A "Plutarchian Comparison" between Marius and Pyrrhus

By Theodore Felix, 17 January 2008;

Plutarch’s Parallel Lives were a series of biographies of Greek and Roman heroes. The main object of which was to compare the achievements of the two civilizations while at the same time acting as a moral “guidebook” for people, especially those eager for fame and greatness. The various Lives were organized in themes: the characters bearing similar traits are paired together with one another. However, in his search to make comparisons, Plutarch often sees what may not necessarily be there -- for instance, the Life of Caesar, Plutarch downplays Caesar’s womanizing in order to elevate his similarities to Alexander, whom he pairs him with. After finishing the two Lives, the reader would then follow into a comparison of the characters. Unfortunately, a number of comparisons have been lost; among them is the comparison between Marius and Pyrrhus. Here, using only Plutarch’s biographies as a source, I will attempt to draw out the similarities inside the two Lives and to write a comparison. At the same time, I will also provide similarities that I noted within them.

Pyrrhus and Marius are both by products of the tumultuous period that marked their particular lives. Pyrrhus was born in the midst of the various succession wars that followed the death of Alexander the Great; while Marius was born into the dark period of the late Republic, where violence and chaos became the norm. In both cases, the individuals had to survive in the dog-eat-dog world they were thrust into; and in both cases, the extremity of their particular characteristics brought about their eventual decline and fall. Like a child going from one toy to another, Pyrrhus moved through various campaigns looking for glory and triumph. His overall scope and aspirations were so great that, while he had yet to even enter Italy, he already dreamt of conquering Africa. This same hubris characterized Marius’ career. Never able to quell his own ambitions, Marius achieved one success after another but ultimately failed to accept his own limitations. Yet, for all their similarities, the Lives do not feel all too similar. For all of Pyrrhus’ over ambition, the tale of this Hellenistic adventurer seems to be quite entertaining; while from the very onset we see Marius a dark disgruntled figure lacking any gentleness. However, although the stories may carry different tones, they warn of the same thing: ambition unchecked by moderation and good judgment will ultimately lead to destruction.

Perhaps one of the most noted contrasts between the two figures is their ancestry. In beginning the Lives of the two men, Plutarch (as usual) gives an overview of the man’s ancestry and origins. With Pyrrhus we are given a fantastic and mythological tale linking him all the way to Achilles. The Homeric names continue to repeat throughout the Life, further emphasizing the significance that this inheritance played. This is done to such a great extent that Pyrrhus seem to mirror Achilles when in action. In great contrast to this, Plutarch tells us in the very beginning that “Marius came of humble origins.”(Marius.3) There is no legendary story in his childhood to entertain us or to proclaim his nobility: Marius is not noble. Pyrrhus is born to a line of kings; Marius to line of villagers. This lack of ancestry will be seen as a stain by
his high-class contemporaries and by Plutarch. This will also play into the political situation that characterized his Life: his conflict will not be one against various successor kings but heavily internal and political since: while Pyrrhus is born to rule, Marius must prove himself. This difference will also influence the nature of the Lives, something that I have already mentioned but will now go into greater detail on.

The nature of Pyrrhus’ Life takes a different tone from Marius’, the former seems to be embroiled in his mythological ancestry: Pyrrhus descends from Achilles. This perceived fact will influence the way Plutarch goes about this nobleman’s story. The Life is gives the feel of myth and is full of Iliad-influenced scenes, from Pyrrhus’ fleeing from his rightful kingdom as a child, to his physical characteristics and magical toe, to the fantastic battle sequences. Here Plutarch blurs the line between reality and fantasy in order to accommodate ancestry. On the contrary, Marius’ life is brutal and real. We have none of the supernatural flair, largely due to the fact that Marius lacks Pyrrhus’ ancestry; Marius is a grim and rustic man. Even the physical descriptions differ greatly in nature. With Pyrrhus, Plutarch gives us a terrifying image of a man who has one line of bone as teeth; yet with Marius, Plutarch strives for complete accuracy: “…there is a stone statue of him in Ravenna, in Gaul, which I have seen, and which perfectly matches what one reads about his harsh and bitter character.”(Marius.2)

The ancestry of the two men and the period in which they lived also comes together to bring about yet another difference: Pyrrhus did not need to climb the social ladder Marius had to. Being of non-aristocratic origin, the odds Marius had to fight were not always on the battlefield but also, and mostly, in the political arena. Marius was continuously fighting an internal battle against his own political opponents. This ladder is inexistent for Pyrrhus and the political turmoil of the Republican Rome is a far cry from the totalitarian regimes of the Diadochoi (Hellenistic successor states). Marius has to achieve supremacy within his birthplace; Pyrrhus is granted it, he now has to maintain and expand it. At the same time, the nature of Marius’ world makes it so that social issues become far more apparent. In this life the issue of what the mass wants plays greatly into this Novus Homo’s rise, not so with Pyrrhus. In the latter the question is mainly between neighboring kings and states. This difference creates an environment that makes the Life of Marius feel more compact. Although we do see numerous exotic locations such as Africa and Gaul, the picture never really seems to leave Rome and her issues. While campaigning in Africa, Marius’ main concern is aggrandizing himself at the expense of his political opponents. At the same time we find far more reality in the politicking of Roman elites. We get a different, far more expansive picture with Pyrrhus. The largely external nature of the struggle makes it so different. Pyrrhus is able to detach himself from Epirus and move onto different localities. This makes his story feel like an adventure. Yet for all their differences, the primary characteristic of these two men was the same: they were men of actions.

“He had no aptitude for peace or life as a private citizen; he owed his prominence to war and it seemed to him that power and prestige were being gradually worn away by idleness and inactivity…”  (Marius.31) This was perhaps the most negative characteristic of Marius: he had no taste for politics and nor could he truly deal with it, he was a soldier and could only elevate himself through war. Pyrrhus seems to have been much the same way: “…for Pyrrhus life became tedious to the point of nausea, unless he could stir up trouble for others…”  (Pyrrhus.13) Pyrrhus had great aptitude
for being a ruler, but was too much of an adventurer. It differs a bit from Marius’ nature, but the result is the same: neither of the two could accept life in retirement. This warlike character served as the primary reason for both of their rise to power but it also hampered their ability to consolidate or lead private political lives, the former being more important for a king; the latter for a republican era statesman. It is for this reason that both men end up following their ultimately destructive course. This characteristic would mix with another destructive characteristic: their lust for power.

Both Pyrrhus and Marius seemed to have been guided by a vision of total supremacy over the world they lived in. From the very beginning of his career, Marius used his nature to impose himself upon the political institution that considered him out of place. Similarly, as soon as Pyrrhus attains some consolidation over his kingdom, he moves to expand. This characteristic, intertwined with their warlike character, created in them a figure that lusted for military power and could think of little other than expansion. For Marius this was especially so since what he lacked as a politician was compensated by his military prowess. This also made them figures of extreme aggression: neither of them could tolerate loss and were fixated on remaining at the top without ever putting much attention over what they were bringing about. Pyrrhus rashly entered Italy with the idea of conquering as far down as Africa and changed directions to Sicily as soon as he saw another opportunity to aggrandize himself. Ultimately he failed to secure any of his successes in either war and, so, lost. Marius could not content himself with five consulships and being declared a “Third Savior of Rome”; he took every opportunity he could to continue to hold and receive power. Both failed to take their limits into account and fell from their ongoing successes to one disaster after another, eventually bringing about their collapse. Plutarch emphasized this similarity throughout the Lives of the two men. “…what he won through feats of arms he lost by indulging in vain hopes…” (Pyrrhus.26) This summation of Pyrrhus can easily be applied to Marius.

Lastly, the two men were continuously hounded by a particular opponent throughout their careers, these opponents having been patrons early on. Marius gained significant ground through the help of Metellus, who was later to become a fierce opponents; while Pyrrhus helped to bring about the downfall of Demetrius, who originally aided his rise. In both stories the figures were eventually defeated but then replaced by a different threat, which brought about the defeat of the two: for Marius, this figure came as Sulla; while Pyrrhus was eventually outdone by Antigonus. The rivalry between the two plays out similarly. Although seemingly vain, this particular similarity is there for Plutarch to further solidify the connection between the two Lives.

In writing the Life of Marius and Pyrrhus, Plutarch is giving us a lesson in excess. None can say that these men lacked ability; and none can say that these men lacked intelligence. They were men raised in two periods full of war and chaos, where uncontrolled rivalry, aggression and ambition would help to or directly influence the fall of their particular states. If there was one thing that these men lacked was an awareness of limitation and this failure would ultimately destroy both of them. In the closing pages of the Life of Marius, Plutarch writes: “Over time, events trickle out of the minds of forgetful, thoughtless people, and so, since they retain and conserve nothing, the empty space within them that should be filled with good things is filled instead with hopes…” (Marius.46) It is Plutarch’s aim to fill that “empty space” with
examples so that we are mindful of the successes of others and their failure. The *Life of Marius* and the *Life of Pyrrhus* give us lessons on what characteristics can help bring about greatness; and how their extremes can destroy us.

**Bibliography**