TEACHING BY EXAMPLE
AETIOLOGY IN PLUTARCH’S DE MULIERUM VIRTUTIBUS
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Abstract

In this paper, I propose that aetiology was central to Plutarch’s essay, De Mulierum Virtutibus. Within this series of examples illustrating women’s virtues, Plutarch concludes many of the episodes with an aetiology. A careful examination of these aetiologies and their distribution throughout the work reveals both the importance of this device and the sophisticated manner in which Plutarch employs it. I suggest this use of aetiology is the main mechanism for proving his argument that women and men can display the same virtue. The aetiologies legitimize this claim by proving that women’s actions had real consequences, the effects of which could even reach his contemporary audience.

This paper will examine one device that Plutarch uses to educate his reader and communicate a shared sense of culture, namely, his use of aetiology. As early as the archaic period aetiology served a didactic function in Greek culture, often within the religious sphere. From the Homeric Hymns to tragedy to the works of Callimachus, aetiology was used to explain a present phenomenon, a festival, custom, or object, in terms of a past occurrence. Within this tradition, Plutarch found aetiology a useful and flexible rhetorical tool and he employed it in a number of his works for a range of purposes. For example, into his Life of Theseus Plutarch incorporates about thirty aetiologies, many of which pertain to the topography and institutions of Athens. These concern Theseus as the founder of Athens and provide a semi-historical basis for his legendary life. Plutarch’s interest in aetiology is also clearly evident in his Greek Questions and Roman Questions (Αἰτία Ἑλληνικά and Αἰτία Ῥωμαῖκα). These works each consist of a string of aetiologies, structured as a series of questions and possible answers that pertain to the origins and causes of institutions or specific naming conventions.

In the essay De Mulierum Virtutibus, Plutarch uses aetiology in yet another manner and for a different purpose. In this paper, I propose that his use of aetiology in this work is the main mechanism for proving his argument that