

The *Mulierum Virtutes* as Miscellany:
A Potential Classification for Plutarch's "Unclassifiable" Work

In 2011, Teresa Morgan claimed that Plutarch was a "virtuoso of the miscellany," and that no other early imperial author had contributed to the development of this genre to the degree that Plutarch had (70). Of the more than one dozen miscellanies that Morgan identifies within Plutarch's *Moralia*, she focuses primarily on Plutarch's sympotic *Table Talk*, claiming that understanding this text as miscellaneous can shed new light on its contents and bring the genre of miscellany back into consideration by classicists. Although Morgan also mentions Plutarch's *Mulierum Virtutes* (*MV*) as a potential miscellaneous text, she does not elaborate on this classification. This paper builds off of Morgan's work, in particular her passing classification of the *MV* and her multiple formulations of the meaning of "miscellaneous." Starting where Morgan left off, I argue for the classification of the *Mulierum Virtutes* as miscellany by both ancient and modern definitions of the term.

I begin by considering the conceptions of miscellany in the ancient world, including the relationship of this genre to that of encyclopedism, and offer both ancient and modern evidence for these conceptions. I then discuss how opinions of miscellany have changed between antiquity and now, as well as the chronological changes of the methods of consumption of miscellaneous texts. I focus particularly on the two definitions of miscellany proposed by Morgan (2007), one of which is broad, the other of which is much narrower and favored by modern classicists. The broader definition claims that an ancient miscellany "is properly any collection of shorter pieces or excerpts, arranged to educate or entertain" (Morgan, 2007: 332), and I use Plutarch's own words from the *MV* to show that this text is both didactic and composed of excerpts, thus conforming to Morgan's broad definition. I follow a similar procedure when working with the

narrow definition, which claims that a miscellaneous text must rework material to a new purpose (Morgan, 2011). By again closely examining the text, I demonstrate that the *MV* can be classified as miscellaneous by both of these modern definitions.

The *MV* is also exceptionally similar to multiple ancient texts that are widely considered to be miscellaneous, particularly Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights* and Plutarch's own *Table Talk*. I draw multiple parallels between the *MV* and these two texts, focusing on the moral framework and randomness of writing that all three works share. The most striking similarity is between the *MV* and the *Table Talk*; in both texts, Plutarch claims that he has recorded his anecdotes and stories "at random" (σποράδην) (*Mor.* 253F, 629D). Using this textual comparison as well as others, I demonstrate that the *MV* conforms to the ancient conception of miscellany as well as the modern ones.

Finally, I take into consideration some possible implications of classifying the *MV* as a miscellaneous text. Besides the challenge of classification, one of the most perplexing aspects of the *MV* is the disjunction between its preface and body: in the preface, Plutarch claims that the best way to compare male and female virtue is to directly compare the words and deeds of males and females. In the body, however, he fails to do this, instead offering up *chreiai* that appear to be only about women. Although many explanations have been proposed for this issue, I think that using the lens of miscellany may provide some further ideas, and I end my paper by briefly discussing some of these potential solutions.

Works Cited

- Morgan, Teresa. "The Miscellany and Plutarch." In *The Philosopher's Banquet: Plutarch's Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*, edited by Frieda Klotz and Katerina Oikonomopoulou, 49-76. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.
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