

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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“AND WHO DID NOT ATTEND THE BANQUET?” EVOCATIVE CONTEXTS OF WOMEN IN PLUTARCH’S *QUAESTIONES CONVIVALES*¹

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Abstract

Goddesses, women poets, *matronae*, lascivious flautists or concubines, those are Plutarch’s women. The references to women in Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Convivales* are spread all over the work and occur in a variety of contexts: mythical justification, intimate hygiene, support of men, the role of mother or simply that of woman. Thus, in this vast gallery presented by the scholar from Chaeronea, the trivial humane figures will be highlighted with the aim to unveil the importance of women and their place in the social sphere. Therefore, the image of the female projected in the *Quaestiones* will be crossed with the dominant view in Graeco-Roman society.

The space that Plutarch devotes to women and to all things related to them – education, social behaviour, the functioning of their body – in the whole of his work is unusual². Moreover, it is remarkable how the scholar from Chaeronea stands up in their defence, not only as human beings, but also as women, not reducing them to weak and useless beings, but exalting them as a natural and cultural force, like noble people that should be dignified from a social and individual point of view, as long as they remain in an inferior sphere.

In fact, the sheer number of works in the *Moralia* dedicated to the situation of women shows Plutarch’s interest in this subject, a real testimony to the history of the female condition: in the *Consolatio ad uxorem*, the author tries to attenuate his wife’s pain for the loss of her daughter; the works *Mulierum Virtutes* and *De Iside et Osiride* are dedicated to Clea, a Delphic priestess and cultured women with whom Plutarch discusses religious and philosophical issues³; we also have a lot to learn from the *Lacaenarum apophthegmata*, as from *Amatorius* and *Coniugalia Praecepta*, where Plutarch accords to marriage an erotic and sacred dimension⁴.

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² For an exhaustive study on Plutarch’s attitude to women and marriage see A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997. See also F. LE CORSU, 1981 for an analysis of the descriptions of women in the *Vitae*.

³ Cf. F. FACQ, 2006/2007, p. 51. This is how Plutarch opens the work *Bravery of Women* (242E-F): “Regarding the virtues of women, Clea, I do not hold the same opinion as Thucydides. For he declares that the best woman is she about whom there is the least talk among persons outside regarding either censure or commendation, (...). But to my mind Gorgias appears to display better taste in advising that not the form but the fame of a woman should be known to many.” In the treatise *Coniugalia Praecepta*, Plutarch mentions the female education issue and its potential impact on the future of young girls, a precept that is most relevant to the present (see *Moralia* 145C sqq). As F. FACQ, 2006/2007, p. 56 concluded: “Si à l’époque classique, il nous donne peu d’anecdotes montrant des filles (...), cela n’est plus le cas lors de la période de la domination romaine sur le monde méditerranéen où l’auteur décrit des scènes de la vie quotidienne représentant des fillettes, soit que cela lui tienne particulièrement à cœur, soit qu’un changement ait effectivement eu lieu dans la société.”

⁴ Cf. *Moralia* 139C-D, 142D-E, 754D, 767D-E, 769F-770A.