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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PLUTARCH'S MANLY WOMEN

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1. *Introduction*

In the third volume of his *Histoire de la Sexualité*, Foucault offers a reading of Plutarch's *Amatorius* in which he argues that it represents "the first shape of an important change in the old erotics" and presages the coming of a new, unitary conception of love.[1] For Foucault the *Amatorius* marks the move away from the earlier dualistic approach that polarized physical and spiritual love. In the Classical construction of *erôs*, physical love is associated with heterosexuality, while spiritual love, on display in powerful and enduring friendships, is expressed in the temperate love of boys. Now, according to Foucault, there begins the move towards symmetry: an understanding of *erôs* in which the shared respect of husband and wife is marked by conjugal affection and a degree of mutuality largely absent from the older erotics. Foucault notes that in Plutarch's view it was entirely appropriate for married women to enjoy strong sexual feelings towards their husbands. In the *Amatorius*, for example, the character Plutarch offers a resounding defense of the widow Ismenodora who is in love with the ephebe Bacchon. The dialogue is interrupted by the news that Ismenodora has kidnapped Bacchon, and the rather elegant interplay of action and philosophy is brought to its climax with the happy news that the wedding will proceed and the interlocutors must adjourn. Pisias, who was Bacchon's lover and was formerly opposed to the wedding, is actually leading the procession, and the dialogue closes with Plutarch saying that they should all go and have a

[1] Foucault 1988, 197 and 228–32. Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University. I wish to thank both audiences, and especially Kathryn Welch and Tom Hillard, for helpful comments that improved the focus of this paper. My thanks also go to an anonymous reader who made detailed suggestions that were very helpful.

laugh at the old pederast's expense. Although the dialogue is steeped in Platonic theory throughout, the endorsement of Ismenodora and the unequivocal praise of conjugal, heterosexual love do indeed mark the *Amatorius* as a fresh contribution to the Greek discourse on sexuality.[2]

Plutarch's approach to sexual relations is part of a broader trend towards seeing an equivalence between the sexes. The Greek novels, David Konstan has shown, often feature heroes and heroines of similar age, class and outlook, a feature rooted in the novels' derivation from the plots and concerns of New Comedy.[3] Closer to Plutarch's own time, the Roman emphasis on the *mulier univira* prefigured the trajectory taken up by early Christianity which would articulate an ideal of partners sharing, in Simon Goldhill's phrase, "equal fervour and religious duty".[4] Patristic writings explored gender relations, if inconsistently, taking their cue from Paul's observation that "in Christ there is no male nor female" (Gal. 3.28), and offering Perpetua and Blandina heroic models regardless of their sex.[5] One final influence was Stoicism's endorsement of the notion of symmetry, particularly in the claims that both men and women were capable of virtue and that both equally warranted training in philosophy.[6]

But as with any broad assertions of sweeping change it is desirable to add nuance to the picture where possible. One can approach Plutarch's thinking on gender from another angle by examining his treatment of 'the virtuous woman'. This is the subject of Plutarch's *Mulierum Virtutes*, in which the Second Sophistic author gives special attention to female bravery. In the introduction to the *Mulierum Virtutes* (242F) Plutarch asserts that women's virtues (*aretai*) are one and the same (*eis to mian einai*) as those of men, and among these virtues he specifies bravery, wisdom and justice. Here we seem to be on the same ground as in the *Amatorius*: there is a symmetry, even an equivalence between the sexes. But Plutarch's argument raises a problem. It is one thing to acknowledge that, in general, men and women

[2] For a discussion of various assessments of the originality of the *Amatorius*, see Brenk 2000, 51–2.

[3] Konstan 1994, 14–59 and 141–50, although Konstan notes that it is courtesans and not citizen women who feel passion equivalent to that of their male counterparts.

[4] Goldhill 1995, 132–3.

[5] Moriarty 1998, 2.

[6] Goldhill 1995, 137.

possess the same virtues, but when these are particularized the implications of the claim become more unsettling. Since *andreia* is a part of virtue, and since *andreia* is the essence of manliness, the assertion that women's virtues are the same as men's implicitly contains within it the tricky proposition that women may possess and display the one virtue that most thoroughly makes a man a man: *andreia*.[7] What is at stake is not merely a question of semantics. If bravery is the same as manliness, then it is no small matter to assert that women's bravery is the same as men's.

Accordingly, the assertion that women's virtues are the same as men's contains within it an implicit approval of the manly woman, a much more radical proposition than the simple notion that men and women are equal. One glimpses the potentially destabilizing effect of this in a contemporary Christian text, *The Passion of St Perpetua*, when, dreaming of her approaching martyrdom, Perpetua describes the scene as follows:

> We had hardly reached the amphitheater, breathless, when he took me into the middle of the arena . . . And I was stripped naked, and became masculine (*facta sum masculus*). And my supporters began to rub me with oil, as they do for a wrestling match; and on the other side I saw the Egyptian rolling himself in the dust . . . And we joined combat and fists began to fly . . . and he fell upon his face and I trod upon his head . . . And triumphantly I began to walk towards the Gate of the Living. (*Pas. S. Perpet.* 10)

For Perpetua, martyrdom involves a transfiguration in which she is made masculine.[8] This may be appropriate for someone whose beliefs threaten the established order of Roman society, but Plutarch's milieu was a Greek elite that had long since made its peace with Rome. To avoid the problem of the masculine woman, Plutarch side-steps a close analysis of Virtue or virtues, instead asserting that all virtues are in essence the same. Despite its respectable Socratic lineage, this is a highly reductive approach, better suited to a philosophical dialogue than to a compilation of *exempla*. A collection of stories with

[7] For an (overly) cautious discussion of the significance of *andreia's* etymological roots, see Moriarty 1998, 5–6.

[8] The bibliography relating to this passage alone is considerable. For a discussion of the passage and a summary of earlier work see Moriarty 1998, 9–10, following the earlier treatment by Shaw 1983. For men, too, impending martyrdom affirmed their *andreia*. "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man", the saint is exhorted by an anonymous voice as he enters the arena (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9).

a cast of many characters and a variety of situations is likely to provide many different instances and types of virtue, as is the case, for example, in the *Vitae*. As if recognizing that his choice of genre is likely to undercut his philosophical stance Plutarch concedes that contingent circumstances differ so that virtues will take on various colors or be expressed differently according to the character of the individual, the customs of the society or other variables. Thus, Ajax and Achilles are both brave but in different ways. But rather than explore these differences, especially any differences between men and women, Plutarch declares emphatically, "Let us not assert different kinds of bravery, wisdom and justice . . ." (243D). This frees Plutarch from the need to define more closely the virtues under discussion: any instance of a virtue becomes an example of Virtue, not because this has been demonstrated dialectically, but because it has been asserted by Plutarch.

This blurring of all distinctions between virtues is reflected in the vignettes recounted in the *Mulierum Virtutes*. Plutarch rarely explicitly states which virtue is illustrated by any given episode. The reader is usually left to infer whether a particular story illustrates justice or moderation or bravery. Plutarch's problem—how to approve the brave woman without also approving the manly woman—is thus circumvented by stripping the episodes of explicit commentary. When no specific virtue is ever identified the women's actions are simply, self-evidently, and generically virtuous. And even when their actions appear to be praiseworthy the narration frequently undercuts the praise of women by making their actions out to be morally ambiguous.

On its own, this failure to identify which virtues are operative in the various stories might seem warranted by Plutarch's contention that all virtues are the same but a better explanation is that the philosophical introduction and the main body of the work simply do not fit with each other.[9] In the introduction, for example, Plutarch proposes to prove that men's and women's virtues are identical by comparing the magnificence (*megalopragmosunê*) of Semiramis and that of Sesostris, the intelligence (*sunesis*) of Tanaquil and that of Servius, the high-mindedness (*phronêma*) of Porcia and that of Brutus. However,

[9] Duff 2000 analyses at length the disparities between the *sunkrisis* and its narrative in the *Vitae*.

no such *sunkriseis* subsequently appear. There are no *virorum virtutes* to act as a counterpoint to the deeds of virtuous women. The *Vitae*, of course, are constructed around exactly this type of one-for-one parallel, in order to make the point that Greek and Roman men exhibited exactly the same virtues and vices, that they were, in fact, identical, but the *Mulierum Virtutes* announces such a comparison only to drop it.[10] The effect of this curious failure is to call attention, whether Plutarch realized it or not, to the abrupt disjunction between the introduction, with its rhetorical balance, its philosophical language and its faintly radical posture, and the rest of the work, with its highly conventional narratives culled from a wide variety of Greek and Roman sources. We are promised comparisons of men and women illustrating the sameness of their virtues, but what we get is a series of vignettes dealing with the bravery and justice of women, either individually or in groups. In fact, a closer reading of the *Mulierum Virtutes* reveals that lurking behind the novel figure of the brave and virtuous woman is a highly traditional, and restrictive, understanding of womanly virtue. In short, the narrative of the *Mulierum Virtutes* finally undercuts the proposition stated in the introduction that men's and women's virtues are identical.

2. *Manly women*

The manly woman, the *gunê andreia*, is not an invention of the Second Sophistic and derives from a longstanding debate over female courage and virtue. Socrates, according to Aristotle, maintained that the temperance, courage and justice of men and women were the same.[11] The same claim can be traced back to Antisthenes in the fourth century (Diog. Laert. 6.1.12), but it was not an idea to which the mainstream of Greek thinking was sympathetic. Aristotle explicitly

[10] Plutarch's *sunkriseis* have been well studied. For the most recent treatments see Boulogne 2000, and Duff 2000. Rosenmeyer 1992, 209 discusses comparison as an organizing principle in Plutarch's biographical works and refers to the introduction of the *Mulierum Virtutes*, commenting, "One may wonder whether . . . Plutarch has given the problem of comparing all the thought it deserves. The argumentative discourse indicates that he is aware of the difficulties. But the problem recedes in the face of his assurance". As we shall see, that assurance may mask a deeper anxiety.

[11] Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a21–2. For a discussion of the debate on women's virtues before Plutarch see Stadter 1965, 3–5.

rejected Socrates' position, asserting that males possessed a superior courage (*arkhikê andreia*) and women an inferior sort (*hupêretikê*). In the *Politics* (1277b20) Aristotle also used female bravery as a yardstick against which to measure male courage, stating that a man would seem a coward if he were only as courageous as a manly woman. Similar thinking, expressed more evocatively, underlies the way Herodotus employs the figure of Artemisia to emphasize the fundamental wrongness of the Persian attack on the Greeks. That there was something essentially wrong in the attempt of the Persians to yoke Europe to Asia was best summed up by the exasperation of Xerxes witnessing the performance of his fleet before Salamis, where Artemisia's Carian forces outshone the rest of his contingents, causing the Great King to leap from his seat and cry out, "My men have become women and my women men".[12] The confusion of gender and sex roles suggests the deeper threat facing the Greeks and also hints at why the expedition must fail: it is unnatural. Barbarians must not and cannot dominate Greeks, anymore than women can excel men. Where they do, they represent a deep threat to order.

Similar anxieties over the bending of gender lines found constant expression in the Greek fascination with Amazons. Both as analogues of Persians and bogeymen in their own right, non-Greek Amazons gendered the Greek anxiety over the threat to order. Nothing could better demonstrate why the order of things had to include the social seclusion of women, and why the best that could be said of a woman was that there was nothing to say about her, than to imagine what would happen if these restrictions were not in place: these warrior women who had invaded Attica had to be beaten by Theseus. In the Athenian imaginary, there was no figure half as scary as a woman who walked, talked and fought like a man.[13]

The threat embodied by the manly woman rendered good service to those branches of Greek culture that reinforced social norms. In the theater, for example, a character such as Clytaemnestra, with her manly deliberations (Aesch., *Ag.* 11), is utterly monstrous. No matter what the ethical complications and the moral conundrums may be that face such a character, avenging a daughter betrayed

[12] Hdt 8.88; see Harrell in this volume.

[13] Lys. *Epitaph.* 2.6–8; Isoc. *Paneg.* 4.68–70; Plut. *Theseus* 27. On Amazons see Boardman 1982, 13, Tyrrell 1984, 9–22, Hall 1989, 215, and Blok 1995.

and the exploitation of her *oikos*, she crosses the line once she begins to act like a man. The line between *oikos* and state was finely and unevenly drawn in the classical period, and gave rise to many contradictions and inconsistencies that were rehearsed and explored on the stage but nothing can excuse, from the point of view of the male citizen audience, the awful actions of a manly woman like Clytaemnestra. There is really no successful resolution for a woman caught between obligations to household and state, even if she is as noble as Antigone. She either goes mad or kills herself or is executed. And just as women on stage so often embody the contradictions of competing loyalties, so too the wholly virtuous woman is caught in a bind. The glory of women becomes synonymous with a good death, so that, as Nicole Loraux has demonstrated, "wives and young girls, if they are going to win the elusive *kleos gunaikôn*, must strive for *andreia*".[14] Hence the paradox of womanly *andreia* as exhibited by Alcestis: her death is noble, selfless and bold, but being so manly it results in the feminizing of Admetus.[15]

Medical writers also explored the innate contradiction of the manly woman in their discussions of conception and sex differentiation. Although Aristotle is well known for having expressed a view of women that saw them as essentially passive participants in these processes, as early as Alcmaeon and Parmenides there were Greek thinkers who posited that the womb was a potential battleground between male and female seed.[16] The fullest expression of this theory is to be found in a treatise in the Hippocratic Corpus in which the explicit claim is made that "both the man and the woman have male and female sperm".[17] Only when there was no battle between the seeds was there a happy outcome, the mingling of male seed from both man and woman creating a manly boy, or the mixing of female seed from both father and mother leading to a feminine girl. The other combinations were more or less grotesque, as Ann Ellis

[14] Loraux 1987, 63.

[15] Loraux 1987, 29.

[16] Arist. *GA* 4.3 769a15–23. For Alcmaeon, Parmenides and the anti-Aristotelian tradition see Lonie 1981, 125–6.

[17] Hipp., *De genitura* 7. Galen also composed a celebrated passage on this question, concluding that similarities between parents and children were evidence that different sperms prevailed in different parts of the body; see Galen, *De sem.* 2.5. For a fuller discussion of theories of sex differentiation in the Hippocratic Corpus see Manuli 1980, 405–6 and Lonie 1981, 125–6.

Hanson points out, with the manly girl a product of the father's female seed defeating the mother's male producing seed.[18] It was a victory of the male, but not of the masculine. Even though the father's seed won the battle, the product of the victory was a female with masculine characteristics, and hence an inappropriate vessel for masculinity.

Greek culture, therefore, admitted the existence of the manly woman, but tended to see this as an aberration or threat. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), the figure of the woman who performs outside the narrowly circumscribed world of women remained fascinating. In the early Hellenistic period Charon of Carthage wrote a four-volume compilation entitled *Biographies of Famous Women.*[19] A steady trickle of works detailing the accomplishments of women continued during the Second Sophistic. Book 5, for example, of the compilation of Sopatros of Apamea included a section on the origins and careers of those who won glory in the world of the Greek theater, whether the performers were male or female.[20] Apollonius the Stoic produced a work entitled *Women Who Were Philosophers or Otherwise Accomplished Something Noteworthy*, while Artemon of Magnesia composed an *Account of Deeds Accomplished by the Virtue of Women.*[21] One cannot assume that the tone of all these works, known to us only by their titles, was uniformly favorable, since authors of the same period were fascinated by paradox and *adoxa*, the praise of unpraiseworthy things, as in the case of Favorinus' *In Praise of Thersites*. One vignette, however, from this genre is preserved and is noteworthy. In Favorinus' speech *In Praise of Fortune*, we encounter the figure of Demonassa the Cypriot lawgiver. Her laws and the penalties they prescribe lead to the execution of her own children. Later, upon seeing a cow mourning for its calf and being driven mad by what Maud Gleason calls "the tragic paradox of her own maternity", she jumps into a vat of boiling metal and is turned into a statue.[22] One has to wonder whether some of the works about famous women were not paradoxological, with more emphasis on the *para* than the *doxa*.

It is most explicitly in the work of Musonius the Stoic that we find a radical reevaluation of the manly woman. In his tract, *Whether Sons and Daughters should receive the same Education*, Musonius writes explicitly,

> Someone may say that *andreia* only applies to men. But this is not so! For a woman too, or at least the best woman, must act in a manly fashion and must cleanse herself of cowardice, so that she may not be overcome by affliction or fear. Otherwise how could a woman remain chaste, if someone by threat or force could make her the victim of some outrage.[23]

The benchmark here is a woman's chastity, so that the apparent novelty of the argument is somewhat undercut by its conventional concerns. Even so, if Musonius were interested in nothing more than a traditional conception of *aidôs* it was hardly necessary to make the further claim that women could possess *andreia*. After all, a manly woman such as Clytaemnestra demonstrated that female *andreia* was, at the very least, problematic. By extending the customary notions of *aidôs* to include *andreia* Musonius was breaking new ground, or at least giving philosophical legitimacy to attitudes that were still novel. What is perhaps most unusual here is not his belief in female courage but the advocacy that follows from it: because girls, no less than boys, have an innate capacity for *andreia* it should be recognized and nurtured by education. It was precisely the philosophical proposition underlying Musonius' claim that fascinated Plutarch and is reflected in Plutarch's assertion that the virtues of men and women are identical. This, however, is in the introduction to the *Mulierum Virtutes*. The episodes recounted in the body of Plutarch's work tell a very different story.

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[18] Hansen 1992, 43.

[19] Charon of Carthage, *Bioi endoxôn gunaikôn* (= *FHG* IV 360)

[20] Sopatros, *Excerpts* 5 (= Phot. *Bibl.* 161). Stadter 1965, 7–8 refers to the anonymous work used by Sopatros as *Women Lifted up to Great Fame and Brilliant Reputation* but the context and wording of the citation makes it clear that the biographies were all of performers.

[21] Apollonius Stoicus, *hosai gunaikes ephilosophêsan ê allôs ti epidoxon diepraxanto* (= Phot. *Bibl.* 161); Artemon of Magnesia, *tôn kat' aretên gunaixi pepragmateumenôn diêgêmata* (= Phot. *Bibl.* 161). See Stadter 1965, 7–8 and Wicker 1978, 109.

[22] Gleason 1995, 13.

[23] Musonius, *Diatribe* 4 (Hense).

3. Mulierum Virtutes

The first and perhaps overwhelming feature of the work is that the pivotal moment of many stories depends on the woman's body. In fact, the virtue of women is inseparable from their bodies and the range of behaviors, taboos and restrictions that are focused on the body, summed up in the notion of shame (*aidôs*). So deeply ingrained is this thinking that some stories are reduced to little more than shorthand. In the case of Lucretia, for example, Plutarch offers only the barest details. Her virtue was one of the causes of Tarquinius' downfall, says Plutarch (250A). After being raped by one of Tarquinius' sons she reported the matter to friends and family, and killed herself, setting in train the events that would eventually lead to the last king's downfall. The notion of *aidôs* operating here is utterly conventional and deeply ingrained, and its ubiquity in stories supposedly concerned with bravery and wisdom helps to explain why the stories in the *Mulierum Virtutes* tend to fall into three categories: those that revolve around obscenity, suggested either by the display of the female genitals or by verbal abuse (or both); stories that relate to concealment; and stories that hinge on physical exploitation. Whatever the work's philosophical stance, the narrative will return again and again to women's bodies.

3.1 *Virtue and Obscenity*

In the first category, involving obscenity, women instil vigor in their men and protect the fertility of their countryside. For example, Plutarch recounts the story of Cyrus' men fleeing from battle only to be confronted by their women who hike up their skirts and cry, "Where are you off to, you most miserable of men? You sure can't flee and crawl back here (*entautha*), from where you came!" (246A–B). Similarly, in the story of the Lycian Women (247F–248D), the curse of Bellerophon who has invoked a terrible tidal wave to inundate Lycia is undone when the Lycian women pull up their garments and go out to meet him, forcing him to retreat out of shame (*hup' aiskhunês*). The tidal wave, too, rolls back to the sea.

Both these stories are, in one sense, about the men's virtue, not the women's. In the story of the Persian Women, the virtue of the women may be said to reside in their boldness, but the outcome depends on the men reacting modestly and honorably to this challenge to their manhood. In the Lycian episode, it is Bellerophon's sense of modesty that causes him to turn back, and the episode is typically unclear about specifying the virtue of the women.[24] In one version of the story, according to Plutarch, the men accomplished nothing when they asked Bellerophon to desist, but when the women crowded around him they met with respect (*aidous tukhein*) and put an end to his anger. The respect referred to is Bellerophon's.

Plutarch does not explain how these stories of genital exposure demonstrate the virtue of women because, in terms of their appeal to the Greeks, the stories have nothing to do with affirming virtue. Rather, the stories resonate with associations to highly traditional and well-established cultic practice. At the Haloa and Thesmophoria festivals in Athens and the Stenia festival on Andros women ritually abused men and held up models of their genitals.[25] These were instances of *aiskhrologia*, well documented also at Syracuse, Aegina and Epidaurus. The *gephurismos* associated with the *pompê* to Eleusis similarly included women abusing the participants in the sacred procession. The best-known example is the Orphic story preserved in Clement of Alexandria, according to which Baubo cheered up the mourning Demeter by exposing herself to the goddess, a story reminiscent of Iambe's jests mentioned in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter.[26] The connections here between obscenity and fertility are unmistakable.[27] Jeffrey Henderson explains the nexus of cult, abuse and obscenity thus: "The efficacy of obscenity in such activities is sometimes sympathetic, in that naming of sexual organs and acts aids fertility, or apotropaic, in that evil powers do not like obscenity".[28] Plutarch, or his sources, is clearly close to this apotropaic sense in his story of the Lycian Women averting the curse of sterility, and the Persian episode, set in the early days of their *arkhê*—the victory is over the Medes, not the Greeks—sanctions sympathetically the growth of

[24] For a discussion of this episode and its variants see Blok 1995, 319–22.

[25] Henderson 1975, 15. The fact that the story of genital exposure is attributed to Persian women does not weaken its association with Greek cult. The Persian story appears to originate with Ctesias; see Stadter 1965, 53–6. Eventually it was given a Spartan setting; see *Apophth. Lac.* 241b. Its significance lies not in its origin but in the way it would have been understood by its audience.

[26] Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.20.1; *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 200–5.

[27] Deubner 1966, 54; Brumfield 1981, 81 and most recently McClure 1999, 47–52 and 215–18.

[28] Henderson 1975, 13.

their power, which, in the tradition of Thucydides, is presented as organic. These episodes seem startling with their focus on self-exposure but turn out to be conventional, resonating with associations from traditional Greek cults concerned with fertility and evil. They have little to do with affirming any female virtue and are really drawn from stories and practices that illustrate the male dread of female sexuality.[29]

Stories concerned with verbal abuse work in a similar way, as women goad their men into action by transgressing the customary gender role that favors female silence and compliance.[30] One example is the first story of the Chian Women (244E–245B), in which, outraged by their men's readiness to lay down their arms, the women revile them. The men are taught boldness by their women and are saved (*houtoi men oun tharrein didakhthentes hupo tôn gunaikôn houtôs esôthêsan*). This pattern is more fully developed in the story of Xenokrite (261E–262D). Aristodemus has established himself as tyrant of Cumae and is forcing the men of the city to toil away digging a ditch. As he passes in review one woman steps out of his way and modestly covers her face. When the menfolk ask her jokingly why she avoided only Aristodemus she replies "Because among the Cumaeans Aristodemus is the only man". On the one hand her physical avoidance of the tyrant's proximity and her gesture of concealment are interpreted by the men as signs of her *aidôs*, but on the other she is still permitted a sharp tongue to spur on her gutless menfolk. Plutarch writes, "This utterance pricked all of them and shamed them (*parôxunen aiskhunei*) into struggling for their freedom" (262C). This particular vignette is interesting for the way in which it splits the figure of the courageous woman in two. Plutarch praises the virtue of the two women who set Cumae free; the first is the anonymous woman armed with the *bon mot* mentioned above, while the other is Xenokrite. But all that she actually does is to get the conspirators into Aristodemus' palace. She is functionally more important for what she is, namely the prize in Aristodemus' bed. Her subjugation stands for the tyrant's exploitation. So here are the twin roles of womanly courage in action: the sexually desirable woman who is the object of the tyrant's unwanted attentions, and the anonymous voice urging the men into action by affirming traditional mores. These women are little more than Body and Conscience. In one sense, the story splits bravery into active and passive components: the women elicit reactions, but it is the men who perform actions.

[29] Horney 1932, 348–60 and Connell 1995, 11.
[30] On the silence of Athenian women, see McClure 1999, 19–24.

A variation of these two fields of action is described in the story of the Women of Miletus (249B–D). During a spate of suicides by young women, occasioned perhaps by something in the air or from some divine origin, on the advice of a man of intelligence (*nous*), the Milesians pass a decree according to which any future suicides are to be carried naked through the agora to their burial. The suicides stop immediately. Although the vignette is short, in it Plutarch manages to blend a remarkable variety of elements. The Hippocratic notion of natural environment is hinted at; the religious explanation of divine affliction is also suggested, so that by exactly the halfway mark we have reached the turning point: the calamity seemed to be beyond human help, says Plutarch. And then immediately an intelligent man, a philosopher perhaps, makes a sensible suggestion based upon his keen understanding of human nature, in this case that those fearless of death may still fear shame. The episode explicitly praises the virtue of the Virgins who are most strongly motivated by a desire to avoid ill repute, but it is the wise man who finds the solution to the problem. The girls' virtue, as always in classical constructions of femininity, is written on their body. Their virtue is proved when their bodies are covered.

3.2 *Virtue and Concealment*

The second category involves stories of concealment, in which the woman's body is equated with some other element, such as the family's wealth or the men's weapons. In the story of Timoclea (259D–260D), she and her house are handed over to a Macedonian officer after the fall of Thebes. After dinner the officer summons Timoclea to sleep with him. This is not the end of his outrageous behavior, says Plutarch, because he then bullies her into revealing the whereabouts of the family treasure. Timoclea's response is revealing. She announces clearly that she would rather have died before this night so that her body might at least have escaped outrage, but she concedes that now she is under his power. She remarks that she will not deprive him of what is his (*ouk aposterêsô se tôn sôn*), for she has become whatever he wishes her to be, an expression that elides the

distinction between her body and her property. She then goes on to tease him with a story of the household's wealth that she has secreted in a dry well outside. The Macedonian is seduced into fetching up the treasure immediately, and while he is in the well Timoclea and her servants kill him by piling rocks on top of him. She is later found out but forgiven by Alexander. Her virtue, her body and the family's property are thus safeguarded.

In the cases of the Women of Melos (246D–247A), and the Women of Salmantica (248E–249B) the role of the women is to hide weapons within their garments, just as their bodies are concealed by their robes. In both cases the women are agents necessary for the men's victory, in the one case enabling them to slay their perfidious hosts, the Carians, and in the other helping them to fight their way to freedom and eventually to win the restoration of their city. Plutarch's language is revealing. In the case of the Melian Women, at the critical moment, "all at once, the women (*men*) opened their robes, while the men (*de*) seized their swords, attacked the barbarians and slew the whole lot of them" (246F). The words draw attention to the women not just concealing the weapons and smuggling them into the banquet, but also opening their garments. It is a critical moment of transgression for both the men and the women: the former are violating *xenia* while the latter are violating *aidôs*. In both cases their actions are justified by the threat to their existence, but the responses, or more properly the fields of action available to each, are quite different: the men take decisive action against their foes while the women are cast in a supporting role in which their decency is compromised in order to facilitate the deeds of their menfolk.

It is surely not coincidental that the story is set at the time of the founding of Cryassus by Melian colonists. Like many ktistic stories this episode is compelling because it reflects the belief that the foundation of a Greek colony was a special moment that required a dispensation from the usual *nomoi* of a civilized community. This pattern is remarkably consistent in many colonial narratives, involving rape, oath-breaking and even murder.[31] Colonial narratives, in fact, are often constructed as if the colonial foundation were a *rite de passage* in which norms are temporarily overturned so that they, and the new society painfully coming into existence, can be reestablished all

[31] Dougherty 1993, 31–44.

the more securely. The community is reassuring itself that there is an inverse relationship between their wild, law-breaking origins and their current law-abiding state. It may be for this reason that so many of the Greek vignettes in the *Mulierum Virtutes* derive from ktistic traditions. These include the stories of the Trojan Women (243E–244A), who are really the first Roman Women, the Chian Women (244E–245C) from the foundation story of Leuconia, the Women of Melos (246D–247A), from the founding of Cryassus, the so-called Etruscan Women (247A–F), actually the foundation story of Lyctus on Crete, the story of Pieria (253F–254B) from the stories of Miletus and its colony Myos, and the story of Lampsace (255A–E), the eponym of Lampsacus. It is in these charged episodes that we most often see women as individuals or groups acting purposefully. It is the Trojan Women, for example, who make the decision to put an end to the wandering of the Trojan survivors by literally burning their boats once they have reached Italy. The Chian Women object to the wimpiness of their men folk, abusing them as cowards (*ekakizon autous*) for abandoning their arms and quitting the city, while Lampsace secretly warns the Greeks of the plot against them. It is as if the crisis of founding a polis authorizes actions which are at odds with normative behavior and permit temporarily a suspension of the usual restrictions on women.

The implications of this for Plutarch's work is that his general proposition that women's virtue is the same as men's often relies for proof on stories that only allow women to act in exceptional circumstances. In some respects this may overlap with broader notions of *andreia*, which emphasize its operation in moments of crisis, but there is still an important difference between men's and women's *andreia* in action. The paradigm of male courage calls for a straightforward response to a threat, whether it be to personal honor or the safety of the community. If the man acts courageously he averts the threat and enhances his own reputation. The moral economy is uncomplicated: danger + courage = honor. But in the case of women's actions the results are more often ambiguous. Polycrite (254B–F) slips a message into a cake baked for her brothers telling them how they can attack her lover's forces, leading to the lover's defeat and capture. Caphene (246D–247A), betrays her Carian relations to aid her lover and the Greeks, and Lampsace (255A–E) betrays her friends and relatives to help the Phocaean colonists. In these stories the women embody divided loyalties, as if complicated moral dilemmas

are more easily handled by displacing them from the male onto the female. These stories draw on the tradition of Greek drama that so often puts heroines into impossible situations, where the restoration of order is finally made possible by the elimination of the female.

Furthermore, not only are women's loyalties divided, but also their bravery is often presented as ambiguous. This becomes almost a reflex on Plutarch's part, as if to concede a simple act of bravery were too much for him. Thus, the story of Valeria and Cloelia (250A–F) tells of the escape of a group of young Roman women from Lars Porsena. The episode culminates in the gift of a horse from Porsena to Cloelia, commemorated in an equestrian statue, for her display of strength (*rhômê*) and daring (*tolma*) beyond that of a woman (*hôs kreittona gunaikos*). Much of the narrative, however, undercuts the praise of the heroines. In fact, the escape of the maidens is misguided because they are not captives. They are serving as hostages to guarantee the terms of the alliance between Porsena and the Romans. He has shown his good faith by rejecting his alliance with Tarquinius and giving up preparations for war against Rome. It is under these conditions that the women impulsively make their escape. As a result, when they get home their menfolk, while admiring their *aretê* and *tolma*, are horrified by their return because they, the men, will appear to be inferior to Porsena in matters of good faith (*en pistei kheirones*). The women's complete disregard for the dictates of honor stands in stark contrast to the behavior of such Roman heroes as Regulus, who argued against peace with Carthage even though this meant returning to his death.[32] The women are commanded to return to Porsena's camp, so that their actions are basically nullified. Indeed, it is telling that Plutarch twice refers to their daring, *tolma*, a quality that is often qualified as 'reckless' (*alogistos*), rather than their bravery (*andreia*), a term not applied to their exploits. They are ambushed on the way back, and although Valeria manages to escape and raise the alarm, it is Aruns, Porsena's son, who rescues the rest of the Roman women. So, while we get the conventional praise of the *aretê* of these women, with at least an implied acknowledgment of bravery, the narration actually undercuts this and presents us with women who court danger, compromise their men's

[32] Zonar. 8.15. See also Plut. *Pyrr.* 20 and App. *Sam.* 10 on the return of prisoners bound by oath. My thanks to Tom Hillard for these references.

honor and need to be rescued. The best that can be said is that the bravery of Plutarch's women is never straightforward.

At times, in fact, the tension between the rather trite praise of women's virtues and the actual details of the *exemplum* almost makes a mockery of the central proposition that women possess the same virtue as men. Consider the extraordinary case of Aretaphila of Cyrene (255E–257E). The vignette begins with Plutarch praising Aretaphila for her *aretê* and her accomplishments (*praxis*). She is distinguished by her good sense (*to phronein*) and her political skill (*politikês deinotêtos*). But the record of her actions tells a different story altogether: she plots to poison her husband, the tyrant Nicocrates, lies when confronted, engineers the seduction of Leander, the tyrant's brother, by dangling her daughter in front of him, is rumored to have poisoned Leander, secretly provokes a war with Cyrene's African neighbors, bullies the tyrant into a defenseless parley with the African chief and hands Leander over to Anabous after alternately egging him on (*etharrunen*) and abusing him (*ekakize*). Even the description of the climactic moment when Aretaphila grabs Leander and physically drags him over to Anabous emphasizes the recklessness of her actions (*itamôs panu kai tetharrêkotôs*). The story ends with Aretaphila retiring demurely to the women's quarters and taking up her work at the loom, but this pat ending cannot hide the fact that the virtue displayed by Aretaphila is worlds away from the straightforward, vigorous manly courage of those who use weapons to exact justice.

Women's weapons undercut the proposition that their virtues are fundamentally the same as men's. Secrecy, trickery, lies, abuse, concealment and the occasional burst of impulsive action: these are the spheres in which female virtue operate, as is also illustrated in the story of Eryxo, widow of the king of Cyrene (260E–261D). When the tyrant Laarchus tries to legitimize his hold on power by marrying her she tricks him into a secret assignation at which he is cut down by her brothers. Although she is explicitly praised for her self-control (*sôphrosunê*) and bravery (*andreia*), the record of her actions qualifies the reader's response to female bravery in a way that distinguishes it from the open *andreia* of men.

3.3 *Virtue and Sexual Exploitation*

Plutarch's understanding of female virtue, then, when the philosophical frame is stripped away, is rooted in conventional notions of

aidôs. So far we have seen this play out in stories employing the tropes of self-exposure or concealment. The third category of story includes those vignettes dealing with sexual exploitation. These are especially significant because within the *Mulierum Virtutes* the sexual exploitation of *women* comes to stand for violations of social order. This authorizes a specific field of action in which women may display their virtues of courage and resourcefulness so long as it serves the greater and more important goal of restoring stability. For example, in the second part of the episode dealing with the Women of Chios (244E–245C), they take hold of a terrible and wild spirit (*deinon d'hai gunaikes kai agrion thumon labousai*—the words suggest that their virtue is an external quality rather than innate), mount the walls and supply their men with arms and encouragement to defeat Philip V. The stimulus for all this is Philip's appeal to the slaves within the city to desert with the promise of freedom and sex with their masters' women. The women's spirited actions are permissible because of the overwhelming threat posed by Philip's proposition. In fact, they are commensurate with that threat.

But if crises call for extreme measures they do not set precedents for daily business. That is well illustrated by the story of the Women of Argos (245C–F). This episode begins with a similar threat to the very existence of the community when Cleomenes defeats the Argives in battle and marches on the city. Once again a semi-divine spirit (*hormê kai tolma daimonios*) operates from without on the women, leading them to man the battlements and defend their country. After their victory the women find that Argos is short of men, so they marry the best of their perioecic neighbors. The women are somewhat contemptuous of these men, whom they regard as beneath them (*hôs kheironas*), leading the Argives to pass a law saying that "Married women having a beard must occupy the same bed with their husbands" (245F). The curious reference to bearded women is an allusion to the masculinity displayed by women who have fought in battle and chosen their own husbands. Not coincidentally, the military success of these manly women was commemorated at a religious festival, but the *Hubristika* was a festival of transvestism. Here as in other such cults, the transvestism did not threaten the normal order of social affairs as much as it reinforced it by offering a temporary respite from it.[33] The festival was an exceptional moment, when women might briefly assume the rôle of men, the very role that they had played during the siege of Argos. But the festival turns the inversion of gender roles into a game, while the law restates the proper order: women may not enjoy independence.

[33] Tyrrell 1984, 68. For a modern version of the same festival, the Yinaikokratia held in Monklissia, see Storace 1996, 234–7.

3.4 *Male and Female Virtue*

Most of the stories, therefore, demonstrate a disjunction between the philosophical claims asserted in the introduction and trotted out towards the end of each vignette, and the lessons conveyed within the narrative. The stories really seem to prove that women's virtue is utterly different from men's: it is more likely to spur others to action than itself to act. It is more likely to arise in, and be confined to, moments of exceptional crisis. It is almost inseparable from traditional notions of shame and can rarely be divorced from the range of men's anxieties about women's bodies. The differences between male and female virtue are best summed up in two episodes. In the story of the Women of Amphissa, (249E–F) Plutarch tells how a band of Thyiades, maenads, lose their way towards the end of their frenzied wanderings around Mt. Parnassus. They arrive one night at Amphissa, where, "exhausted and still not returned to their senses, they threw themselves down here and there in the agora, and fell asleep" (249E). The women of Amphissa discover them and are afraid that they will come to harm and so they form a silent, human barrier around the sleeping women. Next morning, when the Thyiades awake, the women of Amphissa individually take care of them, feed them and finally, with their husbands' consent, they lead them safely to the border. As in the charged stories dealing with colonial foundations, the episode at Amphissa deals with the threat of social disruption. Since they are bacchants, the Thyiades embody the female threat to civilization, which is why their activities are normally assigned to the wilds of Parnassus or Cithaeron. The agora, on the other hand, is civic space and therefore a male domain. The presence of bacchants in the middle of the agora, therefore, suggests an inversion of, or at least a threat to established order. At the time of this episode Amphissa is supposed to have been under occupation by the forces of the Phocian tyrants, so that the juxtaposition of male and female is even more sharply drawn: the bacchants are an implicit threat to the male order and they themselves are explicitly threatened by the Phocian mercenaries. Each of these factors increases the tension, which is only resolved by the Amphissan women interceding

on behalf of the Thyiades. The actions are the opposite of everything Bacchic. They stand in silence around the sleeping bacchants; they minister to them like servants, and they only escort them to the border once they have won permission from their husbands.[34] The story contrasts the excellence of these silent and subservient women with the latent violence of the Thyiades.

The virtues residing in silence and subservience are also on display in the story of Micca, Megisto and the Women of Elis (250F–253F). The elements of the story are familiar: the city has been seized by a tyrant—we are back in the world of social disorder; lovely young Micca becomes the obsession of one of the tyrant's mercenaries—once again, a woman's body serves as the focus of a man's lack of *sôphrosunê*; Micca is stripped naked and remains silent while beaten to death by the mercenary—her courage consists of silent suffering. The story now focuses on the tyrant Aristotimus, who drives many Elians into exile, imprisons the women and beats the priestesses of Dionysus who have come in silence as suppliants to him. As opposition to the tyrant builds, the story moves towards its climax, the interview between the furious tyrant and the level-headed Megisto. At first he attempts to frighten the women by threats (*phobôi . . . êpeilei*) but the imprisoned women refuse to answer and silently agree not to be frightened, nor to give in to the threats (*siôpêi . . . anthomologoumenai to mê dedienai mêd' ekpeplêkhthai tên apeilên*). Then Megisto, who has the position of leadership (*hêgemonikên taxin*) by virtue of her husband and her *aretê*, and who notably does not give up her seat, tells the tyrant that if he were sensible (*phronimos*) he would stop talking to the women and deal with the men directly. "And don't expect that they'll be tricked the way we were", she continues, "and don't expect us to help you trick them". The confrontation is between two figures measured against the standard of self-respecting manhood: the manly woman and the intemperate tyrant. Neither can quite measure up: the woman has only moral strength to assert against the tyrant, and the tyrant has already had to rely on trickery. This has often been exactly what women had available to them, but now it is the tyrant's weapon. In effect, the tyrant and the tyrannized end up swapping gender identities in the story. When Aristotimus rushes at Megisto in a rage his associate

[34] McInerney 1997, 270–2.

Cylon pulls him away saying that such an action would be undignified (*agennes*) and womanish (*gunaikôdes*) and not the work of a ruler (*ouk andros hêgemonikou*). Aristotimus is overthrown shortly thereafter by the returning exiles. After being faced down by the manly woman, the womanish ruler is living on borrowed time.

3.5 *Virtue and Order*

Now it may seem churlish to keep insisting that the virtues of women are different from the virtues of men, and a defender of Plutarch might well say these stories amply prove that Plutarch was right when he asserted that, contingent circumstances aside, male and female virtue are the same. But behind this assertion lies a much more conservative and conventional picture of women. Female virtue is repeatedly connected to notions of *aidôs*, and when they take action their deeds are likely to be morally ambiguous, relying on abuse, deceit and trickery. They are most manly when they are used as a counterpoint to highlight the failings of the bully or the tyrant. Most importantly, the mixture of *aidôs, tolma* and *andreia* that constitutes their *aretê* is most often activated by a threat to social order. Read in one way these stories have very little to do with ethical questions about the nature of women's virtues at all. The stories are much more about that other abiding interest of Greek thinkers: good order. This is the theme that links so many of the stories—the threat of slaves let loose on free women, the threat posed by uncontrolled tyrants, the threat of attacks by perfidious barbarians, the threat of bacchants in the market place, even the threat posed by irrational teenagers—they all share one trait: women can play a role as agents when there is a threat to *eutaxia*. The one time that Plutarch uses this specific word is instructive. It is in the story of the Women of Keios (249D–E) another vignette about *parthenoi*. But unlike the Milesian girls whose dangerous behavior can only be beaten by their natural *aidôs*, the Cean maidens are models of exemplary behavior. These good girls played all day together at the public shrines where they could be seen by all their suitors. At night they attended their menfolk, fathers and brothers, and so modest were they that there was no adultery or seduction for over 700 years. In one sense there is no story in this episode since there is no threat and nothing happens. Nevertheless the girls are models of *aretê*. Despite Plutarch's assertion that all virtues are one and the same, clearly they are not.

Aretê can be demonstrated by simple good behavior, while *andreia* would require test of the girl's courage. It is precisely because the story does not fit with the rest of the work that it is most revealing: it confirms that Plutarch was most interested in the question of social harmony.

This theme is taken up in one of the best-known episodes in the *Mulierum Virtutes*, the story of the Women of Phocis (244B–E).[35] Shortly before the Persian Wars the men of Phocis decide to take up arms against their Thessalian overlords and win their independence once and for all. In desperation they resolve to place all their women and children on a pyre and to set fire to it if they lose the battle. They decide to seek the consent of the women who hold their own assembly and confirm the men's decision. The men fight victoriously and the women are spared, but what wins Plutarch's approval is the women's complete loyalty to their men, their like-mindedness. Indeed, despite their desperation, so completely united are the Phocians in their resolve that even the children hold their own assembly and ratify the men's decision! Ideally women can affirm social harmony. Indeed, in the story of Pieria (253F–254B) the heroine lets her lover know that if he wants her he has to settle the war between her people, the Myosians, and his, the Milesians. Establish peace and harmony and you get the girl.

This discourse on women's virtues is therefore shot through with conventional tropes and motifs, and informed by very traditional concerns regarding shame. In fact, the only stories that seem to offer a genuinely novel vision of women are ones drawn from outside the Greek realm. Three stories late in the work (257E–259D) are set among the Galatians and here we meet women planning, acting and instigating. In one the widow of Sinatus avenges her husband by marrying his killer and poisoning him; in another the infertile Stratonice convinces her husband to father royal heirs by a surrogate, while in the third, Chiomara is captured and raped, but avenges her disgrace by engineering the beheading of her captor. But two observations seem pertinent here: the first is that from the time of Herodotus and Hecataeus, ethnography permitted Greek writers to explore alternative social systems but did not automatically authorize those alternatives. Furthermore, it is notable that each of these stories revolves around the woman as partner, as equal to her husband. These women complement their husbands in avenging their deaths or in securing them heirs. The last vignette, which is repeated in condensed version in the *Amatorius*, ends with Chiomara's husband claiming that a woman's loyalty is a good thing, to which Chiomara replies, "Yes, but it is even better that only one man should live who has been intimate with me", a gruesome, if amusing, twist on the usual claim made by a *femina unius viri*.

[35] See also Paus. 10.1.7 and Ellinger 1993.

4. *Conclusion: the Purpose of* Mulierum Virtutes

Plutarch's thinking, therefore, is a fascinating blend of utterly conventional stories in which women abuse, cajole, mediate, and conspire, on the one hand, and, on the other anecdotes in which women really emerge as worthy partners of men. Not all the stories support the claim that women's virtues are the same as men's, no matter what Plutarch says in the introduction, and this calls for some explanation. It is insufficient merely to assert that the *Mulierum Virtutes* is poorly composed. Rather, there is a tension here between two opposites: on the one hand, a disparate body of material—a wide variety of stories available to Plutarch from his deep familiarity with Greek literature and history—entirely infused with traditional notions of female propriety, and, on the other, Plutarch's own, quite new understanding of conjugal relations, from which he extrapolated the beginnings of a new way of seeing women.

The inconsistency between Plutarch's claims and the conventional stories he actually provides compels us to ask what the forces and anxieties were that prompted his rethinking of female virtue even as he reasserted traditional roles. The key to understanding this lies in recognizing that the sphere of influence and action identified by Plutarch as appropriate for women—the areas in which their *aretê* and *andreia* operated, in other words—was essentially a reflection of a masculine conception of order extending from the household to the state. In other words, it is not gender *per se*, but order which is at the heart of Plutarch's concerns. Accordingly, Plutarch's interest in the virtues of women is part of a broader set of anxieties relating to power, status and ethnic identity that characterizes Greek culture during the Second Sophistic. Just as in an earlier age Amazons, the quintessential manly women, had served as a convenient way of

framing Greek thinking about the otherness of Persians and barbarians and had helped sharpen the sense of what it was to be Greek, so too Plutarch's interest in cataloguing and affirming the virtues of women was at the same time part of his larger program of identifying (and perhaps shaping) the desired order of things in a Hellenized Roman empire. For a Greek writer in the Roman Empire such as Plutarch, the question of woman's virtue and manliness cannot help but be inflected by the underlying question of Greek culture's relationship to Rome, in the same way that the *Vitae* deal ostensibly with men's virtues but also assert the sameness of Greek and Roman statesmanship.

All men's writing about women shares a concern with power, and power is very much an issue at stake in the world of the Second Sophistic. In the early Empire, any writing about power relations—kings and philosophers, statesmen and the community, masters and slaves, Greeks and barbarians, men and women, is going to be written by Greeks under the sway of Rome. Simon Swain has demonstrated the way that Second Sophistic writers rendered the two cultures equivalent and to a certain extent interchangeable: Greeks were equivalent in statesmanship, and the Romans' counterparts in civilization.[36] One thinks, for example, of Aelius Aristides, using Greek encomium to celebrate the power of Rome. This twinning of the two cultures no doubt eased anxieties about the real impotence of the Greeks in the face of Rome's *imperium*. Such is the program that underlies the *Vitae* and the same basic conception of partnership also operates in Plutarch's thinking about women. What concerns him is a power relationship in which weaker impacts favorably upon stronger, in which the weaker partner can inspire the stronger and has within it the potential to match the stronger. That is the position he allows women in relation to men and it is the relationship he desires for Greece with Rome. At the same time, by dwelling on traditional themes of chastity and fidelity, Plutarch is also participating in a discourse in which a concern for bodily boundaries mirrors a concern for social boundaries.[37] The necessary and carefully delineated role within a clear sphere of conduct conceded to women is the same as the position claimed for Greek intellectuals, priests, local elites and

[36] Swain 1996, 136–8.
[37] Perkins 1995, 46–7.

philosophers in relation to their Roman masters. Plutarch is, to use Jacques Boulogne's phrase, "un médiateur transculturel".[38]

The true antecedent, then, to the *Mulierum Virtutes* is not the body of complex and contradictory literature about women. Rather, it is the Hellenistic legacy to which Plutarch was heir: namely the belief that reciprocity was the key to all social relations, linking the weak and the strong in a relationship with clear boundaries and mutual rights. That is the model on which the radical concession to women is made. Plutarch's women, therefore, are manly and virtuous not only because of his generosity of spirit and the novelty of his intellect, but because it mattered so much to his own place in the world.

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[38] Boulogne 1994, 149–53.

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