and upon equality. Plutarch informs his readers of that tendency early in the *Life* (*Pyrrh.* 4. 4), though his later shift from demagogic ruler to tyrant—inspired by his loss of key associates and the critical stage of his *pleonexia*—can only have made that tendency worse.¹⁸ Of course, the attitude is organically linked with *pleonexia*: the burning desire for more implies an undervaluing of those with less, whether an individual or a community.¹⁹ Nor was Plutarch alone in interpreting Pyrrhus after this fashion, as ripe for a fall, for, also in the second century AD, Lucian imagines an encounter between Pyrrhus and an old woman who deflates the king's ambition to be seen as a new Alexan-

¹⁷ On the contrast between the familial and civic concerns of Creon (and Jocasta) and the selfish concerns of Eteocles and Polyneices, see E. P. Garrison, *Groaning tears: ethical and dramatic aspects of suicide in Greek tragedy* (Leiden, 1995), esp. 138-44, with extensive bibliography.

¹⁸ *Pyrrh.* 23. 3; Mossman (n. 1)101 finds the shift too sudden and insufficiently motivated. Reasonably so perhaps, for Plutarch might have offered more explanation. However, he does mention the king's loss of key men against the Romans (21. 10) and his be-ating of Fortune for offering him at the same time more than he can manage, a moment that perhaps marks the fatal onset of the disease of *pleonexia* that drives him on, impatient of all else and all others (22. 1-2). Perhaps the concept of tyranny should be pressed: see further Mastronarde (n. 3) 292-3.

¹⁹ At Sparta that mistake costs him victory, for his perception of Spartan weakness enabled Sparta to withstand his siege: *Pyrrh.* 27-9.

der by comparing him instead with Batrachion the cook (Luc. *Against the untutored publishing many books* 21).

As we have seen, Pyrrhus responds to his setback at Sparta with the perversity characteristic of the pleonectic man: he is all the more eager to conquer the city (*Pyrrh.* 30: here, *philotimia*). At this juncture, however, Pyrrhus is distracted by a new prospect: the *Life* shows Pyrrhus' weakness in the face of a string of such offers, which he cannot refuse on account of the *pleonexia* that drives him ever onwards (*Pyrrh.* 22). A central feature of Pyrrhus' *pleonexia* is his inability, from first to last, to resist offers and suggestions for his own aggrandizement (e.g. *Pyrrh.* 5.7; 12.5; 22). Now, eager to expunge his setback at Sparta, Pyrrhus sets out against Argos, invited by one side of an internal dispute which may recall that between Eteocles and Polyneices in Euripides' play. It is here that he meets his end, brought about by the sort of people he assumed to be no match for him, a poor old woman and her son.

However, Plutarch does not force everything to fit too precisely. The issues in Pyrrhus' siege of Sparta recall those in the siege of Thebes in the *Phoenician Women*. Moreover, the principal characters may be seen to resemble one another.²⁰ Yet, as with his quotations, Plutarch maintains some distance between the reality of the events of the *Life* and the myth of Euripides' play. While there are loud and echoing resonances between the *Life* and the play,²¹ there are not over-precise correspondences, for the very good reason

²⁰ Like Euripides' Thebes, Plutarch's Sparta presents two civic heroines and a young civic hero. Archidamia strides into the Spartan gerusia, sword in hand, to rebuke the Spartan men for thinking that the women should live after their city had been destroyed (*Pyrrh.* 27. 2; Jocasta kills herself with a sword when her sons have killed each other in the play, *Phoen.* 1456-9). Meanwhile, among the younger women, Chilonis shows the fortitude of an Antigone. And the young hero in Sparta is one Acrotatus, who may be understood as a combination of Euripides' Haemon (in his relationship with Chilonis) and Haemon's brother, Menoeceus, willing to give his *Life* for the good of his city. Meanwhile, Cleonymus' admixture of family and civic grievances leads him to bring a foreign force (Pyrrhus) against his city: Polyneices had done much the same.

²¹ Minor resonances are also worth noting, as they combine further to amplify the echo between the play and the *Life*. The play, like the *Life*, is much concerned with military matters, primarily of course the siege of Thebes: its details on siegecraft have attracted serious discussion: Y. Garlan, 'De la poliorcétique dans les 'Phéniciennes' d'Euripide', *REA* 68 (1966) 264-77. Moreover, Argos bulks large in the play, as the support for Polyneices' siege of the city: it is in an assault upon the city of Argos that Pyrrhus is finally killed. Further, Creon, seeking to put his own son first, would have him leave Thebes for Dodona, a place of prime importance in Pyrrhus' realm and family history (*Pyrrh.* 1. 1). Ultimately, when Eteocles kills his brother, it is with a trick of fighting technique that he had acquired while in Thessaly (*Phoen.* 1407): the combination of duelling technique and geographical location seems to invite comparison with Pyrrhus, the military technician of the north. Note also the theme of mutual killing at *Pyrrh.* 33. 6, which

that any such would undermine the truth claimed by Plutarch for his account.

Plutarch gains much for his *Life* of Pyrrhus by explicit and implicit allusions to the *Phoenician Women* of Euripides. By quotation, by allusion and by particular attention to the shared themes of *pleonexia* and parenthood, Plutarch's *Life* invites—indeed, urges—its readers to bear in mind Euripides' play. Dio Chrysostom's discussion of *pleonexia* tends to suggest that Plutarch was doing nothing very surprising in bringing the *Phoenician Women* to bear on a case of *pleonexia*, while *pleonexia* was so familiar an issue that Dio offers an apology for producing an oration on the theme. However, if the above arguments are accepted in substance, Plutarch's use of the play was far more subtle and sophisticated than the adapted quotation to which Dio limits himself.

For Plutarch's *Life*, the *Phoenician Women* constitutes a paradigm of the key issues at stake. The reader of Plutarch familiar with the play, even if only in outline, knows it as an exploration and demonstration of dysfunctional fatherhood and the folly of *pleonexia*. As Dio's adaptation indicates, the fact that the word itself does not appear in the play does not affect the point. Accordingly, particularly through their awareness of the play, Plutarch's readers have a general idea of what to look for in Pyrrhus' case of *pleonexia* and have a broad understanding of the strengths and weaknesses to be found in him. References to the play alert Plutarch's readers to consider the excess and futility of Pyrrhus' ambitions, the tunnel-vision of the warrior-king and his warped and limited concern for his sons and his kingdom both during and after his death. By his favourite method of comparison, here with events and characters from Euripides' play, Plutarch directs and exploits his readers' awareness of the *Phoenician Women* so as better to portray Pyrrhus and, perhaps most important, to construct him as an example of pleonectic folly.

Finally, we should imagine Plutarch's contemporary readers, who are left to consider the significance of all this for their own world. That world was an empire, which could be denounced, inappropriately or not, in very much the terms that Plutarch bemoans the pleonectic kings of the hellenistic world.²² Moreover, the particular problem of succession in a monarchical system had a powerful importance in the Roman empire of Plutarch's day, as with the passage of power from Domitian through Nerva to Trajan. Of

in the play, of course, is the ultimate fate of Polyneices and Eteocles. In both play and *Life* a brooch-pin proves important: inscribing bark in the *Life* and blinding in the play: *Pyrrh.* 2.5; Eur. *Phoen.* 805.

²² *Pyrrh.* 12. 2-4; cf. Tac. *Agr.* 30 with D. Braund, *Ruling Roman Britain* (London, 1996), 163-71.

course, there had yet to be any attempt formally to share imperial power in the long term—whether by geographical or functional divisions of power, or by some other form of on-going joint-rule.²³ However, there were the makings of some such arrangement with Nerva and Trajan, while earlier emperors (as previously the republic) had certainly attempted to settle succession-issues between rival claimants to the thrones of 'friendly kingdoms' by imposing divisions (e.g. Tac. *Ann.* 2. 67). Plutarch's *Life* of Pyrrhus concerned issues which were more than matters of antiquarian interest: as Dio's oration serves further to illustrate, the issue of *pleonexia*, with all its ramifications, was still very much a live one in the imperial society of Plutarch's day.

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²³ See A Pabst, *Divisio regni: der Zerfall des Imperium Romanum in der Sicht der Zeitgenossen* (Bonn, 1986). On the contemporary relevance of Plutarch, see Pelling (n. 2).