

Panagiotis Androulakis, *Conspiracy Narrative and Fractured*

*Community in Plutarch's Galba*¹

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Abstract

Conspiracy, as a socio-political phenomenon, is intertwined with a community. This paper is focused on the narrative analysis of the episode of Otho's conspiracy against the government of Galba in 69 AD, as presented in the homonymous life written by Plutarch. The contrast, as well as the similarity, between these passages and the ones describing the coup d'état of the praetorian guards against Nymphidius Sabinus, is of great importance to outline the military and civil disorder during the execution of a conspiracy. Like Roman historians, Plutarch seeks to fill narrative gaps that reflect secrecy, one of the basic elements of conspiracies. Meanwhile, narrative techniques, such as the management of time and space, the narrator's focus etc., highlight Plutarch's attitude towards these socio-political events. My aim is to show the function of a conspiracy as a divider of the society, military and/or civil.

According to *OED* a 'conspiracy consists in the agreement of two or more persons to do an illegal act, or to do a lawful act by unlawful means'.² It should be noted that a conspiracy is also pervaded by secrecy, without which the risk of failure is high, because it is a vital element of their formation, but causes some problems: clues about the conspiracy stay hidden, thus making its narration inconsistent. The fact that only two—or more persons— form a

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² *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00048049;jsessionid=0389830C953F30EA35E2A97FD896F289> (accessed 21 February 2021).

conspiracy makes things even more complicated, especially when they stay anonymous, or the sources are confusing concerning their names. On the other hand, the conspirators' agenda is so big, that with the assassination of a politician, it might end up with the state overthrown. Finally, it is tricky to describe a conspiracy morally, if we think about, for example, a conspiracy against a usurper, or a malicious person.

Conspiracies are more or less the same in antiquity as in modern times. The question is how they are recognised in a text, when it is not clearly stated by the author. A conspiracy narrative in a text is identified mostly through specific vocabulary.³ The meaning of the words may vary according to context; for instance, in an athletic or ritualistic context *συνόμνυμι* (vow together) is considered differently than in the context of a conspiracy, where sometimes a vow between the conspirators seals a conspiracy and legitimizes it in the eyes of men and gods. Another aspect of identifying a conspiracy in a text is the manipulation of time and space: most conspiracies are carried out during night-time, in private places. This does not mean that the conspirators would not be bold enough to perform their deed publicly in broad daylight. According to Pagán,⁴ a Roman historian's purpose is to fill in the gaps of earlier sources or of what he had learnt through oral tradition. In order to accomplish that, the historian uses characterisation techniques to determine the conspirators' characters and motives, but he also tries to explain the cause and effect of the conspiracy. The final —sometimes full— account of a conspiracy leads to its revelation. Through this, the historian teaches the readers or the audience to perceive the conspiracies as an example to avoid.

³ For the vocabulary of conspiracy, see Roisman 2006: 2-6.

⁴ Pagán 2005: 30-32.

This paper examines with the conspiracy against Galba and the one against Nymphidius Sabinus, both of which occurred in 69 CE and are part of *Galba*, a life by Plutarch's collection commonly known as *Vitae Caesarum*.⁵ Already in the preface, Plutarch states his aim: to record the πραγματικῆν ἱστορίαν (actual, or rather formal history), meaning only the events concerning the emperor during his emperorship. Plutarch tries to highlight the danger that lurks in ἔργα (action), when λόγος (reason) does not control πάθη (emotions),⁶ and to confirm generally accepted moral values by demonstrating the military madness and the (in)capacity of contemporary leaders.⁷ All of Plutarch's Greek and Roman examples in the preface emphasise the different societies' and/or leaders' conflicts about power and dominance, which lead to the society's disruption, especially of Rome, which as –Plutarch states– ‘was torn apart, and collapsed upon itself in many places’ (§1.4).

1. Conspirators and Defenders

Only a few things should be said about the emperor Galba, who ruled from the 8th of June 68 to the 15th of January 69 BCE. He claimed that he was from the family of the Servii, and distantly related to Livia Drusila and the poet Catullus, but nothing is stated as certain by ancient biographers. Galba was the most moderate and wanted emperor, as he was the best option after the

5 Syme 1980: 105. *Galba*, as well as its ‘sequel’ *Otho*, have been condemned by former scholars, such as Leo Strauss and Geiger (See Bowersock 1998: 196.; Geiger 2017: 121, 124; Geiger 2005: 231-232. Nevertheless, these two lives are the earliest source about the ‘Year of the Four Emperors’, thus 68/69 CE.

⁶ *Pathos* here means negative emotions in general, but in other passages it means rage or anger. For more on the distinction between *logos* and *pathos* in Plutarch, see Duff 1999.

⁷ Duff 1999: 29 and 144-145. On military behaviour in *Galba*, see de Blois 2008.

fall of Nero, only in the beginning. His moderation, or rather his parsimony, combined with his counselors' advices, led him to despotic behavior. Namely, not only Galba rejected to give the promised *donativum* to the praetorians who supported him on his succession, but he also ordered the slaughter of a bunch of seamen who demanded their rights as soldiers (Nero had them form a legion), right before entering Rome (§15.3). This change in character led people of high rank and/or lower class to dislike Galba, and to support the conspiracy against him a few months later.

The reason that a conspiracy was formed against Galba is founded on the disappointment of Otho (§23). He believed that Galba would name him his heir to the throne, supported by Vinius, but Galba chose Piso. During the ceremony for Piso to be named heir, Otho was in an emotional tumult: he felt resentment for Galba's rejection, and because Titus Vinius reneged on his promise to support him;⁸ his fear for Piso's future payback was also apparent. Friends of Tigellinus and Nymphidius Savinus –people of lower ethical principles (ἐν τιμῇ γεγονότων ἀπερριμμένοι τότε καὶ ταπεινὰ πράττοντες)– reignited Otho's hope for the throne, by standing by him with compassion and urging him to act with them. Notice again the compound verbs: this time with the first part being the preposition συν- (συναχθόμενοι, συνεπιστένοντες, συναγανάκτου), which denote a collective emotional experience that rallies the potential conspirators. Only two of them are named: optio Veturius and tesserarius Barbius (§24.1). The others might be women and (former) Senators who had previously supported Nymphidius (§9.5) on his attempt to overthrow Galba.

⁸ See §21, where it is mentioned that Vinius promised to support Otho for the adoption, only if Otho married his daughter, Crispina.

Nymphidius Savinus, the praefectus Urbis of Rome, fearing that Galba would demote him when he returned to Rome, decided to dethrone him by forming a conspiracy against him, or as Plutarch points out in the preface, ‘by transforming the most beautiful act, the desertion of Nero, into treason with bribery’; he promised a big *donativum*⁹ to the praetorians who would help him. Nymphidius’ conspiracy failed due to a latent counter-conspiracy by centurion Antonius Honoratus and the praetorians (§14). He heard about the conspiracy late in the afternoon and rebuked the praetorians for the consecutive overthrows of the emperors. Besides pointing Nero’s crimes to justify their former conspiracy, Antonius used one last argument: ‘Shall we then sacrifice Galba right after Nero, and by electing the son of Nymphidia, kill the son of Livia, like we did with the son of Agrippina?’ Honoratus’ point is based on the contrast between Nymphidius’ lowness,¹⁰ and that of Galba’s noble lineage. Honoratus is successful and the soldiers raise a shout, which substitutes the renewal of the oath of allegiance to the emperor. This common opinion is denoted by the use of compound verbs with the first part being the preposition προσ- (προσέθεντο, προσιόντες), which show that the soldiers became of one mind. The soldiers have changed their mind once again (μετέστησαν).

Onomastus, a freedman of Otho, played a leading role. He used bribery and promises to persuade and concentrate all those who were eager to form a conspiracy against the emperor. Plutarch does not analyse Onomastus’ means

⁹ *Donativum* was a gift of money given by the (new) emperor to his Praetorian Guard or to the legionnaires for gratitude for their service.

¹⁰ See §9.1-3. Plutarch refers to an anecdote about Nymphidius’ mother (Nymphidia, the daughter of a freedman and a tailor) and his father, probably an unknown gladiator, Martianus.

of persuasion. On the contrary, the biographer slows the narrative time down and states that Onomastus needed only six days to convert the praetorians (μεταστῆσαι <παντά>πασιν) (§23.2-3). It should be pointed here that the praetorian camp is referred to as healthy (ὕγιαῖνον στρατόπεδον). In §14.6, the *metastasis* has the same meaning, but the essence of the act differs: Honoratus actuated the soldiers to act positively, whereas Onomastus did the opposite, thus being implied that the small community of soldiers is unhealthy. In this way, Onomastus may be thought like the parasite which has polluted a healthy body,¹¹ as well as the chess master who moves the pawns, since he was also the one who cued for Otho to begin for the execution of the conspiracy on the 15th of January (§24.6).

Among the other eponymous conspirators were also men of various military offices. First, Julius Atticus, one of Galba's guards, who arrived on the Palatine blandishing his bloodstained sword and claiming that he had slaughtered the enemy, thereby disproving the news (θροῦς) that Otho infiltrated the praetorian camp (§26.2). Secondly, Attilius Virgilio, who threw the *vexillum*¹² of Galba to the ground,¹³ as soon as he heard the praetorian horsemen and hoplites arriving at the Forum (§26.7). Finally, as it seems, Plutarch's sources are diverging on the name of the one who slaughtered Galba, because he cannot name one; it might have been Terentius, or Camurius, or Lecanius (§27.3). Plutarch is only sure about Fabius Fabullus who beheaded Galba, raised his head from the hair, impaled it on a spear, and

¹¹ This view is based on the lexicological relevancy between the medical *metastasis* (used mostly for cancer) and its plain meaning, change of attitude, and the metonymy of body as a military force with the head as the leader.

¹² Military emblem with a depiction of Galba, see Tac. *Hist.* 1.41.1

¹³ This move evokes the deposition of Nero's statues, after he was affirmed dead. This metaphorical deposition of Galba foreshadows his fatal fall in the end.

carried it around the Forum, like Agave (§27.4).¹⁴ Plutarch is also sure about Piso's slaughterer, Murcus, who beheaded him in the temple of Vesta (§27.6). On the contrary, there is Sempronius Densus, 'the only man that the sun saw among thousands to be worthy of the Roman authority', who tried to restrain the praetorians from attacking Galba's carriage, using his *vitis*, a vine-stock used as a symbol of power. The praetorians' *ἄλογον πάθος* (uncontrollable anger) overruns every form of power, while Sempronius' *fides* to the emperor is not enough to save him from his fellow-soldiers' fatal blows on the limbs (§26.10).

As it is shown above, the members of a conspiracy vary. In these conspiracies, the masterminds of them are inspired by negative emotions – resentment, hatred, and fear of a future situation, but all the others' goals are not specified. It is also observed that a conspiracy does not only 'infect' the lower or the higher ranks of the army, but it has a tremendous impact on them. That explains why a simple symbol of power is less effective compared to the rhetorical use of a social mark, as is someone's lineage. It is quite unusual that Plutarch reconstructs the words of the centurion and uses the female indicator to define the origins of the three conspiracy victims to sooth the soldiers' feelings and induce them to agree with him. Women and men take part in a conspiracy for their own personal gain, but the interest is focused in their social status. As the times passed by, women in Rome had a role in politics mostly behind the curtains, while freedmen had more advantages than during kingship times. On the other hand, instead of being the means to the end,

¹⁴ For the tragic element of the scene, see Georgiadou 2014 and Ash 1997.

former slaves played a leading role in a conspiracy, perhaps because they had political rights¹⁵.

2. The conspiracy

In the first case, Nymphidius –confused by the soldiers' shouts– arrived at the semi-illuminated praetorian camp confident about his accession. The gates were shut, he saw the walls manned, went in, and heard the soldiers cheering Galba's name, so he did the same. Instantly, someone launched a spear against him, but Septimius protected him. Nymphidius was chased around the camp, but he was finally slaughtered inside a soldier's tent. In the second case, while Otho was descending from the Palatine towards the praetorian camp, more and more people were added to his party flourishing their swords. Otho and his supporters infiltrated the praetorian camp, while Galba insisted on more sacrifices to reverse the outcome, a clear irreverence. The rumour came that Otho infiltrated the camp and Vinus tried to prevent Galba from going to the Forum, against Celsus and Laco's advice, who believed that it was best for the emperor to assert his authority. Galba believed Atticus' lies and made his way towards the Forum, as mentioned above. On his way there, a rumour arrived that Otho was successful in his venture.

As Plutarch states (§26.3), the roads leading to the Forum and the balconies over it were crowded: the slaughter of the emperor was to be a spectacle of some sort. His carriage was in constant oscillation, while some Roman citizens shouted at him to return to the Palatine and others to move on. Galba arrived at the Forum at the same time as the conspirators.

¹⁵ See §7.6 for Icelus whom Galba promoted to cavalryman, with the institution of *restitutio natalium*, even though he was a freedman. On freedmen, see further Crook 1967: 36-37, 45, 50-51.

Immediately afterwards, Galba's carriage and himself fell to the ground, next to Lacus Curtius. It should be noted that Galba fell literally and metaphorically next to that place, a monument of Roman heritage and pride.¹⁶

Everyone was silent, only Galba, tilting his neck, said his last words calmly: 'If this is for the best for the Populus Romanus' (§27.1).

In both cases Plutarch uses a form of *teichoscopia*. He describes both scenes firstly from the protagonist's viewpoint, and then from the viewers' perspective. Notice the verbs used for Nymphidius and Galba: ἰδὼν (saw) and ἀπήντησε (come across) respectively. The difference between them is spotted on the development of Nymphidius' slaughter, it being like a part of a tragedy: it is executed in private, and the dead is dragged outside, like with an *ekkyklema* on the orchestra, but this time the body was dragged and put in the center of the camp –at a fenced spot– to be seen by everyone the next day. In the case of the conspiracy against Galba, his body and Piso's were already hanged headless at the Forum, still in their senatorial gowns for people to see them, before the *Senatus Consultum* had gathered to name Otho emperor of the Roman Empire. Earlier in the text, a form of *teichoscopia* is used again, but this time, not only to make the assassination of the emperor to be seen by everyone, but also to dissociate the citizens from the conspirators, since the citizens on the balconies were uninitiated in the conspiracy. It is remarkable though, that Plutarch chooses to use the same verb, βοῶ (shout), both for the perpetrators and the citizens, a technique that intensifies the agitation of the

¹⁶ Lacus Curtius was named either after a Sabine warrior, Mettius Curtius (Livy vii.6), or a young hippeas, Marcus Curtius, who self-sacrificed in the pit to reverse a curse on Rome (ibid), or Gaius Curtius Philo, who dedicated the spot to the gods due to a thunder strike, which dug the pit (Varro *Ling.* 5.150).

situation, thus grouping everyone together under the same reception of the conspiracy.

Conclusion

The similarities between the two conspiracies are based on the element of surprise and deceit, which in turn are covered by secrecy, while the victim of each conspiracy is misled by a sound or noise, which wrongly confirms the expectation, or rather their will. In the end, an anonymous conspirator from the army leads the victim to his death. Conversely, the differences between them are based on social factors. The uniformity of the soldiers in the first conspiracy contradicts the diversity of them in the second. The fact that Plutarch characterises the conspirators through their military rank, is not only a mark to identify the characters, but also to indicate the expanse of Otho's conspiracy in all military ranks and social levels, as well as to make a distinction between conspirators and simple viewers. The latter are indicated through the technique of *teichoscopia* in the case of Otho's conspiracy, but in the case of the conspiracy against Nymphidius, *teichoscopia* is used to unify the conspirators for a specific cause. Furthermore, the victims' social status is consistent with the place of their slaughter, as well as with the dynamics of awareness not only of the victim, but also of the act itself. A potential conspirator's slaughter is not as remarkable as the public slaughter of the emperor, which has severe impact on the Roman Empire. The mutual exposure of the victims' dead bodies makes the act itself official, and it teaches a lesson mostly to the readers, through an example to avoid.

It seems, then, that only members of a conspiracy are unified, while they only differ in terms of social status or rank, whereas they are simultaneously

diverging from the mass; the fracturing of the society is the result of their act. Unaware of the outcome of the event, people's opinions are divided, thereby deviating from the common standpoint, while others are forced to act contrary to social and political conditions due to the success of a conspiracy, namely the Senators. It is also observed that a conspiracy may be a microcosm, which mirrors the actual community, where different classes and ranks co-exist and interact. With these in mind, Plutarch's conspiracy narratives in this text show the political and social decadence, which affects the Roman community and establishes segregated collective identities within the collective Roman identity.

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