

Names as portraits. The function of nick-names in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a preliminary introduction to some onomastic topics which appear in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. The interest of Plutarch in names and nick-names can be argued from many passages of his works where he deals with Greek and Latin onomastics: in the *Parallel Lives* references to family names, surnames and nick-names are remarkably frequent, and the paper offers a list of them. There is an interesting relationship between nick-names and portraits: Plutarch surely knew some of the sculpted portraits of the persons described in his *Lives* and probably used them as historical sources. Hence the importance of a dialogue between onomastics and art history in order to discover which portraits could be known at Plutarch's times and which of them were actually used by him for his descriptions.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to draw a preliminary introduction to some onomastic topics which appear in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

The interest of Plutarch in names and nick-names can be argued from many passages of his works where he deals with Greek and Latin onomastics; such interest is confirmed by a lost treatise of his, mentioned in the so-called Lampria Catalogue under the title Περὶ τῶν τριῶν ὀνομάτων, τί κύριον, where he deals with the *tria nomina* Latin onomastic system. The *Parallel Lives*, being the biographies of important men of the Greek and Roman world, offered a wide range of opportunities to discuss onomastic topics; as a matter of fact, references to family names, surnames and nick-names are remarkably frequent there. The first step of the present research, therefore, is to offer a list of passages where Plutarch deals with onomastics, especially with names and nick-names, in *Parallel Lives*. Place-names and names of gods and mythological heroes, even if often discussed by the author, will not be taken into account in this survey. The English translation is taken from Perrin (1914-1923).¹

2. The texts

The most important passages of the *Parallel Lives* devoted to names and nick-names are the following:

- 1) *Publicola*, I, 1: "Publicola [from *publicus* and *colere*] was so called later by the Roman people as a mark of honour, while his previous name was Valerius".
- 2) *Publicola*, 11, 5-7: "At that times the Romans did not use money very much; wealthy people owned big flocks of sheep instead. This is why the Romans used to call their patrimony *peculium*, from *pecus* ('cattle'), and on their oldest coins they used to reproduce an ox or a sheep or a pig. They named their sons *Suillius*, *Bubulcus*, *Caprarius* and *Porcius*".
- 3) *Publicola*, 16, 7: "Horace was surnamed *Coclites* because he had lost an eye during the war; or, according to others, because he had such a pug-nose that there was no separation

¹ For a complete bibliography see the website of the International Plutarch Society, which is continually under construction (<http://www.usu.edu/ploutarchos/plutbib.htm>).

between the two eyes-sockets, and his eyebrows formed a single line. The people wanted to call him *Cyclops*, but because of their bad pronunciation the use prevailed to call him *Coclitēs*".²

4) *Publicola*, 17, 4-5: "There was a burning brazier nearby, which had been prepared for a sacrifice of king Porsenna. Mucius held out his right hand over it and let it burn without a move. They say this is why they called him *Scevola*, which means 'left-handed'".

5) *Aristides*, 6, 1-2: "Of all his virtues, it was his justice that most impressed the multitude, because of its most continual and most general exercise. Wherefore, though poor and a man of the people, he acquired that most kingly and godlike surname of 'The Just'".

6) *Aristides*, 7, 1: "Now, to resume, it befell Aristides to be loved at first because of this surname, but afterwards to be jealously hated, especially when Themistocles set the story going among the multitude that Aristides had done away with the public courts of justice by his determining and judging everything in private, and that, without any one perceiving it, he had established for himself a monarchy".

7) *Cato*, 1, 3-4: "His third name was not Cato at first, but Priscus. Afterwards he got the surname of Cato for his great abilities. The Romans call a man who is wise and prudent, *catus*. As for his outward appearance, he had reddish hair, and keen grey eyes, as the author of the well-known epigram ill-naturedly gives us to understand: Red-haired, snapper and biter, his grey eyes flashing defiance, Porcius, come to the shades, back will be thrust by their Queen".

8) *Cimon*, 4, 4: "Now Miltiades, who had been condemned to pay a fine of fifty talents and confined till payment should be made, died in prison, and Cimon, thus left a mere stripling with his sister who was a young girl and unmarried, was of no account in the city at first. He had the bad name of being dissolute and bibulous, and of taking after his grandfather Cimon, who, they say, because of his simplicity, was dubbed *Coalemus*, or Booby".

9) *Lucullus*, 1, 1: "In the case of Lucullus, his grandfather was a man of consular rank, and his uncle on his mother's side was Metellus, surnamed *Numidicus*".

10) *Pericles*, 3, 3-7: "She [Pericles' mother], in her dreams, once fancied that she had given birth to a lion, and a few days after bore Pericles. His personal appearance was unimpeachable, except that his head was rather long and out of due proportion. For this reason the images of him, almost all of them, wear helmets, because the artists, as it would seem, were not willing to reproach him with deformity. The comic poets of Attica used to call him *Schinocephalus*, or 'Squill-head' (the squill is sometimes called *schinus*). So the comic poet Cratinus, in his *Cheirons*, says: 'Faction and Saturn, that ancient of days, were united in wedlock; their offspring was of all tyrants the greatest! He is called by the gods the head-compeller'. And again in his *Nemesis*: 'Come, Zeus! of guests and heads the Lord!' And Telecleides speaks of him as sitting on the acropolis in the greatest perplexity, 'now heavy of head, and now alone, from the eleven-couched chamber of his head, causing vast uproar to arise'. And Eupolis, in his *Demes*, having inquiries made about each one of the demagogues as they come up from Hades,³ says, when Pericles is called out last: 'The very head of those below hast thou now brought'".

11) *Pericles*, 8, 3-4: "It was from natural science, as the divine Plato says, that he 'acquired his loftiness of thought and perfectness of execution, in addition to his natural gifts', and by

² On the etymology of this name: Varro, *De Lingua Latina*, VII, 51.

³ The comic poet Eupolis, in the comedy mentioned here, shows four great politicians and generals, Solon, Miltiades, Aristides and Pericles, coming back from the underworld in order to restore Athens to its ancient glory.

applying what he learned to the art of speaking, he far excelled all other speakers. It was thus, they say, that he got his surname; though some suppose it was from the structures with which he adorned the city, and others from his ability as a statesman and a general, that he was called *Olympian*. It is not at all unlikely that his reputation was the result of the blending in him of many high qualities. But the comic poets of that day, who let fly, both in earnest and in jest, many shafts of speech against him, make it plain that he got this surname chiefly because of his diction; they spoke of him as ‘thundering’ and ‘lightening’ when he harangued his audience, and as ‘wielding a dread thunderbolt in his tongue’”.⁴

12) *Pericles*, 27, 3-4: “Ephorus says that Pericles actually employed siege-engines, in his admiration of their novelty, and that Artemon the engineer was with him there, who, since he was lame, and so had to be brought on a stretcher to the works which demanded his instant attention, was dubbed *Periphoretus*. Heracleides Ponticus, however, refutes this story out of the poems of Anacreon, in which Artemon Periphoretus is mentioned many generations before the Samian War and its events. And he says that Artemon was very luxurious in his life, as well as weak and panic-stricken in the presence of his fears, and therefore for the most part sat still at home, while two servants held a bronze shield over his head to keep anything from falling down upon it. Whenever he was forced to go abroad, he had himself carried in a little hammock which was *borne along* just above the surface of the ground. On this account he was called *Periphoretus*”.

13) *Pericles*, 39, 2: “And it seems to me that his otherwise puerile and pompous surname [*Olympios*] is rendered unobjectionable and becoming by this one circumstance, that it was so gracious a nature and a life so pure and undefiled in the exercise of sovereign power which were called Olympian, inasmuch as we do firmly hold that the divine rulers and kings of the universe are capable only of good, and incapable of evil”.

14) *Fabius Maximus*, 1, 1-4: “Some writers state that the first members of the family were called *Fodii* in ancient times, from their practice of taking wild beasts in pitfalls. For down to the present time *fossae* is the Latin for *ditches*, and *fodere* for *to dig*. In course of time, by a change of two letters, they were called *Fabii*. This family produced many great men, and from Rullus, the greatest of them, and on this account called Maximus by the Romans, the Fabius Maximus of whom we now write was fourth in descent. He had the surname of *Verrucosus* from a physical peculiarity, namely, a small wart growing above his lip: and that of *Ovicula*, which signifies *Lambkin*, was given him because of the gentleness and gravity of his nature when he was yet a child. Indeed, the calmness and silence of his demeanour, the great caution with which he indulged in childish pleasures, the slowness and difficulty with which he learned his lessons, and his contented submissiveness in dealing with his comrades, led those who knew him superficially to suspect him of something like foolishness and stupidity”.

15) *Nicias*, 2, 1: “I may say of Nicias, in the first place, what Aristotle wrote, namely, that the three best citizens of Athens [...] were Nicias the son of Niceratus, Thucydides the son of Melesias, and Theramenes the son of Hagnon. However, this was true of the last in lesser degree than of the other two, because he has been flouted for inferior parentage as an alien from Ceos; and on account of his not being steadfast, but ever trying to court both sides in his political career, was nicknamed *Cothurnus*”.⁵

⁴ See Aristophanes, *Acharn.*, 530.

⁵ The *cothurnus*, the kind of boot used by tragic actors, could be put on on the left or the right foot indifferently. The nick-name is therefore referred to someone who changes his mind easily.

16) *Crassus*, 7, 1: “Now it vexed him [Crassus] that Pompey was successful in his campaigns, and was called *Magnus* (that is, *Great*) by his fellow-citizens. And once when some one said: ‘Pompeius Magnus is coming’, Crassus fell to laughing and asked: ‘How great is he?’”.

17) *Caius Marcius*, 11, 2-6: Gaius Marcius got his third name *Coriolanus* after the conquest of the Volscan city of Corioli. “From this it is perfectly clear that *Caius* was the proper name; that the second name, in this case *Marcius*, was the common name of family or clan; and that the third name was adopted subsequently, and bestowed because of some exploit, or fortune, or bodily feature, or special excellence in a man. So the Greeks used to give surnames from an exploit, as for instance, *Soter* and *Callinicus*; or from a bodily feature, as *Physcon* and *Grypus*; or from a special excellence, as *Euergetes* and *Philadelphus*; or from some good fortune, as *Eudaemon* [...]. And some of their kings have actually had surnames given them in mockery, as Antigonus *Doson* and Ptolemy *Lathyrus*. Surnames of this sort were even more common among the Romans. For instance, one of the Metelli was called *Diadematus*, because for a long time he suffered from a running sore and went about with a bandage on his forehead; another member of this family was called *Celer*, because he exerted himself to give the people funeral games of gladiators within a few days of his father's death, and the speed and swiftness of his preparations excited astonishment. And at the present day some of them are named from casual incidents at their birth, *Proculus*, for instance, if a child is born when his father is away from home; or *Postumus*, if after his death; and when one of twin children survives, while the other dies, he is called *Vopiscus*. Moreover, from bodily features they not only bestow such surnames as *Sulla*, *Niger*, and *Rufus*, but also such as *Caecus* and *Claudius*. And they do well thus to accustom men to regard neither blindness nor any other bodily misfortune as a reproach or a disgrace, but to answer to such names as though their own. This topic, however, would be more fittingly discussed elsewhere”.⁶

18) *Demosthenes*, 4, 1: “Demosthenes, the father of Demosthenes, belonged to the better class of citizens, as Theopompus tells us, and was surnamed *Makairopoiòs*, ‘Cutler’, because he had a large factory and slaves who were skilled workmen in this business [the production of knives and swords]”.

19) *Demosthenes*, 4, 5-8: “From the first [Demosthenes] was lean and sickly, and his opprobrious surname of *Batalus* is said to have been given him by the boys in mockery of his physique. Now *Batalus*, as some say, was an effeminate flute-player, and Antiphanes wrote a farce in which he held him up to ridicule for this. But some speak of *Batalus* as a poet who wrote voluptuous verses and drinking songs. And it appears that one of the parts of the body which it is not decent to name was at that time called *Batalus* by the Athenians. But the name of *Argàs* (for they tell us that Demosthenes had this nickname also) was given him either with reference to his manners, which were harsh and savage, the snake being called *argàs* by some of the poets; or with reference to his way of speaking, which was distressing to his hearers, *Argas* being the name of a composer of vile and disagreeable songs”.

20) *Cicero*, 1, 3-6: “The first member of the family who was surnamed *Cicero* seems to have been worthy of note, and for that reason his posterity did not reject the surname, but were fond of it, although many made it a matter of raillery. For *cicer* is the Latin name for chick-pea, and this ancestor of Cicero, as it would seem, had a faint dent in the end of his nose like the cleft of a chick-pea, from which he acquired his surname. Cicero himself, however, whose Life I now write, when he first entered public life and stood for office and his friends thought he ought to drop or change the name, is said to have replied with spirit that he would strive to make the name of Cicero more illustrious than such names as Scaurus

⁶ Plutarch had written a lost treatise on this subject, Περὶ τῶν τριῶν ὀνομάτων, τί κύριον, as mentioned above.

or Catulus. Moreover, when he was quaestor in Sicily and was dedicating to the gods a piece of silver plate, he had his first two names inscribed thereon, the Marcus and the Tullius, but instead of the third, by way of jest, he ordered the artificer to engrave a chick-pea in due sequence. This, then, is what is told about his name”.

21) *Cicero*, 5, 2: “During the first part of his time at Rome he conducted himself with caution, was reluctant to sue for office, and was therefore neglected, being called *Greek* and *Scholar*, those names which the low and ignorant classes at Rome were wont to give so readily”.

22) *Cicero*, 29, 5: “There was also a general belief that Clodius had intercourse with his other two sisters, of whom Tertia was the wife of Marcius Rex, and Clodia of Metellus Celer; the latter was called *Quadrantaria*, because one of her lovers had put copper coins into a purse and sent them to her for silver, and the smallest copper coin was called ‘*quadrans*’”.

23) *Focio*, 10, 1: “There was a certain Archibiades, nicknamed Laconistes [‘admirer of Sparta’], because, in imitation of the Spartans, he let his beard grow to an extravagant size, always wore a short cloak, and had a scowl on his face”.

24) *Cato*, 10, 1: “Athenodorus, surnamed *Cordylion*”.

25) *Dion*, 31, 1: “Hipparinus [was] the name of Dion's son. Timaeus, it is true, says he was called *Aretaeus*, from his mother Arete”.

26) *Brutus*, 12, 5: A cousin of this Brutus, Decimus Iunius Brutus, was called ‘Albinus’: “Then it was decided to bring over to their cause the other Brutus, surnamed *Albinus*”.

27) *Brutus*, 49, 3: “Then, of a sudden, a man who was a good soldier and had been conspicuously honoured for his bravery by Brutus, rode out of the ranks and went over to the enemy; his name was *Camulatus*”.⁷

28) *Aemilius*, 2, 1: “That the Aemilii were one of the ancient and patrician houses at Rome, most writers agree. The first of them, and the one who gave his surname to the family, was Mamercus, a son of Pythagoras the philosopher, who received the surname of *Aemilius* for the ‘grace’ and charm of his discourse (αιμυλία)”.

29) *Aemilius*, 8, 1-3: “Antigonus [*Monophthalmos*], who was the most powerful of Alexander's generals and successors, and acquired for himself and his line the title of King, had a son, Demetrius [*Poliorketes*], and his son was Antigonus surnamed *Gonatas*. His son in turn was Demetrius, who, after reigning himself for a short time, died, leaving a son Philip still in his boyhood. The leading Macedonians, fearing the anarchy which might result, called in Antigonus, a cousin of the dead king [...]. He received the surname of *Doson*, which implied that he was given to promising but did not perform his engagements”.

30) *Aemilius*, 25, 2-4: “When the Romans had conquered the Tarquins, who had taken the field against them with the Latins, two tall and beautiful men were seen at Rome a little while after, who brought direct tidings from the army. These were conjectured to be the Dioscuri. The first man who met them in front of the spring in the forum, where they were cooling their horses, which were reeking with sweat, was amazed at their report of the victory. Then, we are told, they touched his beard with their hands, quietly smiling the while, and the hair of it was changed at once from black to red, a circumstance which gave credence to their story, and fixed upon the man the surname of *Ahenobarbus*, that is to say, ‘Bronze-beard’”.

⁷ *Camulatus* derives probably from the name of the Celtic war god *Camulus*.

- 31) *Pelopida*, 20, 5: “Now, in the plain of Leuctra are the tombs of the daughters of Scedasus, who are called from the place *Leuctridae*, for they had been buried there, after having been ravished by Spartan strangers”.
- 32) *Marcellus*, 1, 1-2: “Marcus Claudius, who was five times consul of the Romans, was a son of Marcus, as we are told, and, according to Poseidonius, was the first of his family to be called *Marcellus*, which means *Martial*. For he was by experience a man of war”.
- 33) *Alexander*, 70, 4-5: “Antigenes, the *One-eyed*, was a splendid soldier, and while he was still a young man and Philip was besieging Perinthus, though a bolt from a catapult smote him in the eye, he would not consent to have the bolt taken out nor give up fighting until he had repelled the enemy and shut them up within their walls”.
- 34) **Demetrius*,⁸ 2, 2: “Demetrius [*Poliorketes*], the surviving son, had not the height of his father, though he was a tall man, but he had features of rare and astonishing beauty, so that no painter or sculptor ever achieved a likeness of him. They had at once grace and strength, dignity and beauty, and there was blended with their youthful eagerness a certain heroic look and a kingly majesty that were hard to imitate”.
- 35) *Demetrius*, 10, 5: “The spot where Demetrius first alighted from his chariot they consecrated and covered with an altar, which they styled the altar of Demetrius *Alighter*” (*Cataibàtes*, i. e. ‘who descends from the sky’, name usually given only to gods like Zeus or Hermes).
- 36) *Demetrius*, 24, 3: “I may not pass over the modesty and virtue of Democles. He was still a young boy, and it did not escape the notice of Demetrius that he had a surname which indicated his comeliness; for he was called Democles the Beautiful (*o kalòs*)”.
- 37) *Demetrius*, 53, 8: “The children left by Demetrius were these: Antigonus and Stratonice, by Phila; two named Demetrius, one who was surnamed *Leptòs*, ‘the Thin’ [...]”.
- 38) *Antony*, 18, 8: “And besides these, he [Antony] left to guard Gaul six legions with Varius, one of his intimates and boon companions, who was surnamed *Cotylon*” (from the Greek *kotyle*, a wine cup).
- 39) *Antony*, 60, 5: “Now, Antony associated himself with Heracles in lineage, and with Dionysus in the mode of life which he adopted, as I have said, and he was called the New Dionysus”.
- 40) *Pyrrhus*, 1, 2: “Neoptolemus the son of Achilles, bringing a people with him, got possession of the country [Epeirus] for himself, and left a line of kings descending from him. These were called after him *Pyrrhidae*; for he had the surname of *Pyrrhus* in his boyhood, and of his legitimate sons [...] one was named by him *Pyrrhus*”.
- 41) **Pyrrhus*, 3, 6: “In the aspect of his countenance Pyrrhus had more of the terror than of the majesty of kingly power. He had not many teeth, but his upper jaw was one continuous bone, on which the usual intervals between the teeth were indicated by slight depressions”.
- 42) *Pyrrhus*, 10, 1: “After this battle Pyrrhus returned to his home rejoicing in the splendour which his fame and lofty spirit had brought him; and he was given the surname of *Eagle* by the Epeirots”.

⁸ The quotations introduced by * are not strictly referring to a name or a nick-name, but contain physical descriptions of the person involved and are therefore included in the list because they can give important information concerning the relationship between the verbal portrait contained in the *Lives* and the artistic portraits of the person.

43) *Marius*, 1, 1-5: “Of a third name for Caius Marius we are ignorant, as we are in the case of Quintus Sertorius the subduer of Spain, and of Lucius Mummius the captor of Corinth; for Mummius received the surname of *Achaïcus* from his great exploit, as Scipio received that of *Africanus*, and Metellus that of *Macedonicus*. From this circumstance particularly Poseidonius thinks to confute those who hold that the third name is the Roman proper name, as, for instance, *Camillus*, *Marcellus*, or *Cato*; for if that were so, he says, then those with only two names would have had no proper name at all. But it escapes his notice that his own line of reasoning, if extended to women, robs them of their proper names; for no woman is given the first name, which Poseidonius thinks was the proper name among the Romans. Moreover, of the other two names, one was common to the whole family, as in the case of the *Pompeii*, the *Manlii*, or the *Cornelii* (just as a Greek might speak of the *Heracleidae* or the *Pelopidae*), and the other was a *cognomen* or epithet, given with reference to their natures or their actions, or to their bodily appearances or defects, *Macrinus*, for example, or *Torquatus*, or *Sulla* (like the Greek *Mnemon*, *Grypus*, or *Callinicus*). However, in these matters the irregularity of custom furnishes many topics for discussion”.

44) **Marius*, 2, 1: “As for the personal appearance of Marius, we have seen a marble statue of him at Ravenna in Gaul, and it very well portrays the harshness and bitterness of character which were ascribed to him”.

45) *Artaxerxes*, 1, 3: “The first Artaxerxes, pre-eminent among the kings of Persia for gentleness and magnanimity, was surnamed *Longimanus*, because his right hand was longer than his left, and was the son of Xerxes; the second Artaxerxes, the subject of this Life, was surnamed *Memor*, or ‘Mindful’, and was the grandson of the first [...]. Cyrus took his name from Cyrus the old, who, as they say, was named from the sun; for *Cyrus* is the Persian word for sun”.

46) *Agides and Cleomenes*, 9, 2: “Cassandra, daughter of Priamus [...] was nick-named *Pasifaa* because she used to show her oracles to everybody”.

47) *Tiberius and Caius Graccus*, 8, 5: “Caius Laelius, the comrade of Scipio [...], received the surname of *Wise* or *Prudent* (for the Latin word *sapiens* would seem to have either meaning)”.

48) *Lycurgus*, 3, 6: Birth of Lycurgus’ son: “In this manner he managed to bring the woman to her full time, and when he learned that she was in labour, he sent attendants and watchers for her delivery, with orders, if a girl should be born, to hand it over to the women, but if a boy, to bring it to him, no matter what he was doing. And it came to pass that as he was at supper with the chief magistrates, a male child was born, and his servants brought the little boy to him. He took it in his arms, as we are told, and said to those who were at table with him, ‘A king is born unto you, O men of Sparta’; then he laid it down in the royal seat and named it *Charilaus*, or ‘People’s Joy’, because all present were filled with joy, admiring as they did his lofty spirit and his righteousness”.

49) *Sulla*, 2, 1: “His personal appearance, in general, is given by his statues; but the gleam of his gray eyes, which was terribly sharp and powerful, was rendered even more fearful by the complexion of his face. This was covered with coarse blotches of red, interspersed with white. For this reason, they say, his surname *Sulla* [‘reddish’] was given him because of his complexion, and it was in allusion to this that a scurrilous jester at Athens made the verse: ‘Sulla is a mulberry sprinkled o’er with meal’”.

3. Names, nick-names and portraits

Plutarch takes every possible opportunity to discuss the Latin onomastics system, or the etymologies of names and nick-names. Every now and then his opinion is far from being accepted by modern philology, but this is not a subject we can deal with here. Examples of his interest in onomastics are quotations no. 17 and 43 (onomastics in general, and in particular the use of third names in Latin), and especially no. 2, 3, 7, 8, 12, 14, 22, 27, 28, 30, 32, 35, 38, 48, 49 (etymologies).

As far as the names and nick-names mentioned in the *Lives* are concerned, they can be listed according to the following categories:

a) *Names and nick-names referring to the character of the person*: quotations no. 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 21, 27, 28, 29, 47.

b) *Names and nick-names referring to the physical aspect of the person*: quotations no. 3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 19, 20, 24, 26, 29, 30, 33, 36, 37, 49.

c) *Names and nick-names derived from specific acts and from the behaviour of the person*: quotations no. 9, 14, 17, 33, 34, 35, 42, 43, 48.

d) *Names and nick-names depending on the profession and the usual activity of the person*: quotations no. 18, 22, 23, 32, 38, 46.

e) *Names and nick-names descending from the names of a person's ancestor, relative, place of birth or of residence*: quotations no. 25, 31, 39, 40, 45.

f) *Names and nick-names rooted in ancient traditions and uses*: quotation no. 2.

The attention of Plutarch for names and nick-names shows that in his eyes they are not secondary details, but offer a synthesis of an entire biography. Plutarch writes in his *Life of Aemilius* (1, 1): “I began the writing of my *Lives* for the sake of others, but I find that I am going on with the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror [...]”. The biography itself works as a mirror (Momigliano, 1971; Peter, 1865); *Lives* reproduce in every detail not only the physical aspect of the person, but also his character, his virtues and faults, his everyday behaviour. The biography aims at rendering all this through words; in a similar way, visual arts, and specifically the art of portraiture, aim at this result through images. Names and nick-names are a sort of linguistic summary of both the moral and the physical aspect of a person, while the portrait carves these same aspects in stone. Plutarch, being a Greek who works in the Roman world, knows and shares the spirit of both Greek and Roman portraits. For the Greeks, a portrait is an abstract and ideal reproduction of a person, where all his life is contained. The portrait does not reproduce the person in every detail; it does not even bring to perfection the appearance of a person (it is not an ideal reproduction in that sense); rather, it tries to convey the true spirit of that person, in a moment which actually never existed, because it sums up all the different moments of a person's life. For the Romans, on the contrary, the portrait is like a photograph taken in a specific instant of a man's life: the picture is faithful, sometimes even merciless. The Greek portrait is the abstract sum of different moments of an entire life; the Roman portrait is the scrupulous and realistic reproduction of one single, significant moment of that life. The difference between the two consists mainly in a different approach to time.

In Plutarch's *Lives*, nick-names have the functions of both Greek and Roman portraits: they are a synthesis of all characteristics of a person (like the Greek portraits), but the result of such a synthesis is as vivid and realistic as the detailed reproduction of a single moment (like

the Roman portraits). If we compare the portraits that we know to the corresponding nick-names discussed by Plutarch, we have an idea of such similarity. Three examples can be chosen from the list of texts mentioned above: they refer to Pericles, Marius and Sulla.

For Pericles, we can compare the description of quotation no. 10 in the list with the most famous Pericles's portraits, recognizable in the type of the Sala delle Muse at the Vatican. The shape of his head, which "was rather long and out of due proportion", is alluded to by the helmet: "For this reason the images of him, almost all of them, wear helmets, because the artists, as it would seem, were not willing to reproach him with deformity", says Plutarch. Hence his nick-name '*Schinocephalus*', or *Squill-head*, used especially by comic poets.

For Marius, too, Plutarch expressly finds a correspondence between his portrait and his character (see quotation no. 44: "we have seen a marble statue of him at Ravenna in Gaul, and it very well portrays the harshness and bitterness of character which were ascribed to him"). Such "harshness and bitterness" is shown also by other portraits of Marius, like the one at the Glyptothek in Munich.

Also for Sulla an explicit reference to the statues is made by Plutarch himself: "His personal appearance, in general, is given by his statues", he says (see quotation no. 49). The fact that "the gleam of his gray eyes, which was terribly sharp and powerful, was rendered even more fearful by the complexion of his face" is confirmed by portraits like the one at the Glyptothek in Munich, where the "gleam of the eyes" actually draws our attention.

4. Portraits as historical sources

Plutarch seems to recognize that names and nick-names can be a relevant instrument for his historical work: they can be considered as a synthesis of the peculiarities of a person, and offer a sort of linguistic parallel or *pendant* to the artistic portraits carved in marble. Plutarch, as we have seen, surely had in mind some of these portraits while writing the biographies of his heroes, since many of them died long before he started his work (Fuhrmann, 1964; Svoboda, 1934). Nick-names, especially those referring to the physical aspect of a person, actually needed the support of a portrait to be discussed and explained as Plutarch does.⁹ Portraits could have been significant historical sources for him: hence the importance of a dialogue between onomastics and art history in order to discover which portraits could be known in Plutarch's times, which of them were actually used by him as a source for his descriptions, and what the relationship between the nick-names transmitted by the written tradition and those reflected by the artists' works was (Wordman, 1971). This field of research, still largely neglected (as shown by Traglia, 1992), could reserve some surprising result if it were taken into consideration in a systematic way.

The power that Plutarch sees in names in general is clearly evident in a passage from the *Life of Pyrrhus* (11, 4-5) that I shall quote as a conclusion: "That night Pyrrhus dreamed that he was called by Alexander the Great, and that when he answered the call he found the king lying on a couch, but met with kindly speech and friendly treatment from him, and received a promise of his ready aid and help. 'And how, O King,' Pyrrhus ventured to ask, 'when thou art sick, canst thou give me aid and help?' 'My name itself will give it,' said the king".

⁹ Plutarch himself insists on the correspondence between portraits in the visual arts and portraits in words: "As painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests" (*Alexander*, 1, 1).

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