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Women in antiquity through the eyes of Plutarch

ABSTRACT. This article deals with the writings of Plutarch and some of his radical views regarding women. Excerpts from Plutarch's texts referring to female nature are studied and presented. The main issue that occupied Plutarch and many other authors of his era was the question of virtue, a purely philosophical concept deeply rooted in the ancient Greek culture. For this reason, some of Plutarch's writings focus on the place of virtue in women's society. Plutarch tries to prove that virtue exists equally in women, that women are dynamic, lawful wives who have the power to take matters into their own hands and who can perceive also the ultimate matter of friendship. This paper, therefore, seeks to show the other side of the coin regarding the position of women in antiquity, among Plutarch's ethical essays, the *Moralia*.

KEYWORDS: women in antiquity, Plutarch, virtue, *moralia*

Introduction

When we talk about antiquity, our mind goes straight to the thought of misogyny and inequality between men and women. However, there have been ancient Greek philosophers and writers who have generally expressed progressive views on women, accepting their rights and demanding equal treatment and access to education, such as Socrates, through the writings of Plato (Collette, 2018), and Euripides who showed the portraits of "strong, assertive, successful women", as well as the reasons that led to their actions (Pomeroy, 1995, p. 107/8). Another person who did not hesitate to dedicate entire philosophical treatises to his wife and to his female-friend, who fought for the equality of humans and animals by making him a proponent of vegetarianism and a protector of all beings on earth, is Plutarch.

Plutarch, as an aspiring philosopher, writer, biographer, priest of the god Apollo, graduate of the Academy of Plato and well-traveled (Κακριδής, 2012), is known for two works: The *Parallel Lives* (Ancient Greek: *Bíoi*

παράλληλοι) and *Moralia* (Ancient Greek: *Ἠθικά*). In *Parallel Lives* there are 50 biographies, four of which are unparalleled and the remaining are matched in twenty-three pairs. Each couple consists of an important Greek (politician, military leader, etc.) and a Roman whose life and actions are similar. Plutarch's goal was to compare their lives and cultural differences, honoring both of the comparing couple, and help readers exemplify the virtues and avoid mistakes (Κακριδής, 2012). His *Moralia*, according to the title, include philosophical essays focusing on ethics and morality. Despite the fact that these essays belong to his early writings, they have a lot to say and point out.

A much-discussed phenomenon of the time was the concept of virtue (Ancient Greek: *ἀρετή*) in all its manifestations (temperance, wisdom, bravery, justice etc.). Socrates, Plato, Aristotle were the masters of writing about moral virtue, followed by the Stoics, the Sceptics, and others. Virtue meant excellence, to be virtuous with a quality character that would eventually lead to the state of happiness (Ancient Greek: *εὐδαιμονία*) (Parry, 2014). Plutarch therefore relied on this and recorded his thoughts on women of his era.

“Man’s virtues and woman’s virtues are one and the same” (Plutarch, pp. 475, 243A)

As mentioned above, Plutarch had dedicated some of his essays to his wife Timoxena and to his friend Clea, a priestess at the temple of Apollo (Plutarch, 1931, p. 473). This fact alone proves that the women of his life had exerted a reasonable influence on Plutarch and his mentality, helping him spiritually express his thoughts and reach conclusions about the female nature.

His treatise on the *Bravery of Women*, dedicated to Clea, presents from the outset some convictions for women with whom Plutarch disagrees (e.g. Thucydides' view that the best woman is the one who speaks less and stays confined to the home) (Plutarch, 1931, p. 242E). Thus, he introduces the subject of this treatise which is the proof of virtue in both women and men, recording various female personalities, their words and actions that, thanks to their bravery, are admirable. He presents stories about women from many areas (Troy, Chios, Argos, Persia, Miletus, Pieria, etc.) dealing with historical facts. In his work, women set the example of devotion, intelligence and help that they provide to men who face some adverse condi-

tions, mainly war and hardship, emphasizing the lawfulness they show to their husbands and acting as their saviors, until the men take action again (Stadter, 1999, p. 178/9).

A typical example are the women of Chios. The Chians, at some point, were at war with the Erythraeans, a very strong opponent. So, they thought of giving up, losing every chance of hope. It was then that the women called them cowards and told them to say some brave words to defend their morale and drive out the enemy:

But when the men said that they had given their oath, the women bade them not to leave their arms behind, but to say, by way of answer to the enemy, that the spear serves as a cloak, and the shield as a shirt, to a man of spirit. The Chians took this advice, and when they used bold words towards the Erythraeans and displayed their weapons, the Erythraeans were frightened at their boldness, and no one approached them nor hindered them, but all were well pleased at their departure. So the Chians, having been taught courage by their women, were saved in this way (Plutarch, pp. 487, 245A-B).

This is a classic case of the courage of women acting outside the home, always defending their husbands or men.

As it turns out, the way Plutarch describes the stories is essentially a comparison (Ancient Greek: *σύγκρισις*) between men and women's actions. The motif of comparison was an integral part of ancient Greek literature, especially that of Plutarch, who, as we know, wrote the *Parallel Lives* comparing distinguished people. The purpose of the comparison he uses on the *Bravery of Women* was to highlight the various manifestations of virtue in individuals and to understand its nature (Duff, 2002, p. 248):

And actually it is not possible to learn better the similarity and the difference between the virtues of men and of women from any other source than by putting lives beside lives and actions beside actions (Plutarch, pp. 477, 243C).

Furthermore, it has been argued that this comparison is deliberate in order to simply emphasize the courageous actions of women, using a male tyrant as a rhetorical mechanism (Monaco, 2019, p. 194). In particular, the tyranny regime allows, or rather facilitates, women to show their virtues, as men are hindered, which otherwise would not be easy (Monaco, 2019, p. 196). Megisto's story confirms this theory.

During Aristotimus' tyranny, Hellanicus, a powerful and just opponent, was preparing a revolt against the tyrant. Aristotimus then

threatened the women in prison to write a letter to their husbands so that they would leave the country, otherwise he would kill the wives and their children. The women, united and strong, did not respond, and their leader, Megisto, told him that what he was doing was cowardice, that is, using women to deceive his enemies. After all, it wouldn't hurt much the men to lose their wives because they want to restore justice after all:

[...] But if you despair of persuading them yourself, and are attempting to use us to mislead them, do not expect to deceive us again, and I pray that they may never entertain such a base thought that, to spare their wives and little children, they should forsake the cause of their country's freedom. In truth, it is not so bad a thing for them to lose us, whom they have not at present, as it is a good thing to rescue the citizens from your cruelty and overbearing insolence (Plutarch, pp. 523/5, 252C).

So, Aristotimus asked for her child to be brought in to kill him in front of her eyes, and Megisto replied to her son that it was easier for her to see him die than to be tortured as a slave in this tyrannical regime:

[...] his mother, calling him by name, said, "Come here, child, and, before you can realize and think, be delivered from this bitter despotism; since for me it is more grievous to look upon your undeserved slavery than upon your death" (Plutarch, pp. 525, 252D).

Other events had taken place in this story, but the most important is at the end, when Hellanicus got rid of the tyrant and the time had come for the daughters of Aristotimus. Many wanted to torture and kill them, but the voice of justice spoke (Megisto) and said that it was not democratic to kill them as violently as tyrants do. Thus, they allowed the daughters to commit suicide and prepared a proper burial for them, shedding real tears of bitterness as they were not heartless and cruel but real people with emotions:

But Megisto, with the rest of the women, meeting them, cried out that they were committing a frightful crime if they who deemed themselves worthy to be a democratic people were, in this matter, showing recklessness and wanton violence like despots. [...] In consequence no one there was so bitter or such a hater of despots as not to shed tears and commiserate the nobility of the maidens (Plutarch, pp. 529/31, 253C-E).

In other words, there is the successful comparison of the tyrant, who is violent, arrogant, barbaric and brazen, with a woman who is dynamic, not afraid of death, courageous and fair. Again, one may notice that men are finally acting to restore democracy, but the contribution of women and their supportive words is just as important.

It is not known whether all events are true, despite the fact that Plutarch was also known as a historian, because, in this case, he seems to have shed light purposely on the morality of the women and the immorality of the tyrant. His intentions and interests, in other words, surpassed the simple recording of historical events and unfolded unknown stories, just as Breebaart commented, "He was more a historian in his methods, than in his intentions" (Breebaart, 1967, p. 36), and that's a point that tells a lot about Plutarch.

Women in the light of animals

In his *Moralia*, three treatises refer to animals, the use of rationality (*logos*), their abilities, and vegetarianism as a moral way of life. At this point, it would be reasonable to ask what Plutarch's attitude towards animals and women has to do with each other. This subchapter will answer that question.

One of the two sources on Plutarch's conception of women, under the animals' spectrum, is the detailed description of a sea-bird, halcyon, in an attempt to argue about the virtues of animals. Specifically, in his essay *Whether Land Or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, Plutarch, in the words of Phaedimus, speaks of two very important virtues possessed by halcyon, which are similarly observed in the human species. These are the love for her partner and her children, which, according to Jazdzewska, "represent virtues of women who are wives, mothers, and household caretakers." (Jazdzewska, 2015, p. 429). Described as the wisest of the sea animals, halcyon expresses her love for her partner as any faithful woman would. She is devoted only to her partner, she never leaves him, and her intentions are always good, without hiding subterranean plots against him:

If it is proper to speak briefly of her several virtues, she is so devoted to her mate that she keeps him company, not for a single season, but throughout the year. Yet it is not through wantonness that she admits him to her company, for she never consorts at all with any other male; it is through friendship and affection, as with any lawful wife (Plutarch, pp. 463, 983A).

Perhaps such a view may be stereotypical today because, certainly, women are not only characterized by these virtues of a mother and a wife, but it is worth noting that such a description in antiquity would be considered as progressive. After all, these encomiastic words of Plutarch were recorded with the ultimate goal of praising the female nature for these virtues. It is also noteworthy the fact that Plutarch uses the analogy of halcyon with a lawful wife, which may indicate two things: on the one hand the equation of animals with humans, and on the other hand Plutarch's appreciation of these feminine virtues.

Later on, another art that takes on anthropomorphic extension is the one of building the nest, which is indirectly similar to the art of women's weaving, an activity very common at that time. Plutarch, at this point, once again equates humans with animals and, much more, creates a pattern to be imitated (halcyon), based on the ideal standards of the women of his society (Jazdzewska, 2015, p. 432):

She collects the spines of garfish and binds and weaves them together, some straight, others transverse, as if she were thrusting woven threads through the warp, adding such bends and knots of one with another that a compact, rounded unit is formed, slightly prolate in shape, like a fisherman's weel (Plutarch, pp. 465, 983C).

It is well known that at those times, married women were responsible for the housework, the raising of the children, and generally internal activities, such as weaving (Cartwright, 2016). This was not considered degrading then, on the contrary, it was the normal course of events, so such an act, according to Plutarch, had to receive due attention.

In his essay *Beasts Are Rational*, the second major report on women of the time comes from the mouth of Gryllus, a pig and former soldier, who has the ability to speak, enchanted by the spells of Circe. Gryllus, discussing with Odysseus, presents the positive aspects of being an animal. He states, among other things, that in the animal kingdom there is equality between males and females, and that valor is not exclusively a characteristic of men, but extends to women too:

in beasts valor is naturally equal in both sexes and the female is in no way inferior to the male. She takes her part both in the struggle for existence and in the defense of her brood (Plutarch, pp. 505, 987F).

In an ironic tone, Plutarch emphasizes the fact that there is inequality in human society, implying that it is inferior to that of animals. In animals,

females are just as brave, defending their families, such as panthers and lionesses (Plutarch, pp. 507, 988A). What Plutarch wants to say in other words is that he had obviously noticed the acts of inequality against women and that is why he wanted to remind his readers, who would basically be men, that they are making a big mistake by thinking that they prevail over courage and bravery in comparison to women.

Eros and women

A significant discussion on the subject of women is also held in the essay *Dialogue on Love*, the main axis of which is love and married life. It is a philosophical dialogue based on the rich widow Ismenodora who wants to marry the late-teenager Bacchus. In this type of Platonic dialogue, the speakers are in favor of and against this relationship, presenting arguments and discussing about the god Eros, the concept of friendship and giving several examples. Plutarch agrees with Ismenodora's future relationship with Bacchus, because he believes that such a woman will now have acquired wisdom and intelligence through life and will be able to enter into friendly relations with her partner, so she will have the right to govern this relationship, as the younger must respect and obey the older (Tsouvala, 2014, p. 202):

The nurse rules the infant, the teacher the boy, the gymnasiarch the youth, his admirer the young man who, when he comes of age, is ruled by law and his commanding general. No one is his own master; no one is unrestricted. Since this is so, what is there dreadful about a sensible older woman piloting the life of a young man? She will be useful because of her superior intelligence; she will be sweet and affectionate because she loves him (Plutarch, pp. 339, 754D).

Accordingly, in order to validate his argument, Plutarch invokes other persons, such as the teacher with the student, claiming that as this is generally the case, there is no cause for concern if this gentle presence of a woman rules over the relationship because it will be out of love.

Another statement is the belief that both men and women are characterized by their virtue and beauty, both of which contribute to love:

To be sure they say "that beauty is the flower of virtue"; yet it would be absurd to deny that the female produces that flower or gives a 'presentation' of a 'natural bent for virtue' (Plutarch, pp. 415, 767B).

To put it in other words, Plutarch states that not only men but also women can equally produce the flower of love and participate in it both physically and spiritually. That is, love springs with the true beauty that is virtue, which can exist in both sexes (Beneker, 2008, p. 691).

As for the major issue of friendship, Plutarch adequately acknowledges the corresponding possibility for women by saying that sexual intercourse is the beginning of such a friendship, as the measure is maintained and thus ensure a long-term spiritual relationship. Women are endowed by nature with beauty, sweet voice and attractive body, which, if used properly and wisely, will win the sympathy and friendship of their spouses (Tsouvala, 2014, p. 202/3):

On the other hand, in the case of lawful wives, physical union is the beginning of friendship, a sharing, as it were, in great mysteries. Pleasure is short (Plutarch, pp. 427, 769A).

“So, it is ridiculous to maintain that women have no participation in virtue.” What need is there to discuss their prudence and intelligence, or their loyalty and justice, when many women have exhibited a daring and great-hearted courage which is truly masculine? And to declare that their nature is noble in all other relationships and then to censure it as being unsuitable for friendship alone—that is surely a strange procedure. They are, in fact, fond of their children and their husbands; their affections are like a rich soil ready to receive the germ of friendship; and beneath it all is a layer of seductive grace. [...] just so nature has endowed women with a charming face, a persuasive voice, a seductive physical beauty and has thus given the dissolute woman great advantages for the beguilement of pleasure, but to the chaste, great resources also to gain the goodwill and friendship of her husband (Plutarch, pp. 429, 769C-D).

In the above passage, reference is also made to the virtues of women: intelligence, prudence, justice, courage, affection. Prodigal women use their merits in the wrong way to gain pleasure, but the pure woman will unconsciously use them to secure the friendship and goodwill of her husband. The comparison of the dissolute with the virtuous woman may sound a little inappropriate to someone’s ears, but Plutarch’s purpose would have been to highlight the virtues of women and to break some stereotypes that want all women to be the same and unscrupulous.

Plutarch must have examined the subject in detail before reaching this conclusion between male and female friendship, since this issue played a key role in his life. He had written philosophical treatises dedicated exclusively to this subject, or referring to it in various parts of his reports

(*How Could You Tell a Flatterer from a Friend, On Having Many Friends, Table Talk* etc.). Friendship meant more to him than just casual acquaintances. It was something higher, moral, a hard work that brought together virtue, intimacy and usefulness, offering pleasure (Baltzly & Eliopoulos, 2012, p. 59/60).

Conclusions

In summary, what can be said with certainty is that Plutarch made a difference for his time. He claimed that the virtue of women is the same as that of men, women are active, intelligent and brave, they are affectionate with their husbands and children and respect traditions. He also argued for equality between men and women, he spoke at length about the idea of friendship and the potential for women to acquire it, and finally, he expressed his opinion on the couple's love and the highest spiritual relationship.

It is interesting that Plutarch favors heterosexual moral relationships, where both subjects have control over their actions and their sexuality simply facilitates the situation rather than misleads. This makes him a traditional type, blessing the reins of *Eros*, and subversive introducing the term of spiritual relationships between men and women (Brenk, 1988, p. 460). He seems to have believed in love between a heterosexual couple, aside the procreation purposes.

Furthermore, the fact that he equated people with animals, that he supported the ranks of slaves (Plutarch, pp. 317, iv. 4-v. 4), and that he generally fought—through writing at least—against discrimination and injustice does not go unnoticed. These are the views that make him generally a proponent of marginalized beings, a characterization introduced by Newmyer, and a pioneer in introducing the idea of showing compassion and sympathy to other sentient beings (Newmyer, 1996). This is how his thoughts about women expand, too.

In any case, Plutarch, although proposing a revolutionary image of women and their actions, stating that they can acquire virtues just like men, implied, according to Warren, that their virtue must be in accordance with their gender, acting in an internal context (in their home) and simply support the man's life, not replace it (Warren, 2018, p. 11). However, such a view would be expected in those years and it would be unfair to overlook all the times that Plutarch supported the female nature. After all, the

purpose of this article was to shed light on some of the prevailing views of women at the time, emphasizing progressive attitudes towards them presented by Plutarch. Even if that seemed paradoxical, it was the truth.

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