

SLEEPING WITH THE TYRANT: THEBE THE TYRANNICIDE AND THE DEATH OF ALEXANDER OF PHERAE IN PLUTARCH'S *PELOPIDAS**

Abstract: The murder of Alexander of Pherae by his wife Thebe closes Plutarch's *Pelopidas*. While scholars have tended to view this ending as posthumous vengeance for Plutarch's hero, this paper argues that Plutarch wrote Alexander's death to satisfy the quintessential elements which a wicked tyrant ought to experience and that he also exercised creativity by adducing another motif of Thebe as noble tyrannicide. Plutarch's take, therefore, departed from an established tradition which portrayed Thebe unfavourably. A virtuous Thebe complemented Plutarch's interest in other female tyrannicides in *Mulierum Virtutes* as well as his position expressed in that treatise that bravery is not gender-specific.

Keywords: Plutarch, Thebe, Alexander of Pherae, *Pelopidas*, women, tyrannicide, tyranny

Plutarch concludes the *Life of Pelopidas* with the story of how the tyrant Alexander of Pherae was stabbed to death in his own bed (358 BCE). According to Plutarch, Alexander's wife Thebe devised a plan with her three brothers (*συνθεμένη μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν*, 35.6): she placed them such that they would lie in wait inside the house (35.8); once Alexander was fast asleep and the dog, which stood guard outside the bedroom door, was sent away (35.8), she smuggled her brothers into the chamber (35.8–9). There, Plutarch relates, the brothers lost their nerve (*ἐκπεπληγμένων*, 35.10), but Thebe threatened to wake Alexander, shaming (*αἰσχυνθέντας*) and spurring them into action (35.10). This event excited the interest of Greek¹ and Roman² authors alike and even formed the action of a tragedy entitled *Pheraeans* by the third-century Athenian Moschion (*TGrF* 97 F 3 (I.264)).³ Scholarship on Alexander's

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¹ Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.37; Theopompus, *FGrHist* 115 FF 337 (= *Mor.* 1093C), 352; Conon, *FGrHist* 26 F 1.50.2; elsewhere in Plutarch, see *Mor.* 856A.

² Cic. *Off.* 2.25, Val. Max. 9.13.

³ On *Pheraeans*, see Xanthakis-Karamanos (2002) 229–38.

death in *Pelopidas* holds that Plutarch prolonged the *Life* as posthumous vengeance for his eponymous hero's demise.⁴ This paper will expound on this idea and explore the significance of Alexander's murder within the context of tyrants' death narratives. I shall argue that Plutarch wrote Alexander's death in such a way so as to satisfy the quintessential elements of the end that a *wicked* tyrant ought to experience. Furthermore, this paper will show that Plutarch introduced another important motif, namely Alexander's wife Thebe as noble tyrannicide. Plutarch's take, therefore, departed from an alternative historical tradition of Alexander's murder which saw Thebe motivated by sexual jealousy and dynastic ambition.

In a 2013 article, Nino Luraghi proposed that motifs which recur in the death narratives of tyrants have symbolic meaning, and he identified a handful of elements—torture, purification, sacrilege, and the uprooting of the family—which, according to Greek thought, formed a typology of the tyrant's death.⁵ Luraghi did not treat Alexander, but analysis of *Pelopidas* shows that Plutarch crafted his narrative of the tyrant's death to include many of these elements. And, when historical details did not conform precisely to the conditions of the motif, Plutarch engaged them indirectly or integrated others, such as Thebe's role as tyrannicide. Thus, by continuing the story beyond the principal's end and giving Alexander a model tyrant death, Plutarch writes events to satisfy and make history just. Regarding Thebe's depiction and motives, Marta Sordi noted in a 2014 article Plutarch's characterisation of Thebe as tyrant-slayer and concluded that Thebe's intentions were dynastic rather than ideological.⁶ Building on this line of argumentation, this paper will demonstrate that Thebe's stylisation as ideologically motivated tyrannicide formed an integral part of *Pelopidas*' moralising aim and that Plutarch availed himself of the motif of female tyrant-slayers in other works such as *Mulierum Virtutes*.

Death, in sociological and anthropological terms, is a social event.⁷ As such, the conditions and rituals accompanying it should befit the identity of the deceased. Dying and death rituals, therefore, reflect social roles and reinforce social values.⁸ In this way, the manner of a wicked tyrant's end should atone for the heinous acts which he committed in life. Alexander's portrait in the *Life* chimes in well with this idea and through this depiction Plutarch

⁴ On Alexander's death in *Pelopidas*, see Georgiadou (1997), Sprawski (2006). More generally, see Pelling's (1997) seminal article which explores death as a closural device. Over a quarter of the *Lives* end with a death other than the principal's (Pelling (1997) 228). See also Wardman (1974) 18; van der Valk (1982) 301–37, esp. 320.

⁵ Luraghi (2013b) 49–71.

⁶ Sordi (2014) 333–43.

⁷ Metcalf and Huntington (1991), Humphreys (1993). From Luraghi (2013b) 49, I borrow death as a 'social event'.

⁸ Metcalf and Huntington (1991) 2, 5; Humphreys (1993) 148–68.

justifies Alexander's appropriately gruesome death. Before turning to a typology of tyrant deaths, however, Alexander's likeness to the typology of the wicked tyrant merits our brief attention.

1. Alexander, the Wicked Tyrant

The archetypal figure of the tyrant has generated a fair amount of scholarly attention.⁹ This 'discourse of tyranny', as Luraghi aptly summarised it, sets out how 'the Greek political imagination outlined a standard portrait of the *turannos*, a particular type of man characterised by a typical selection of vices: cunning, cruel, greedy, but also sexually incontinent, annoyed by flattery but incapable of tolerating free speech'.¹⁰ There is no shortage of examples in Greek historical writing but a few which immediately spring to mind include Phalaris of Acragas,¹¹ Periander of Corinth,¹² and Dionysius I of Syracuse.¹³ As with the aforementioned *tyrannoi*, Plutarch's Alexander of Pherae possesses the cardinal traits of the tyrant's stock image. In Plutarch's words, Alexander showed 'contempt for righteousness and justice' (*τὴν ὀλιγωρίαν τῶν καλῶν καὶ δικαίων*, 29.6) and was devoid of mildness or lawfulness (*ἐπειρᾶτο καὶ ποιεῖν ἐκ τυράννου πρᾶον ἄρχοντα ... καὶ νόμιμον*, *Pelop.* 26.2). There is also a strong emphasis on the psychic aspect in the standardised portrait of the tyrant.¹⁴ In this regard, the idealised tyrant is incapable of self-control and moderation. Plutarch focuses much of his sketch on vices originating from the absence of Alexander's self-restraint. Alexander, for example, is incurably brutal (*ἀνήκεστος καὶ θηριώδης*, 26.3).¹⁵ His cruelty (*ὠμότης*) is noted on a number of occasions (26.3; 28.9; 29.6; 35.6). He is known for his licentiousness (*ἀσέλγεια*,

⁹ The bibliography provided here is by no means exhaustive but offers a useful overview: Catenacci (1996) 12–15, 28–33 and *passim*; id. (2012) 23–5, 34–7 and *passim*; Di Branco (1996) 101–22; Lewis (2004); Osborne (2009) 181–4; Mitchell (2013) 153–63; Luraghi (2013a), (2013b), (2014), (2015), and (2018).

¹⁰ Luraghi (2013a) 17.

¹¹ Murray (1992); Luraghi (1994) 21–9; Catenacci (2012); Adornato (2012).

¹² Vernant (1982) 26–33; Salmon (1984) 195–207; De Libero (1996) 151–78; Catenacci (2012); Hornblower (2013) 251–2, 261–6.

¹³ Stroheker (1958); Sanders (1987); Caven (1990); Sordi (1992); Lewis (2000) 97–106; Catenacci (2012).

¹⁴ On tyranny not as a form of rule, but a psychological syndrome, see Luraghi (2018) 14–16, 21; for Plato's influence on this dimension of the tyrant portrait, see Di Branco (1996) 103; Forsdyke (2009) 243; Balot (2006) 201–4.

¹⁵ For the hendiadys, Georgiadou (1997) 194.

26.3; 28.9) and greed (πλεονεξία, 26.3) and hated for his hybris (ὑβρις, 28.9)—a trait whose connection to tyranny is well established.¹⁶

Alexander is also compared to a wild animal (ὥσπερ θηρίον, 29.5)¹⁷ and this dehumanisation continues in a lengthier passage. Alexander buried men alive (ζῶντας ... ἀνθρώπους κατώρυττεν);¹⁸ on other occasions he covered them in the skins of wild boars and bears (ἐτέροις δὲ δέρματα σῶν ἀγρίων καὶ ἄρκτων περιτιθείς) and set his hounds on them to tear apart (τοὺς θηρατικούς ἐπάγων κύνας διέσπα) and shot them down as if for sport (κατηκόντιζε παιδιᾶ ταύτη χρώμενος, 29.6). Plutarch includes two further acts of brutality with massacres at specific locales: at Meliboea and Scotussa, Alexander surrounded the people in assembly with his guards (ἐκκλησιαζούσας περιστήσας ἅμα τοὺς δορυφόρους) and killed them from the youth up (ἠβηδὸν ἀπέσφαξε, 29.7–8). In this digression on Alexander's caricature, all parties involved lose their humanity due to the degree of savagery: Alexander, whom Plutarch has already likened to a beast, renders his victims into prey by dressing them in the skins of wild beasts. He uses another animal, specifically hounds, to destroy them, if he does not hunt them as quarry himself. Other features of the tyrant's standardised portrait which Plutarch grafts onto Alexander include fear (καταπλαγείς, 29.11), cowardice (32.9 (at Pelopidas' attack Alexander retreats behind ranks of bodyguards), paranoia (ἀπιστίαν, 35.6, cf. 35.7), bloodthirstiness (μυιφόνον, 27.6), along with repeated references to bodyguards (δορυφόροι, 26.4, 29.8, 32.11).

2. Death Befitting a Wicked Tyrant

It is now time to explore how this portrayal of Alexander influenced Plutarch's recreation of his death scene. The first element to stand out is torture. Plutarch describes the moment of Alexander's death vividly: as Thebe urged her brothers on, one of them grabbed and held down Alexander's feet (τῶν δ' ὁ μὲν τοὺς πόδας κατεῖχε πῆσας), another took hold of his hair and bent his head

¹⁶ For an early link between tyranny and hybris in Greek historiography, see Otanes' speech in Herodotus' Constitutional Debate (3.80.3–4) with Asheri–Lloyd–Corcella's (2007) 473–4 discussion. For a comprehensive study of *hybris* within its Greek cultural context, see Fisher (1992).

¹⁷ For other tyrannical figures compared to wild beasts, see Plut. *Demetr.* 48.1; *Caes.* 66.10 (both wild beast and sacrificial victim imagery); *De Alex. fort.* 344A. The tyrant, of course, as wild animal is not without precedent: see, e.g., the tyrant as werewolf: Pl. *Resp.* 8.565–6; for tyrants as predators, see Pl. *Phd.* 82a.

¹⁸ Georgiadou (1997) 202 notes a link to *Marc.* (3.5–6), where the Romans entomb a Greek and Gallic couple whilst still alive. See also Erdkamp (2020) 183–5 for a recent study of this incident and others. For a later Roman parallel in Domitian's burial of a vestal virgin alive, see Suet. *Dom.* 8.4, Plin. *Ep.* 4.11, and Stat. *Silv.* 1.1.33–6.

back (ὁ δὲ τὴν κεφαλὴν λαβόμενος τῶν τριχῶν ἀνέκλασεν), and the third struck and killed him with the sword (ὁ δὲ τρίτος τῷ ξίφει τύπτων αὐτὸν διεχρήσατο, *Pel.* 35.11–12). The hastily-carried-out execution, however, failed to inflict the pain on Alexander which he had delivered to others, and this was clearly a source of disappointment to Plutarch for he goes on to relate, ‘by the swiftness of his death he died more leniently perhaps than he deserved’ (τῷ μὲν τάχει τῆς τελευτῆς πρῶτερον ἴσως ἢ προσῆκον ἦν ἀποθανόντα, 35.12). Yet although circumstances of the murder did not square with Plutarch’s desired outcome, he nevertheless alluded to the motif of torture indirectly by underscoring the inadequacy of Alexander’s death.

The torture, however, which could not be exacted on Alexander in his final moments, did afflict his corpse and Plutarch relates that afterwards his body was subjected to ‘outrage’ (αἰκία, 35.12). Homer’s use of αἰκία to express Achilles’ atypical handling of the body of Hector renders the significance of this term clear (*Il.* 24.19). Complementing Homer’s example of αἰκία are two passages from Diodorus Siculus: in the first, αἰκία paired with hybris describes the Syracusans’ violent actions against the Phoenicians living in Greek territory at the instigation of the tyrant Dionysius I (14.46.3); the second appears in a passage recounting the abuse inflicted on Bessus’ corpse once it was handed over to Darius III’s family (17.83.9). This alleged treatment of Alexander’s remains allowed Plutarch to combine torture with another essential motif of tyrant-death narratives—purification. In Plutarch’s version, after the bedroom murder, Alexander’s corpse ‘was thrown out and trampled on by the Pheraeans’ (ρίφέντος καὶ πατηθέντος ὑπὸ τῶν Φεραίων, 35.12). To an ancient audience, the symbolic meaning of this gesture was clear. The verb ρίπτω ‘to throw or cast’ sometimes used in combination with the adjective ἄταφος ‘unburied’ conveyed the exposure of a corpse to the elements without a tomb, funeral rites, or burial.¹⁹ In his soliloquy in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, the eponymous hero explains his removal to the shore so that he might not be thrown out and cast to the dogs (μὴ ... ριφθῶ κυσὶν πρόβλητος, 820–30). In Plutarch’s *Mulierum Virtutes*, the corpse (τὸν νεκρόν) of the tyrant Learchus of Cyrene was thrown over the city walls (ἐρριψαν ὑπὲρ τὸ τεῖχος, *Mor.* 261B). Similarly, Theopompus uses the verb-adjective pairing (ἄταφος ἐρρίφη) to describe the treatment of the body of the convicted traitor Antiphon (*FGrHist* 115 F 120 = *Plut. Vit. Dec. Or.* 833A).²⁰ The verb πατέω ‘to tread under foot or trample on’ (LSJ s.v. II.3), whether performed literally or metaphorically, conveys disregard or even disdain. An apt example comes again from *Ajax*,

¹⁹ See LSJ s.vv. ριπτάζω III; ἄταφος. On the disposal of corpses in this way, see Lindenlauf (2001) 87–8.

²⁰ See also D.L. 26.2.79.

where the verb is used to describe the treatment which a bold-tongued man (γλώσση θρασύν, 1142) should receive (πατεῖν παρείχε τῷ θέλοντι, 1146).²¹

According to ancient Greek practice, unburied corpses were traditionally a source of defilement (*miasma*) for the community. Yet when the cadaver in question was that of a public enemy, their unburied body paradoxically did not cause pollution.²² At Athens, the bodies of two types of public enemy in particular, temple-robbers and traitors, were exposed to treatment similar to that of Alexander's and were thrown out and left unburied just over the Attic border.²³ This casting out of the corpse and denial of burial formed a ritual drama which represented the 'symbolic rejection of the malefactor'.²⁴ These practices also share affinities with the purification rituals associated with the *pharmakos* or scapegoat in which members on the 'margins' of society (e.g., criminals, slaves, ugly persons, strangers, young men and women, and kings) were ritually abused and either driven out or killed by the community.²⁵

Ancient testimony shows that the bodies of tyrants and those closely associated with them were also subject to comparable treatment. We have already considered the example of Learchus of Cyrene (*Mor.* 261B).²⁶ In Nicolaus of Damascus' version of the end of the Cypselid dynasty, the Corinthians exposed the corpse of the last tyrant and then exhumed and cast out the bones of his family (*FGrHist* 90 F 60). At Syracuse, the body of the long-time supporter of the Dionysian tyrants Philistus was dismembered, dragged through the city, and eventually cast out by the Syracusans (D.S. 16.16.3).²⁷ It was said that Dion's influence among the Syracusans suffered because, once in power, he forbade them from breaking open Dionysius I's tomb and casting out his body (Plut. *Dion* 53.2).²⁸ Finally, although tyranny is not a label usually associated with Alexander's family, it is perhaps telling that Cassander had the remains of the late King's mother Olympias thrown out and left unburied (D.S. 17.118.2). In death, then, temple-robbers, traitors, killers of suppliants, as

²¹ Similarly, Aesch. *Ag.* 1356–7: 'but they trample deliberation's honour to the ground and their hands do not sleep' (οἱ δὲ τῆς μελλοῦς κλέος | πέδοι πατοῦντες οὐ καθεύδουσιν χερί); Ar. *Vesp.* 377: 'not to trample on the decrees of the goddesses' (μὴ πατεῖν τὰ τῶν θεῶν ψηφίσματα).

²² Parker (1983) 46.

²³ Parker (1983) 46–7.

²⁴ For the quotation see Parker (1983) 47.

²⁵ Bremmer (1983) 299–320, Parker (1983) 257–70. For the list see Bremmer (1983) 303.

²⁶ For similar treatment of the bodies of deceased tyrants in *Mul. Vir.*, see no. 15 (Micca and Megisto) where the body of Aristotimus is exposed and left in the agora.

²⁷ Plutarch records comparable abuse of Philistus' body (*Dion* 35.5).

²⁸ When Timoleon finally became master of the whole of Syracuse (343 BCE), Plutarch says that he allowed the Syracusans to demolish not only the citadel, but also the palaces and tombs of the Dionysii (*Tim.* 22).

well as tyrants and their families—members of society who were perceived as offensive to the gods and had incurred religious pollution through their transgressions—underwent acts of ritual purification. Furthermore, just as with the rituals of the *pharmakos*, the participation of the entire community in the abuse of a tyrant's body, such as the Pheraeans trampling on Alexander's cadaver, represented a statement of the collective political will.

Killing a tyrant is also described in many ancient sources as an expression of divine justice and therefore cannot bring the religious pollution of sacrilege and legal liabilities upon the tyrannicide.²⁹ Nowhere is this connection more apparent than in legislation on unpunished killing. Laws from Athens, Eretria, and Ilium authorise members of the community to kill a tyrant or aspiring tyrant and guarantee tyrant-killers not only legal impunity but also ritual purity before the gods.³⁰ In the *Life*, Plutarch depicts the punishment that awaits Alexander in terms of divine will.³¹ As prisoner at Pherae, Pelopidas challenges the tyrant to kill him so that Alexander, even more 'hated by the gods' (*θεομισής*), might die sooner (28.4). Elsewhere Plutarch describes Alexander's death in terms of punishment and not only as a conviction of his hero Pelopidas (*δώσοντος τοῦ τυράννου δίκην*, 28.3) but also of the Pheraeans (*δίκην διδόντα τὸν τύραννον*, 29.3).³² Plutarch, moreover, reinforces the tyrant's death as divine punishment in his own authorial voice: 'I shall relate the punishment which Alexander paid to the gods a short time later for Pelopidas' death' (*ἣν δ' ὀλίγον ὕστερον τοῖς θεοῖς ὑπὲρ Πελοπίδου δίκην ἔδωκε διηγῆσομαι*, 35.4). This foreshadowing of Alexander's punishment and its sanction by the

²⁹ See, for example, Thgn. 1180–2: 'But as for the people-devouring tyrant, knock him dead the way you please, | For there is no retaliation from the side of the gods for this' (*δημοφάγον δὲ τύραννον ὅπως ἐθέλεις κατακλίνει | οὐ νέμεσις πρὸς θεῶν γίνεται οὐδεμία*) (trans. Luraghi (2013b) 52). Impunity for tyrant-killers, however, could be subject to dispute, as the curse of the Alcmaeonids for their involvement in the murder of the Cylonian suppliants demonstrates (on this episode, see Giuliani (1999)).

³⁰ From Athens, there are several examples: an archaic Athenian law ([Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 16.10); decree of Demophantos (And. 1.96–8, Dem. 20.159, Lycurg. *Leocr.* 124–7), although the authenticity of this decree has not been without controversy (see Canevaro–Harris (2012); *contra*, Sommerstein (2014)); law of Eucrates (*IG II³* 320). Eretria: *SEG* 51.1105; Knoepfler (2001) 208–9. Ilium: Frisch (1975) no. 25. On tyrant-killing legislation, more generally, see Ostwald (1955); Youni (2001); Teegarden (2014).

³¹ On the theme of divine retribution in Plutarch, see Brenk (1977) 256–77.

³² The full passage at 29.3 is illustrative of Plutarch's outlook: 'Such great fear fell upon his commanders and friends, and so great an impulse held his subjects poised for revolt and there was so great a joy of what was come, that they now watched for the tyrant's punishment.' (*τοσοῦτος ἐνεπεπτώκει φόβος τοῖς περὶ αὐτὸν ἡγεμόσι καὶ φίλοις, τοσαύτη δὲ [πρὸς] τοὺς ὑπηκόους ὄρμη πρὸς ἀπόστασιν εἶχε καὶ χαρὰ τοῦ μέλλοντος, ὡς νῦν ἐποφομένους δίκην διδόντα τὸν τύραννον.*)

divine realm align Thebe and her brothers' cause to that of the gods and dispel in advance any stain of sacrilege for his killing.

Even so, certain conditions in Alexander's murder prohibited Plutarch from evoking all the elements of the tyrant-death typology. Greek thought held that in assuming power a tyrant also put his family at risk, since when communities deposed tyrants they often sought to eliminate his progeny. Solon's famous words disavowing tyranny touch on this idea.³³ When the Syracusan cavalry challenged Dionysius I of Syracuse in the revolt of 405 BCE, they ransacked Dionysius' house and raped his first wife, events which prompted her swift suicide (D.S. 13.112.4).³⁴ In *Mulierum Virtutes*, after the assassination of the Elean tyrant Aristotimus a crowd stormed the house of the tyrant only to find that his wife, in anticipation of their arrival, had already hung herself (*Mor.* 253B). The tyrant's daughters, however, were captured alive and were narrowly saved from slaughter by the heroine Megisto, who mercifully allowed them to commit suicide (*Mor.* 253C–E).

Thebe was the daughter of Jason, the first tyrant of Pherae, and her husband Alexander was the son of Jason's brother and successor Polydorus.³⁵ This meant that Thebe and her brothers were Alexander's cousins. Thus, Plutarch could not apply the motif of the uprooting of the tyrant's family to an account in which the *tyrant's own family* murdered the *tyrant*.³⁶ One way Plutarch offset this obstacle was to bring into play a motif which Luraghi's aforementioned study did not consider closely, but one which would have been familiar in rhetorical schools of Plutarch's time—the brave tyrannicide.³⁷ And, who better to proselytise Thebe than another tyrant-slayer? Earlier in the *Life* (5–12), Plutarch discussed at length Pelopidas' involvement in the assassination of the polemarchs who ruled Thebes with the help of Spartan backing from 382–379 BCE and whose likeness to tyrants Plutarch makes repeatedly clear (6,

³³ F 33.5–7 *IEG*²: 'For if I had come to power, laid hold of abounding wealth, | and ruled over the Athenians as tyrant for one day | I'd be willing to be flayed later for a wine skin and my family utterly destroyed.' (ἤθελον γὰρ κεν κρατήσας, πλοῦτον ἄφθονον λαβὼν | καὶ τυραννεύσας Ἀθηνέων μούνον ἡμέρην μίαν, | ἀσκὸς ὕστερον δεδάρθαι κάπιτετρίφθαι γένος.)

³⁴ There is a grim cycle of vengeance on the family among the Dionysian tyrants: on the murder of Dion's wife and sister after his assassination, see Plut. *Dion* 58.4; *Tim.* 33. On the fate of the wives and daughters of Dionysius II after his expulsion from Locri, see Ath. 12.541d–e.

³⁵ Xen. *Hell.* 6.4.33–5; Plut. *Pelop.* 28.3; Sprawski (1999) 49–51.

³⁶ For a similar reversal of the uprooting of the tyrant's family motif, see Xen. *Hier.* 3.7–9, where an absence of trust not only between the tyrant and his friends, but even the tyrant and his family (specifically, children, brothers, and wives) is noted.

³⁷ On tyrants and tyrannicide in Greek declamation, see Tomassi (2015).

7, 9).³⁸ It is against this backdrop and Alexander's depiction as the stock tyrant that Plutarch develops the motif of Thebe as tyrant-slayer.

3. Thebe the Tyrannicide

In 368 BCE, while on embassy to Thessaly, Pelopidas was apprehended by Alexander and for a time imprisoned at Pherae. Plutarch is the only extant source to record Pelopidas meeting Thebe during his incarceration. According to Plutarch, Thebe was drawn to Pelopidas because of his reputation for courage (*θαρσαλέος*) and high-mindedness (*γενναῖον*, 28.5). Thebe's encounters soon became more frequent and Plutarch describes their impact on her: 'Accordingly, after continually visiting Pelopidas and speaking openly with him about her sufferings, she was filled with courage, resolution, and animosity toward Alexander' (*διὸ καὶ συνεχῶς φοιτῶσα πρὸς τὸν Πελοπίδαν, καὶ παρρησιαζομένη περὶ ὧν ἔπασχεν, ὑπεπίμπλατο θυμοῦ καὶ φρονήματος καὶ δυσμενείας πρὸς τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον*, 28.10). Thebe's newly found qualities of 'courage' (*θυμός*) and 'resolution' (*φρόνημα*) echo Pelopidas' virtues (*θαρσαλέος* and *γενναῖον*) which originally drew her to him.

A like symbiosis is attested between another pair of tyrant-slayers in Plutarch's *Lives*. In *Brutus* it is Cassius who 'fired [Brutus] up and urged [him] on' (*ἐξέκαυσε καὶ κατήπειξε*) to assassinate Caesar (8.5). John Moles observes that Cassius 'brings [the protagonist] to the point of action' and 'acts as the voice of Brutus' conscience'.³⁹ The structural role of Cassius and Pelopidas are thus analogous: both exhort would-be tyrannicides against a relative or close friend (in the *Brutus*, Plutarch records the tradition that attributed Brutus' paternity to Caesar (5)) and both act as agents in the narrative who rouse Thebe and Brutus to purpose.⁴⁰

At the end of the *Life*, as Plutarch narrates Alexander's death, he returns to the Pelopidas-Thebe connection. 'As was mentioned earlier', he says, 'Pelopidas had *taught* Thebe, who was Alexander's wife, not to fear the outward splendour or power of the tyranny' (*Θήβην τὴν συνοικουσαν αὐτῷ ... Πελοπίδας ἐδίδαξε μὴ φοβεῖσθαι τὴν ἔξω λαμπρότητα καὶ παρασκευὴν τῆς τυραννίδος*,

³⁸ On the Theban polemarchs as tyrants, see Gehrke (1985) 168–80, Berve (1967) I.299–300; On Greek ideas of collective tyranny, see Jordovic (2006).

³⁹ Moles (2017) 118. According to Moles (2017) 43–5, Plutarch engages in a sustained *synkrisis* of Brutus and Cassius that pervades the *Life*. Through this technique, Plutarch is able to contrast a moderate, philosophically minded Brutus with a fiery, impetuous Cassius, which in his assessment of Brutus' motivation to kill Caesar complements his literary and moralistic aim.

⁴⁰ For a reverse gender dynamic, see Plut. *Alex.* 38, where the famous Athenian courtesan Thais rouses Alexander and the Macedonians to incinerate Persepolis as retribution for Xerxes' burning of Athens (Hamilton (1969) 99–100).

35.5). Here, Plutarch presents the rapport between Pelopidas and Thebe in paideutic terms (ἐδίδαξε): just as an instructor indoctrinates his pupil so too did Pelopidas inculcate anti-tyrannical sentiment in Thebe.⁴¹

Of course, it is not the case that Plutarch denies Thebe any personal motivation in conceiving Alexander's murder. In *Pelopidas* and Thebe's first meeting, Plutarch claims that Thebe was worn down by Alexander's 'cruelty' (ὠμότης) and 'hybris' (ὑβρις) in addition to his licentiousness and seduction of her youngest brother (μετὰ τῆς ἄλλης ἀσελγείας καὶ τὸν νεώτατον αὐτῆς τῶν ἀδελφῶν παιδικὰ πεποιημένου, 28.9). Later Plutarch reaffirms that Thebe feared Alexander's 'untrustworthiness' (ἀπιστία) and detested his 'cruelty' (ὠμότης, 35.6). There will be more on Thebe's jealousy later, but it is worth noting here that Plutarch has transferred the motif of sexual exploitation of women, which is traditionally associated with tyrants, to one of Thebe's brothers.⁴² Aside from her brother's seduction, there is no more in Plutarch's account that suggests Thebe's intentions were personal.⁴³ After all, cruelty, hybris, and untrustworthiness constitute familiar traits of the rhetorical construct of the tyrant. Thus, in Plutarch's mind, Thebe's ideological aversions to tyranny arose from her paideutic relationship with Pelopidas and these ideas brought about the conspiracy to assassinate Alexander.

While the male-female pedagogical rapport is to my knowledge unique to *Pelopidas*, Thebe is in fine company among women who operate in close proximity to tyrants in Plutarch's works.⁴⁴ Yet Thebe holds a unique place, since in the *Lives* women tend to play 'supporting roles in androcentric narratives'.⁴⁵ But in *Pelopidas* Plutarch has Thebe assume the agency of a tyrannicide and expresses admiration for her deeds. The oeuvre for showcasing the bravery of women in which tyrants occupy a subordinate role is, of course, Plutarch's *Mulierum Virtutes*. In fact, there is a preponderance of women confronting tyrants or tyrannical men in this treatise. Mallory Monaco Caterine has shown how this dynamic of woman versus tyrant operates as a

⁴¹ On Plutarch and pedagogical relationships, see Zadorojnyi (2011).

⁴² I am grateful to John Marincola for discussion on this point.

⁴³ I am not suggesting that sexual transgression is an immaterial motivation. Indeed, it appears as a thought-pattern in several important tyrannicides and tyrant oustings (e.g., Harmodius and Aristogeiton (Hdt. 5.55; Thuc. 6.54–9) and Lucretia and the Tarquinii (Liv. 1.57–60)). Plutarch, however, appears more interested in foregrounding Thebe's ideological rather than personal motives.

⁴⁴ For women in tyrants' circles, see *Dion*, *Timoleon*, and *Cleomenes*. In *Demetrius* and *Antony* as well as in *Mulierum Virtutes*, vignettes featuring women accentuate the tyrannical traits of male characters. This is a preoccupation not only of Plutarch (Blomqvist (1997)) but also Greek historical writers beginning as early as Herodotus (Lewis (2011)); Coppola (2013) explores women as tyrannicides, in particular; Dreher (2014); Galvagno–Seminara (2014).

⁴⁵ Monaco Caterine (2019) 195.

rhetorical device so as to reinforce the treatise's argument that virtue is not gender specific.⁴⁶ Of the nine stories featuring tyrannical men—men who either conform to the theoretical definition of a tyrant as an extra-legal ruler or who possess traits of the *tyrannos*—Plutarch offers three examples in which the heroine, just like Thebe, takes on the position of tyrant-slayer. Furthermore, when compared to Thebe, the heroines Aretaphila (no. 19), Eryxo (no. 25), and Xenocrite (no. 26) offer parallels to her depiction in *Pelopidas*.⁴⁷

Each are closely connected to a tyrant whether by marriage or kinship ties. Eryxo is twice joined with a tyrant: at the outset she is married to the tyrant Arcesilaus II and, after his death, is pursued by his murderer and successor Learchus (260F). Aretaphila's union with the tyrant Nicocrates is likewise strained. The tyrant killed her husband Phaedimus and made Aretaphila his unwilling wife (ἐγγημεν ἄκουσαν, 255F). Later in the narrative she becomes mother-in-law to another tyrant, Leander, the brother and successor of Nicocrates (256E). The daughter of a citizen whom the tyrant had exiled, Xenocrite too finds herself the reluctant wife of Aristodemus (262A).

In addition, while the women of *Mulierum Virtutes* are portrayed as the architects behind the tyrant-killing, they rely on male kinsmen or supporters who assist in executing their plans. In *Pelopidas*, Thebe conspired with her three brothers (συνθεμένη μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν) to make an attempt on Alexander's life (ἐπεχείρει τόνδε τὸν τρόπον, 35.6). Eryxo, like Thebe, masterminds the plot to kill Learchus and works in concert with her brothers (βουλευσαμένη μετὰ τῶν ἀδελφῶν, 260F). For instance, she devises the plan to lure Learchus to a private meeting on the pretext of consummating their union before officially married and sets her brother Polyarchus and two associates to lie in wait (261A–B). When Xenocrite gets word of resistance to Aristodemus' rule, she provides the band of men safe passage into the palace and guides them to the unarmed tyrant (262C). Aretaphila manages to carry out not one but two tyrannicides; she is also noteworthy because Plutarch twice compares her to Thebe. Plutarch justifies Aretaphila's recourse to poison in her first attempt to kill Nicocrates because, unlike Thebe, she was deprived of faithful supporters in the household (256A). Once discovered, however, Aretaphila is subjected to torture by the tyrant and his mother, and only narrowly escapes death (256B–D). Nicocrates' assassination is finally brought about when Aretaphila innovatively creates what she had all the while lacked—a male relative. She marries off her daughter to the tyrant's brother Leander and thus gains for herself a son-in-law to help in bringing about her plans (256E). With the murder of Nicocrates successfully carried out, Aretaphila finds that she is faced with yet another

⁴⁶ Monaco Caterine (2019) 194–208.

⁴⁷ On the historical contexts and Plutarch's sources for *Mulierum Virtutes*, see Stadter (1965); Wagner (1968).

problem: her co-conspirator Leander makes himself the new tyrant of Cyrene (256F). Thus, Aretaphila must set to work again to depose another tyrant. This time she stirs up a war with a neighbouring Libyan power and persuades their leader Anabus to arrest Leander at a sham peace conference orchestrated by her (257A–B). Once captured, the Cyrenaeans condemn the tyrant to death and cast him into the sea to drown (257D).

The praise with which these women meet in Plutarch's accounts formalises their role as tyrannicides. When the murder of Learchus prompts a diplomatic embassy to Egypt, King Amasis expresses approval of Eryxo's self-control (*τὴν σωφροσύνην*) and courage (*τὴν ἀνδρείαν*, 261C). Plutarch underscores the importance of Xenocrite's role when he insists that her *aretē* made the city free (*ἡ Κυμαίων πόλις ἠλευθερώθη δυοῖν ἀρετῇ γυναικῶν*, 262C).⁴⁸ After the death of Aristodemus, the Cumaeans made Xenocrite priestess of Demeter, but she respectfully rejected all other honours and gifts (*τιμῶν δὲ καὶ δωρεῶν μεγάλων*, 262C–D).⁴⁹ When Aretaphila returned to Cyrene with the tyrant Leander in chains, her compatriots' first reaction was to celebrate their freedom (*ἀπόλαυσμα τῆς ἐλευθερίας*) and greet Aretaphila with joy and tears (*ἐκείνην ἀσπάσασθαι μετὰ χαρᾶς καὶ δακρύων*), as if supplicating a statue of a god (*ὥσπερ ἀγάλματι θεοῦ προσπίπτοντας*, 257C). Just like Xenocrite, Aretaphila receives honours and praise (*τῶν τιμῶν τῆς Ἀρεταφίλας καὶ τῶν ἐπαίνων*) and is even offered a share in the governance of the city (*συνάρχειν καὶ συνδιοικεῖν τοῖς ἀρίστοις ἀνδράσι τὴν πολιτείαν*, 257D), which, true to logic of the narrative, she turns down (257E). After all, if the world of the tyrant is a topsy-turvy one in which women could rule over men, Aretaphila's decision not to participate in political life is pivotal to the restoration of society to its 'correct' state. The other point of comparison Plutarch draws between Thebe and Aretaphila is their shared role as tyrannicides and the shared intentions of those undertakings. Aretaphila, Plutarch says, 'as the sole hope for the common good, offered herself and emulated the noble deeds and famous daring of Thebe of Pherae' (*αὐτὴν οὖν ἡ Ἀρεταφίλα ὑποθεῖσα μόνην τοῖς κοινοῖς ἐλπίδα καὶ τὰ Θήβης ζηλώσασα τῆς Φεραίας καλὰ καὶ περιβόητα τολμήματα*, 256A). It is clear that Plutarch conceived of these women as ideologically motivated tyrant-slayers, and he availed himself of this motif not only in the *Mulierum Virtutes*, but also in *Pelopidas*, where too he gave prominence to the actions of a woman.

⁴⁸ The other of the two women to whom Plutarch is referring in this statement is a nameless Cumaean woman whose actions and words roused a band of men to come together against the tyrant in the first place (262B).

⁴⁹ On gifts and honours awarded tyrannicides in the polis as normative, see Isoc. 8.143; Xen. *Hier.* 4.5; Arist. *Pol.* 2.1267a15; Teegarden (2014) 9–10 and *passim*.

A different picture of Thebe and her rationale emerge in other historical writings.⁵⁰ In the *Hellenika*, Xenophon records two traditions about Thebe's motivation. In the first, Thebe's pleas for the life of one of Alexander's former beloveds fall on deaf ears and the tyrant has the young man imprisoned and eventually executed (*Hell.* 6.4.37). Another report preserved by Xenophon held that Alexander contemplated a new marriage with Jason of Pherae's widow, who was likely also Thebe's former stepmother (*Hell.* 6.4.37).⁵¹ According to both explanations, the origins of Thebe's plot were highly personal and in the case of the latter the prospect of another marriage suggests jealousy or dynastic ambition or both.

Another source, Conon's *Diegeseis*, also highlights dynastic rivalry. There, Thebe races to action in self-defence when Alexander divulges a plot to kill her and her brothers (*FGrHist* 26 F 1.50.2). The aftermath of the tyrant's murder, however, is suggestive of Thebe's influence and personal ambition. Conon says that 'she received the power herself but gave the title and the glory of the tyranny to Tisiphonus who was the eldest of her brothers' (καὶ αὐτὴ τὴν μὲν ἰσχὺν δέχεται, τοῦνομα δὲ καὶ τὴν δόξαν τῆς τυραννίδος Τισιφόνῳ τῷ πρεσβυτάτῳ τῶν ἀδελφῶν δίδωσιν, *FGrHist* 26 F 1.50.4). The Roman sources cite jealousy arising from Alexander's infidelity. In Cicero's *de Officiis*, Thebe murdered Alexander 'because of a suspicion that he was keeping a concubine' (*propter pelicatus suspicionem*, 2.25). Valerius Maximus, possibly drawing on Cicero or working from a common source, also claimed that Thebe was 'prompted by anger over a concubine' (*paelicitus ira mota*, 9.13).

A remark from Plutarch's *De Herodoti Malignitate* suggests that it was this common tradition as preserved in the accounts of Xenophon, Conon, Cicero, and Valerius Maximus to which Plutarch was responding when he depicted Thebe as noble tyrannicide. In the passage, Plutarch inveighs against historians who, when there is a choice, impute disreputable motives rather than honourable ones to historical personages, and uses Thebe as an exemplum: 'just as those who put in writing that the murder of Alexander by Thebe was not the work of *high-mindedness* and a *hatred of evil*, but that of *jealousy* and *womanly passion*' (ὥσπερ οἱ τὸν ὑπὸ Θήβης Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ τυράννου φόνον οὐ μεγαλονοίας οὐδὲ μισοπονηρίας, ζήλου δὲ τινος ἔργον καὶ πάθους γυναικείου τιθέμενοι, *Her. Mal.* 6 = *Mor.* 856A). The consistent portrayal of Thebe throughout Plutarch's corpus and the remark made here strongly suggest that an established historiographical tradition saw Thebe unfavourably.

⁵⁰ Stadter (1965) 102 n. 254 offers a list of the ancient writers who record Thebe's story but does not differentiate the variations in her portrayal among them.

⁵¹ Beloch (1912–27) III.2 82–3; Ogden (1999) xxx.

4. Conclusion: Plutarch's Editorial Intervention

If Thebe as honourably motivated tyrant-slayer departed from one version, questions arise regarding the source for Plutarch's portrait. While scholars attribute the sources of *Pelopidas* variously,⁵² there is some consensus that Plutarch consulted Theopompus for his material on Alexander and in another treatise of the *Moralia* Plutarch mentions that he enjoyed Theopompus' telling of Thebe's story (*Non posse* 10 = 1093C).⁵³ It is certainly possible, then, that Plutarch adapted his Thessalian material from Theopompus' *Philippica*. However, it should be noted that in the extant fragment from Theopompus about Alexander's death (*FGrHist* 115 F 352), there is a shift in tone: Alexander's body is eventually handed over to this family for burial and thus deemed worthy of funerary rites, in opposition to the post-mortem treatment in Plutarch's narrative where Alexander's body as pollutant is left exposed.⁵⁴ This, of course, does not necessarily mean that Theopompus might have recorded differing traditions surrounding Alexander's murder or the extant fragment focused on another episode pertaining to Alexander's corpse. At all events, we cannot rule out Theopompus. Moreover, it is now clear that wherever Plutarch found the Thebe-favourable account, he almost certainly invented her meeting and instruction with Pelopidas.

A closer look at the historical conditions and circumstances of Alexander's death offers further proof of Plutarch's editorial intervention. Ten years separated Thebe's alleged meeting of Pelopidas (368 BCE) and the murder of Alexander (358 BCE), which should give rise to questions about the authenticity

⁵² Traces of Ephorus, Callisthenes, Xenophon, and Polybius have been noted in *Pelopidas*, but there is some consensus that Callisthenes serves as Plutarch's principal source (Georgiadou (1997) 19–20 n. 49).

⁵³ Plut. *Non posse* 10 = *Mor.* 1093C = Theopompus, *FGrHist* 115 F 337: 'Who would find pleasure in sleeping with the most beautiful woman rather than lying awake with the stories Xenophon wrote about Pantheia or Aristoboulos about Timocleia or Theopompus [about] Thebe?' (τίς δ' ἂν ἡσθείη συναναπαυσάμενος τῇ καλλίστῃ γυναικὶ μᾶλλον ἢ προσαγρυπνήσας οἷς γέγραφε περὶ Πανθείας Ξενοφῶν ἢ περὶ Τιμοκλείας Ἀριστόβουλος ἢ Θήβης Θεόπομπος;) (trans. Morison (2014)). For Theopompus as Plutarch's source, see Westlake (1939) 14–15; Stadter (1965) 102 n. 154; Sordi (1995) (specifically for the recapture of the Cadmea, *Pelop.* 5–13); Georgiadou (1997) 24–5. For a general discussion of Plutarch's sources and methodology, see Homeyer (1963); Pelling (1980); Piccirilli (1998).

⁵⁴ In this fragment, Theopompus says that Alexander worshipped Dionysus at Pherae's port of Pagasae and that, 'when his body had been thrown into the sea, Dionysus appeared standing over a fisherman in a dream and bade him to take up the basket of his bones. The fisherman went to Crannon and handed his remains over to his family, who buried him' (καταποντωθέντος δὲ Ἀλεξάνδρου Διόνυσος ὄναρ ἐπιστάς τινα τῶν ἀλιέων ἐκέλευσεν ἀναλαβεῖν τὸν φορμὸν τῶν ὀστέων. ὁ δὲ ἀπελθὼν εἰς Κραννῶνα τοῖς οἰκείοις ἀπέδωκεν· οἱ δὲ ἔθαψαν, *FGrHist* 115 F 352).

of their relationship. Likewise, despite Plutarch's claims that Alexander's murder followed 'shortly after' (ὀλίγον ὕστερον, 35.4) the death of his hero Pelopidas (364 BCE), at least six years separated these events.⁵⁵ Perhaps even more important, however, is that the death of Alexander did not mark the end of the tyranny at Pherae, as Plutarch's narrative would have his readers believe. In fact, the sources are unanimous that Thebe's brother(s) succeeded as rulers at Pherae (*Hell.* 6.4.37; Conon, *FGrHist* 26 F 1.50.4; D.S. 16.14.1) and proved themselves no different from Alexander as far as their memory as *tyrannoi* was concerned (D.S. 16.14.1). Thebe's brothers would rule until 352 BCE when as a result of their miscalculated alliance with the Phocians in the Third Sacred War, they found themselves on the losing side and surrendered to Philip of Macedon. Viewed in this light, we can appreciate the ending of *Pelopidas* with Alexander's murder as a highly successful terminal device: it most certainly avenged the death of Plutarch's hero Pelopidas, but it also afforded Alexander the death owed a wicked tyrant. In so doing, Plutarch replaced his long-dead hero with a new heroine and instilled in Pelopidas' protégé Thebe the motives and ideology necessary to write a morally satisfying end.

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⁵⁵ For a similar episode of telescoping the death of Vespasian and end of the Flavian dynasty, after describing two of Vespasian's victims (*Mor.* 770d–1d), see Brenk (1977) 257. On chronological compression in Plutarch, see Pelling (1980) 127–8.

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