Illustrations of Motherhood in the *Mulierum Virtutes*

This paper offers a much-needed study of how the *Mulierum Virtutes* (hereafter *MV*) depicts maternal roles and virtues, and considers how this subtle treatment mirrors other, more explicit accounts of the subject in the *Lives* and the *Consolatio ad Uxorem*. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that, within the broader collection of stories about female virtue in the *MV*, we can trace a smaller collection of moralizations intended for mothers, and it attempts to explore in some detail this vastly understudied set of paradigms.

Plutarch establishes in his preface that the lessons which follow are intended for a certain Clea, a priestess of Delphi and the recipient of another of his works, *Isis and Osiris*. Yet Clea is an appropriate addressee for the *MV* not only because of her erudition, but also because, as a woman, she is expected to embody and perform the roles of wife and mother. In antiquity, a woman's identity—regardless of her age, marital status, or whether she had a child—was inextricably interwoven with her reproductive potential. Therefore, just as Clea's status as priestess informs a reading of *Isis and Osiris*, so, too, does her gender serve a programmatic function in the *MV*, priming a series of maternal virtues within the episodes to come.

Throughout the *MV*, Plutarch consistently invests mothers with moral education and self-sacrifice on behalf of the *polis*, and he endorses both behaviors as maternal responsibilities. Examples of the former are seen in the women of Phocis, who produced children capable of civic-minded action ἰδίᾳ (244D), "in private" and unprompted, and the wives of the Persians, who utilized *anasyrma*—self-exposure of their genitalia—along with a parturitional cry (246A, "Surely you cannot, in your flight, slink back in here whence you were born") to dissuade men's cowardice in battle. Later anecdotes of Stratonike and the wife of Pythes illustrate the civic function of motherhood; both wives, when deprived of children, are praised for not excessively grieving such loss—a behavior which Plutarch also rebukes elsewhere (*Consolatio ad Uxorem* 609E). Instead, these women devote themselves to nourishing the *polis* as a sort of surrogate child. Through these examples, I argue, Plutarch reminds both Clea and his readers that while the generative function of motherhood is essential to create and sustain an *oikos*, the virtues of a mother—didacticism, selflessness, and nourishment—are what sustain the *polis*.

Two *synkriseis* punctuate this *polis*-nourishing role of mothers in Plutarch's *MV*, mirroring to some extent the pairing of biographies in the *Parallel Lives*. The first of these juxtaposes the parents of Micca, who lament idly when their daughter faces abuse from an unwanted suitor and chalk the cruelty up to "necessity" (251A τὴν ἀνάγκην), and Megisto, who is willing to sacrifice her own child—the manifestation of her identity as mother—rather than stand by and see injustice prevail (252C–D). Through these vignettes, Plutarch offers two composite sketches of mothers: one who sacrifices (for) her child and is admired, and one who silently obeys her role as wife and is vilified. If we translate this into terms of social spheres, we see that the successful mother operates for the sake of the *polis* while the failure restricts her operation solely in interest of her own *oikos*.

This tension between domestic and civil interest extends to a second *synkrisis* between Aretaphila and Calbia. Both women exploit their maternal status by urging their children to act, but only one is successful. The reason for this is not their methods of persuasion, but rather their differing motivations. Calbia attempts to persuade her son, the tyrant Nicocrates, with only domestic motivation—namely to protect him from harm (256B)—and fails; Aretaphila, in contrast, couches her persuasions in civic motivation—to help her children fulfill their social role (256D–E) and to depose a tyrant (256E–F)—and therefore succeeds in both cases.

The common thread between these two extended parallels is the notion of sacrifice and civic mindedness being essential to "good" mothering. The difference between the two exempla, however, is that Aretaphila and Calbia exploit and establish their motherhood in a political sphere rather than a private one, as both Megisto and Micca's mother do. By expanding the sphere of maternal influence from private to public in this way, Plutarch bridges the gap between the feminine *MV* and the masculine *Lives* and evokes memory of other political mothers, particularly Cornelia and Olympias, whom he named as paragons of virtue in his preface (243D).

By studying these recurrent exempla of motherhood throughout the *MV* and identifying their antecedents in other Plutarchian works, this paper clarifies a continued preoccupation with proper parental practice, which further develops our conception of Plutarch not just as a teacher and philosopher but as a husband and father as well.