

The Ethics of Motherhood in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*

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The Plutarchan corpus is broadly divided into two groupings: the *Moralia* and the *Parallel Lives*. The first is a collection of treatises on miscellaneous subjects including religion, literary criticism, education, philosophy, and history. The *Parallel Lives* is his magnum opus, composed in the latter years of his life and consisting of biographies of Greek and Roman statesmen, paired for comparison. Both collections share a foundational principle of moral edification,¹ a purpose Plutarch explicitly articulates in the introduction to his biography of Alexander the Great (*Alex.* 1):

οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίου, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι πάντως ἐνεστι δῆλωσις ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας, ἀλλὰ πράγμα βραχὺ πολλάκις καὶ ῥῆμα καὶ παιδιὰ τις ἔμφασιν ἦθους ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυριόνεκροι καὶ παρατάξεις αἰ μέγισται καὶ πολιορκίαι πόλεων.

I am not writing history but biography, and the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often, in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives, huge troop movements, and whole cities besieged.²

¹ T. Duff, “Plutarch as Moralist and Political Educator,” in F. B. Titchener et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plutarch* (Cambridge 2023) 47–78, at 65.

² Transl. R. Waterfield, in Plutarch's *Greek Lives* (Oxford 2008).

Plutarch's engagement with historical figures in *Lives* is guided by moral imperatives such as virtue, humanity, and compassion, serving to substantiate the ethical principles outlined in *Moralia*.³ These principles involve not only men, and indeed nearly every *Life* Plutarch presents—Marcellus being a notable exception—includes at least one female figure. Women in *Lives* have various roles: as wives, sisters, daughters, courtesans, and concubines, and rather than portraying them as passive or submissive, Plutarch shows their autonomy and maturity. Women are seen as historical figures but also as embodiments of the ethical precepts Plutarch outlines in his works, thus becoming part of the bridge between his thinking in *Lives* and in *Moralia*.⁴

It is as mothers that women have their strongest ethical presence in *Lives*. Among the extant forty-six paired biographies, most comparing a Roman with a Greek individual though some are unpaired, in each case Plutarch takes care to introduce both the father and mother of the eminent man in question. Notably, Plutarch's work is one of the earliest Greek literary sources to explicitly name mothers, setting him apart from his contemporaries.⁵ As Bradley Buszard observes, depictions of women in Plutarch's work offer "the most extensive analysis of female

³ D. A. Russell, "On Reading Plutarch's *Moralia*," *G&R* 15 (1968) 130–146, at 135.

⁴ G. Tsouvala, "Love and Marriage," in M. Beck (ed.), *A Companion to Plutarch* (Malden 2014) 191–206, at 191.

⁵ E.g. *Lyc.* 1, *Sol.* 1, *Them.* 1, *Cim.* 4, *Per.* 1, *Alc.* 1, *Ages.* 1, *Alex.* 2, *Dem.* 4, *Demetr.* 2, *Pyrrh.* 1, *Agis* 4, *Tim.* 3, etc.; Cratesicleia, Cleomenes' mother's name, is mentioned in the dramatic epilogue of Cleomenes' life (*Cleom.* 22). The names of the mothers of Nicias, Phocion, Eumenes, Aratus, and Philopoemen are not mentioned. Mothers' names are more frequently omitted in Roman lives (e.g. Titus Flamininus, Fabius Maximus, Crassus, Aemilius Paulus, Sulla, Sertorius). It is interesting to note that in Plutarch's *Vitae decem oratorum* only two mothers out of ten are mentioned. Generally, especially in a legal context, even in the Hellenistic period, there was a tendency to avoid women's names in public discourse, which made Plutarch an exception. See J. Gould, "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens," *JHS* 100 (1980) 38–59, at 45.

character by any ancient author.”⁶

This article aims to explore the ethics of motherhood as portrayed in Plutarch’s *Lives* by conducting a critical analysis of selected passages that focus on the influence of mothers on their children. After an introductory discussion, the study is divided into two sections which focus separately on maternal relations with sons and with daughters. The article seeks to refine our understanding of the social and cultural norms surrounding motherhood as depicted in Plutarch’s writings, specifically examining how the role of mothers in *Lives* shows women challenging limitations in Greek and Roman conventional gender roles.

Plutarch and family values

Love and marriage hold significant importance for Plutarch, both as a moral philosopher and as a statesman.⁷ Throughout his writings, he consistently underscores the importance of the family for cultivating virtues in individuals, such as kindness and patience, that are foundational for societal welfare. In *Lives*, he often focuses on the domestic affairs of his protagonists, particularly those belonging to higher social strata,⁸ where the husband—typically older⁹ and educated—assumes the roles of

⁶ B. Buszard, “The Speech of Greek and Roman Women in Plutarch’s *Lives*,” *CP* 105 (2010) 83–115, at 83.

⁷ See discussion in Tsouvala, in *A Companion to Plutarch* 191–206.

⁸ In *De liberis educandis* (1B, 8E) Plutarch concedes that he advises exclusively to the elite families.

⁹ For the difference in age between groom and bride see S. Boehringer, S. Caciagli, and A. Stevens, “The Age of Love,” *Clio. Women, Gender, History* 42 (2015) 24–51, at 28–29. Similarly, see A. Glazebrook and K. Olson, “Greek and Roman Marriage,” in T. K. Hubbard (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities* (Blackwell 2014) 73–86, at 74. In Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, Ischomachus tells Socrates that he married his wife when she was not yet fifteen (7.5, ἔτη μὲν οὐπω πεντεκαίδεκα γεγονυῖα ἦλθε πρὸς ἐμέ). Sparta could have been an exception, because the Spartan girls usually married at eighteen; see S. B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* (Oxford 2002) 5.

both teacher and leader of the family.¹⁰ While the responsibilities of a wife and mother are indispensable to societal well-being, women are not granted the same status as those accorded to husbands and fathers.¹¹

However, Plutarch's views on marriage and motherhood are in certain aspects progressive. In *Coniugalia Praecepta* he attributes the responsibility for a harmonious family life to both partners (138C), a stance that was atypical for his era. He envisions marriage as a partnership between two distinct individuals, founded on mutual affection and, importantly, marital sexual love.¹² An exemplary marriage, according to him, should be based on affection, respect, and gratitude—attitudes that were uncommon in this second-century context (*Sol.* 20, ἐπὶ τεκνώσει

¹⁰ As the usual age gap was from ten to fifteen years, the husband, according to Plutarch, should be a guide to his wife as well as philosopher and teacher, and he should lead her towards virtue (*Coni. praec.* 145C). At 142E he compares the husband's leadership in the family to the soul's leadership of the body: κρατεῖν δὲ δεῖ τὸν ἄνδρα τῆς γυναικὸς οὐχ ὡς δεσπότην κτήματος ἀλλ' ὡς ψυχὴν σώματος. Socrates' question in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* confirms that it was the husband who was traditionally supposed to teach his wife to behave properly (7.4, ὦ Ἰσχύμαχε, πάνυ ἂν ἠδέως σου πυθίμην, πότερα αὐτὸς σὺ ἐπαίδευσας τὴν γυναῖκα, ὥστε εἶναι οἶαν δεῖ).

¹¹ M. Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion* (London 2001) 294.

¹² In the *Amatorius* Plutarch advocates for ἔρωσ of the husband for his wife, mutual love, and friendship between spouses; see J. M. Rist, "Plutarch's *Amatorius*: A Commentary of Plato's Theories of Love?" *CQ* 51 [2001] 557–575. In *Coniugalia praecepta* 142F Plutarch says that "the marriage of a couple in love with each other is a solid union" (γάμος ὁ μὲν τῶν ἐρόντων ἠνωμένος καὶ συμφυῆς ἐστίν). According to A. G. Nikolaidis, "Plutarch on Women and Marriage," *WS* 110 (1997) 27–88, at 49, to Plutarch "a marriage without sex is a loveless union." It is difficult to agree with Walcot that Plutarch regards sex with women as a dirty thing (P. Walcot, "Plutarch on Sex," *G&R* 45 [1998] 166–187, at 166 when he claims: "In fact [Plutarch] clearly shares the long-established and common Greek prejudice whereby sexual activities are thought something essentially 'dirty', forced upon man by a combination of biological necessity and an inability to resist feminine wiles, and something, therefore, to be experienced rather than enjoyed, not spontaneously but at a set and regular time, in total privacy and without excessive passion").

καὶ χάριτι καὶ φιλότῃτι γίνεσθαι τὸν ἀνδρὸς καὶ γυναικὸς συνοικισμόν). The fundamental object of marriage, according to Plutarch, is for parents to raise their children in an environment of mutual love and support, equipping them with the best possible education to cultivate them into virtuous citizens (*De lib. ed.* 4C, 5C). He emphasizes the shared responsibility of both parents in their children's upbringing, portraying the mother as the emotional center of the family, while the father represents the rational principle.

Roman inspiration

Although a Roman citizen of equestrian rank, Plutarch was a committed Greek patriot and his decision to pair Greek and Roman lives reflects his dual allegiance. While his viewpoints often echo Greek virtues, they also engage with Roman social norms, thus establishing a dialogue between the two cultures. Even when discussing Roman affairs and figures, Hellenic culture remains central to Plutarch's account. As Rebecca Preston explains, "the Greek elite were in many ways the most Romanized of the population in the East. Yet, as the most educated and culturally proficient, and in their claim to cultural authority as guardians of classical heritage, they could also be seen as the most Greek."¹³ Plutarch finds his protagonists embodying Greek virtues rooted in the classical past, and he legitimizes his interpretations through the authority of historical tradition. Given his dual Greek and Roman cultural affiliation, it stands to reason that his perspective on maternal roles is influenced by both traditions. Yet portraits of Athenian mothers are conspicuously absent in Plutarch's *Lives*, an absence that likely reflects Athenian cultural norms and social practices that largely relegated women to the domestic sphere away from

¹³ R. Preston, "Roman Questions, Greek Answers: Plutarch and the Construction of Identity," in S. Goldhill (ed.), *Being Greek under Rome. Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge 2001) 86–119, at 91.

public life and political activities.¹⁴ These patriarchal attitudes towards women, along with the corresponding social and legal practices, are tellingly encapsulated in Aristotle's comparison of women to children (*Pol.* 1260a9–14), and in Pericles' Funeral Oration in Thucydides' *History* in which Pericles sees it as women's duty to avoid giving men reason to speak of them much, whether favourably or negatively (2.45.2):

εἰ δέ με δεῖ καὶ γυναικείας τι ἀρετῆς, ὅσαι νῦν ἐν χηρείᾳ ἔσονται, μνησθῆναι, βραχεία παραινέσει ἅπαν σημανῶ. τῆς τε γὰρ ὑπαρχούσης φύσεως μὴ χείροσι γενέσθαι ὑμῖν μεγάλη ἢ δόξα καὶ ἥς ἂν ἐπ' ἐλάχιστον ἀρετῆς πέρι ἢ ψόγου ἐν τοῖς ἄρσεσι κλέος ἦ.

If I may speak also of the duty of those wives who will now be widows, a brief exhortation will say it all. Your great virtue is to show no more weakness than is inherent in your nature, and to cause least talk among males for either praise or blame. (transl. M. Hammond)

Although Thucydides was a key authority for Plutarch, he openly diverged from the historian on the subject of the correct role of women. This can be seen in the introduction to his *De mulierum virtutibus* when Plutarch finds more compelling Gorgias' notion, that a woman's reputation should be known to many: ἡμῖν δὲ κομψότερος μὲν ὁ Γοργίας φαίνεται, κελεύων μὴ τὸ εἶδος ἀλλὰ τὴν δόξαν εἶναι πολλοῖς γνώριμον τῆς γυναικός (242E–F).

In Plutarch's *Lives*, it is noteworthy that all exemplary mothers are either Spartan or Roman. In the *Sayings of the Spartan Women* in *Moralia*, mothers are depicted as embodiments of a heroic ethos, valuing austerity and unflinching loyalty to the polis as maternal virtues. Far from needing to limit what Pericles calls women's natural weakness, the Spartan mother stoically accepts

¹⁴ D. M. Pritchard, "The Position of Attic Women in Democratic Athens," *G&R* 61 (2014) 174–193. Newly-born male children of Athenian citizens had to be declared to and accepted by the members of their father's deme, while there is no evidence for this procedure for daughters. The system remained stable well into the Hellenistic period (J. K. Davies, "Athenian Citizenship: The Descent Group and the Alternatives," *CJ* 73 [1977] 105–121, at 105). Babies depicted on Athenian vases are always male: Pritchard 183.

her son's fate, neither showing grief at his death nor hesitating to reject or even see him executed should he prove unworthy of Sparta.¹⁵ However, in *Lives*, Plutarch does not primarily employ this Spartan prototype. Instead, his depiction seems more influenced by the Roman concept of motherhood. Unlike their Greek counterparts, Roman women were always citizens of the state as well as family members, and they maintained a position of respect throughout their lives.¹⁶ The Roman mother, recognized as an experienced member of the older generation, wielded considerable authority over her children.¹⁷ Yet, similar to her Spartan counterpart, the Roman mother is rarely associated with affection or tenderness in literary sources.¹⁸

Yet Plutarch ascribes significant importance to maternal affection in the upbringing of children. This perspective is illuminated in his *De amore prolis*, where he maintains that the aim of bearing and raising a child is not utility but love (496C, ὡς τοῦ τεκεῖν καὶ θρέψαι τέλος οὐ χρεῖαν ἀλλὰ φιλίαν ἔχοντος). He further argues that this naturally ingrained affection is most deeply rooted in mothers (496E, τὸ φύσει φιλόστοργον). However, elaborating on a son's filial affection, he asserts that fathers invest considerable effort from early childhood in raising their sons (ψελλιζόντων καὶ συλλαβιζόντων ἠκροῶντο), and that most fathers will predecease their sons' virtuous achievements (496E–497A):

ἀνθρώπου δ' ἢ μὲν ἔκτροφή πολύπονος ἢ δ' αὐξήσις βραδεῖα, τῆς δ' ἀρετῆς μακρὰν οὔσης προαποθνήσκουσιν οἱ πλείστοι πατέρες. οὐκ ἐπεῖδε τὴν Σαλαμίνα Νεοκλῆς τὴν Θεμιστοκλέους οὐδὲ τὸν Εὐρυμέδοντα Μιλτιάδης τὸν Κίμωνος, οὐδ' ἤκουσε Περικλέους Ξάνθιππος δημηγοροῦντος οὐδ' Ἀρίστων Πλάτωνος φιλοσοφοῦν-

¹⁵ M. Myszkowska-Kaszuba, "The Roman Mother like the Spartan Mother: Remark on a Cross Cultural Notion of the Mother(hood) in Plutarch," *Hermes* 145 (2017) 480–487, at 482.

¹⁶ P. Culham, "Women in the Roman Republic," in H. J. Fowler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* (Cambridge 2004) 139–159, at 139.

¹⁷ S. Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Norman 2013) 171.

¹⁸ According to Dixon, "The ideal mother of Latin literature was a formidable figure": *The Roman Mother* xvi.

τος, οὐδ' Εὐριπίδου καὶ Σοφοκλέους νίκας οἱ πατέρες ἔγνωσαν· ψελλιζόντων καὶ συλλαβίζόντων ἠκροῶντο καὶ κώμους καὶ πότους καὶ ἔρωτας αὐτῶν οἷα νέοι πλημμελούντων ἐπεῖδον· ὥστ' ἐπαινέσθαι καὶ μνημονεύεσθαι τοῦ Εὐήνου τοῦτο μόνον ὧν ἔγραψεν, ἢ δέος ἢ λύπη παῖς πατρὶ πάντα χρόνον.

As for man, his rearing is full of trouble, his growth is slow, his attainment of excellence is far distant and most fathers die before it comes. Neocles did not live to see the Salamis of Themistocles nor Miltiades the Eurymedon of Cimon; nor did Xanthippus ever hear Pericles harangue the people, nor did Ariston hear Plato expound philosophy; nor did the fathers of Euripides and Sophocles come to know their sons' victories; they but heard them lisping and learning to speak and witnessed their revellings and drinking-bouts and love-affairs, as they indulged in such follies as young men commit; so that of all Evenus wrote the only line that is praised or remembered is "For fathers a child is always fear or pain." (transl. Helmbold)

Plutarch's seeming endorsement of the age-old patriarchal tendency to "erase the maternal contribution to 'selfhood',"¹⁹ warrants careful scrutiny,²⁰ especially since his examples of fatherhood predominantly feature illustrious Athenians. In *Lives*, his portrayals of motherhood are largely set in Roman and Spartan contexts, rather than in classical Athens. The scarcity of surviving material on Athenian women from the classical era, along with their exclusion from collective memory, might explain Plutarch's relative silence concerning Athenian women in *Lives*.²¹ His depiction of exemplary mothers relies heavily on

¹⁹ Quotation from L. Green, "Myth, Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity in Irigaray," *Studies in the Maternal* 4 (2012) 1–22, at 3.

²⁰ The purpose and the genre of *De amore prolis* is not quite clear, but nowadays it is often regarded as a declamation and thus meant for a male audience. See G. Roskam, "Plutarch against Epicurus on Affection for Offspring. A Reading of *De amore prolis*," in G. Roskam et al. (eds.), *Virtues for the People. Aspects of Plutarchan Ethics* (Leuven 2011) 175–201, at 176.

²¹ In the *Alcibiades* Plutarch alludes to the very limited access to information about the mothers of prominent Athenians: *Alc.* 1, Νικίου μὲν καὶ Δημοσθένους καὶ Λαμάχου καὶ Φορμίωνος Θρασυβούλου τε καὶ Θηραμένους, ἐπιφανῶν

Spartan and Roman sources, suggesting that such material was more accessible to him.

Mothers and sons

Plutarch's portrayal of the heroic mother, embodying the nexus between motherhood, ethics, and state policy, bears similarities to the Spartan militaristic, state-sponsored Spartan model of motherhood. As is well known, Spartan girls underwent rigorous athletic training, preparing them for their roles as mothers of warriors. Mothers were esteemed as the pinnacle of moral authority for their sons and thus motherhood was seen as serving societal expectations. She had the power not only to grant her son life but also, in extreme cases, to condemn him to death, as is illustrated in Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women*.²² Similarly, Roman matrons were publicly celebrated for their loyalty to their male relatives and to Rome itself.²³ However, Plutarch places particular emphasis on the emotional bonds between mothers and sons, highlighting their reciprocal nature.

Plutarch's *Lives* features numerous examples of Greek and Roman sons submitting to their venerated mother's desires, even when such acquiescence results in their ruin. One example is Coriolanus, who, having lost his father (*Cor.* 1, πατρὸς ὄρφανός),

ἀνδρῶν γενομένων κατ' αὐτόν, οὐδενὸς οὐδ' ἡ μήτηρ ὀνόματος τετύχηκεν, "After all, Nicias, Demosthenes, Lamachus, Phormio, Thrasybulus, and Theramenes were Alcibiades' contemporaries and were famous at the time, but there is no trace even of the names of any of their mothers." All of the mentioned individuals were born before 451 B.C. when Pericles' citizenship law was passed, requiring that Athenian citizenship was bestowed only on those whose father and mother both were Athenians.

²² When a Spartan mother hears that her son behaved dishonorably during a military campaign, she advises him either to shake off the accusations against him or to stop living: 241D, Ἄλλη ἀκούσασα περὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ, ὡς κακῶς ἐπὶ τῆς ξένης ἀναστρέφοιτο, ἔγραψε, "κακά τευ φάμα κακκέχεται· ταύταν ἀπόθρευ ἢ μὴ ἔσο; 241E, Ἐτέρα ἐπ' ἀδικήματι τῷ παιδί κρινομένῳ, "τέκνον," εἶπεν, "ἢ τὰς αἰτίας ἢ σεαυτὸν τοῦ ζῆν ἀπόλυσον.

²³ A. K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (New York 2016) 4. See also Myszkowska-Kaszuba, *Hermes* 145 (2017) 480–487.

was raised by his widowed mother Volumnia (τραφεῖς ὑπὸ μητρὶ χήρᾳ).²⁴ Thanks to his mother's devoted care, Coriolanus was able to overcome the absence of his father and emerge as an exceptional, distinguished individual (σπουδαῖον ἄνδρα καὶ διαφέροντα τῶν πολλῶν). Deeply devoted to his mother, although he pursued his own glory, he placed even greater importance on his mother's happiness as the principal goal in his life (4, ἦν δὲ τοῖς μὲν ἄλλοις ἡ δόξα τῆς ἀρετῆς τέλος, ἐκείνῳ δὲ τῆς δόξης ἡ τῆς μητρὸς εὐφροσύνη). Even in adulthood, his mother's influence remained central throughout his life, as evidenced by his decision to marry according to her wishes and to continue living with her even after starting his own family (4).²⁵ When Volumnia visited Coriolanus' camp to dissuade him from assaulting Rome, he immediately submitted to her plea, despite recognizing that a peace treaty between the Romans and Volscians would result in his death (36).²⁶ Upon his return to Antium, conspirators assassinated him.

Like Volumnia, mothers emerge as brave figures who insist that their sons pursue the highest goals, support them steadfastly, and share in the risks they undertake, while fathers remain largely absent. For example, Alexander the Great was heavily influenced by his mother Olympias, who persistently insinuated that his true father was a god and not Philip, and thus urged him

²⁴ In Roman literary sources, mothers are presented as taking care of their sons' intellectual and moral education (Dixon, *The Roman Mother* 177). According to Dixon, Roman matrons "tended to focus their ambitions on their sons rather than their husbands, sons expected their mothers to support their political aspirations" (175).

²⁵ In Rome, the adult son, even when unmarried, might have lived apart from his mother (and father). A widowed mother was usually regularly visited by her son (Dixon, *The Roman Mother* 169). Living together with an adult son (and his family) is stressed in *Lives* only in the case of Roman mothers.

²⁶ After Volumnia persuades him to end the war and arrange peace between Romans and Volscians, blaming him for not showing his mother any gratitude and reverence, Coriolanus cried in despair that it is she alone and not the Romans who won a victory over him and the Volscians for Rome (36).

to seek goals befitting the son of a deity (*Alex.* 3). Alexander esteemed her so highly that he ignored Antipater's accusations of her political interference, asserting that "a single tear shed by a mother wipes out ten thousand letters" (39, μυρίας ἐπιστολάς ἐν δάκρυον ἀπαλείφει μητρός). Similarly, Timoleon revered his mother Demariste; her disapproval of his actions against his brother grieved him so deeply that he attempted to starve himself to death (*Tim.* 5). Likewise, Sertorius was deeply devoted to his mother Rhea, whom he held in great admiration (*Sert.* 2, ὑπερφυῶς δοκεῖ φιλομήτωρ γενέσθαι). She had brought him up as a politician, training him extensively in law and oratory,²⁷ deeming this the ideal preparation for his future political career (2). Despite their sons' eminent status, these mothers continued to exert significant influence over them. Their sons, in turn, regarded them with profound devotion, complying with their wishes even under the most trying circumstances.

The unbreakable bond between mother and son persists throughout their lives, with mothers acting as ultimate moral authorities for their sons. Mothers like Volumnia, Olympias, Demariste, and Rhea actively participate in their sons' political activity, influencing their decisions and supporting them in just causes, while also condemning any unjust actions. Mothers, through their sons, gain social status, political visibility, and carve out a place in history, as exemplified by Volumnia, who saved Rome from destruction at the hands of Coriolanus though this meant ultimately sacrificing her maternal love (*Cor.* 35–36).

Volumnia is one of eleven Greek and Roman women who deliver speeches in *Lives*. Her speech presents a strong maternal ethics: an unyielding sense of personal accountability for both

²⁷ In Plutarch, usually it is the father who should be in charge of the education of the son: B. M. Santiago, R. C. López, and M. S. Romero, "Mothers and Sons in Plutarch's Roman *Parallel Lives*: *Auctoritas* and Maternal Influence during the Roman Republic," in *Motherhood and Infancies in the Mediterranean in Antiquity* (Oxford 2018) 200–210, at 201. Still, in the Roman literary sources there is a constant stress on the good mother's contribution to her son's education (Dixon, *The Roman Mother* 170).

her son's fate and Rome's destiny.²⁸ The influence of a virtuous mother like Volumnia extends beyond her son's childhood, shaping his decisions and actions even when he has grown into a powerful adult. From Plutarch's viewpoint, this profound bond between mothers and sons seems to be deeply ingrained in Greek and Roman society, possessing immense value in shaping not only individual destinies but also the course of history itself.

The Roman matron Cornelia, mother to the Gracchi brothers Tiberius and Gaius, stands out as yet another exemplary mother in *Lives*.²⁹ After the untimely death of her husband, Cornelia single-handedly raised their twelve children, refusing to marry King Ptolemy VIII and dedicating herself to her family and estate. Despite the loss of nine of her children, she remained devoted to the two sons who would become distinguished statesmen. She alone among women in *Lives* is characterized as magnanimous (μεγαλόψυχος, *Ti. Gracch.* 1), a quality typically attributed to statesmen in Plutarch's writings.³⁰ Cornelia meticulously arranged her sons' education and future careers, and their achievements reflect her influence.³¹ Plutarch portrays her as a loving and prudent mother who had high expectations for her sons, thereby earning their respect and admiration. Gaius, for instance, publicly lauded her virtue in one of his speeches (*C. Gracch.* 4), while Cornelia went to considerable lengths to support her sons in their political endeavors. During

²⁸ Buszard, *CP* 105 (2010) 89.

²⁹ Cf. Santiago et al., in *Motherhood and Infancies* 204–205; see also Myszkowska-Kaszuba, *Hermes* 145 (2017) 485–487.

³⁰ *Lyc.* 22; *Per.* 36; *Fab.* 1; *Alex.* 4, 30, 42; *Dem.* 1; *Dion* 19, 52; *Tim.* 5; *Aem.* 28; *Pel.* 25, 26; *Flam.* 21; *Phoc.* 36; *Arat.* 19; *Cat. Min.* 14; et al.

³¹ *Ti. Gracch.* 1, οὕτω φιλοτίμως ἐξέθρεψεν, ὥστε πάντων εὐφροσεστάτους Ῥωμαίων ὁμολογουμένως γεγονότας, πεπαιδεύσθαι δοκεῖν βέλτιον ἢ πεφυκέναι πρὸς ἀρετήν, “She brought up these two boys, Tiberius and Gaius, with such devotion that although they were, by common consent, the most gifted young men of their generation in Rome, their education was generally held to have played a more important part than nature in forming their excellent qualities.”

Gaius' conflict with his adversary Opimius, Cornelia secretly hired supporters for him from abroad and corresponded with him through encrypted letters (*C. Gracch.* 13). After Cornelia's death, the Romans commemorated her by erecting a statue bearing the inscription "Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi" (*C. Gracch.* 4), an enduring tribute to her dual status as an exemplary mother and an exemplary Roman citizen.

In *Lives*, Plutarch's mothers are depicted as capable of performing heroic deeds for the sake of their sons, deeds that rival those of the most gallant men.³² Although his examples specifically pertain to Spartan mothers, it is conceivable that other virtuous mothers would behave similarly under analogous circumstances. For instance, Agesistrata and her mother Archidamia were deeply moved by their son and grandson Agis' idealistic vision for Sparta. They supported him both financially and politically, actively participating in his efforts to implement political reforms intended to restore Sparta's greatness, despite societal resistance (*Agis* 6–9). Regrettably for them, notwithstanding their commitment, their reform efforts failed because of overwhelming internal opposition in Sparta. After Agis was condemned to death, Agesistrata went to the prison and begged for her son's life to be spared, thus risking her own life. There she was charged with conspiracy together with her son. She did not deny it nor try to escape but met her fate heroically, as her son did, wishing that her death could bring good to Sparta (20, "Μόνον," ἔφη, "συνενέγκαι ταῦτα τῇ Σπάρτῃ.").

Similarly, the Spartan king Cleomenes' mother Cratesicleia was willing to risk her own life for the success of her son's political ambition to restore Sparta's former glory. Ptolemy promised to support Cleomenes but asked for hostages, including his mother and children. Cleomenes was hesitant to inform his

³² In his *Bravery of Women* (*De mulierum virtutibus*) Plutarch argues that women have agency and are capable of heroic deeds, but all the examples he gives there of collective or individual bravery are centred on daughters or wives rather than mothers.

mother, but upon his doing so, Cratesicleia laughed fearlessly and declared that she should be sent by ship to wherever she could best serve Sparta before old age rendered her body useless (*Cleom.* 22).³³ Her resulting death attains a tragic stature, mirroring the demise of Agis' mother and grandmother (38). In *Lives*, mothers rather than fathers are prepared to relinquish everything for their sons' well-being, even sacrificing their own lives.

Caesar's mother, Aurelia, also played a significant role in her son's adult life, although her story lacks the tragic elements found in other examples offered by Plutarch. Aurelia is portrayed as a reputable, prudent woman (*Caes.* 9, γυνή σόφρων) consistently supporting Caesar in even the riskiest of situations and expressing empathy and concern for his public reputation. Residing in Caesar's household, she kept a close eye on the behavior of his young wife Pompeia. When Caesar made the bold decision to run for pontifex maximus, his mother was the only person who truly understood and supported him. On the day of the election she accompanied him to the threshold with tears in her eyes (7, τῆς μητρὸς ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας αὐτὸν οὐκ ἄδακρυτὶ προπεμπούσης). Aurelia keenly understood that a defeat to Catulus would signify Caesar's downfall, a sentiment further confirmed by Caesar's parting words to her.³⁴

According to Plutarch, a mother's love and unwavering commitment to her son embody her ἀρετή (moral virtue), warranting public recognition. Mothers like Volumnia, Olympias, Demariste, Rhea, Cornelia, Agesistrata, Cratesicleia, and Aurelia establish a standard for others to emulate, transcending the boundaries of the domestic sphere. Plutarch's approach illuminates the private, enclosed, and often secretive world of the Greek household, in which women's activities were traditionally

³³ According to Buszard, "Cratesicleia's character and civic awareness are surprising. No other noble woman in the *Lives* expresses sentiments so thoroughly public in nature" (*CP* 105 [2010] 95).

³⁴ *Caes.* 7, ἀσπασάμενος αὐτήν, "ὦ μήτερ, εἶπε, "τήμερον ἢ ἀρχιερέα τὸν υἱὸν ἢ φυγάδα ὄψει.

obscured from men's knowledge. To employ John Gould's expression,³⁵ Plutarch unveils the "inside" world to the "outside" world, challenging the conventional belief that silence about women constituted the highest form of praise. In modern Western maternalism, the measure of the mother is her child; in Plutarch, the measure of the son is his mother.³⁶

Mothers and daughters

While Plutarch shows a strong interest in the topic of motherhood in his works, it is worth noting that his *Lives* lacks portrayals of emotionally charged mother-daughter relationships. This omission is puzzling, especially considering that in the classical polis the potential for intimate and affectionate bonds between mothers and daughters was occasionally acknowledged.³⁷ This gap in his narrative is the more noteworthy considering Plutarch's own life. After the loss of his daughter, he composed a consolatory letter to his wife, a document that serves both as a philosophical instruction and a personal reflection representing

³⁵ Gould, *JHS* 100 (1980) 50.

³⁶ Modern concepts of motherhood that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century regarded motherhood as an institution fundamental to the society. Good mothers were considered to have a unique influence on their children and were expected to rear a new generation that would ensure the successful functioning of the society (see J. Vandenberg-Daves, *Modern Motherhood: An American History* [New Brunswick 2014] 1–8). According to R. H. Barrow, starting from the sixteenth century, through Montaigne and Rousseau, who owed a great deal to Plutarch, "the life and institutions of France were profoundly changed and so the life of Europe": *Plutarch and his Times* (London 1967) 162. For nineteenth-century readers, Plutarch was very well known, mainly as a biographer; see I. Hurst, "Plutarch and the Victorians", in S. Xenophontos et al. (eds.), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch* (Leiden 2019) 563–573.

³⁷ According to P. E. Slater, "the mother-daughter bond seems nonetheless to have been the closest, most affectionate, and least conflicted of all familial dyadic relationships, as is true in most sex-segregated societies": *The Glory of Hera. Greek Mythology and Greek Family* (Boston 1968) 29. Cf. J.-M. Claassen, "Plutarch's Little Girl," *Aclass* 47 (2004) 27–50, at 41–42.

his response to the tragic event.³⁸ In the letter, Plutarch describes his little daughter as “exceptionally beloved” (608C, ἀγαπητὸν διαφερόντως), a sentiment noted for its rarity, considering the traditionally limited role of fathers in their daughters’ upbringing.³⁹ Moreover, Plutarch recognizes the profound nature of the mother-daughter bond, emphasizing that the loss was even greater for his wife, especially as this was a longed-for daughter, born following four sons (608C, σοὶ ποθούση θυγάτηρ μετὰ τέσσαρας υἱοὺς ἐγεννήθη). Despite these deeply personal insights, Plutarch’s *Lives* offers no historical examples of emotionally strong mother-daughter relationships.⁴⁰

Yet, in the narrative of Agesistrata and Archidamia, we find a rare depiction of a mother and grandmother’s selfless devotion to their son and grandson, Agis IV, the young heir to the Eurypontid throne. Their actions are solely motivated by Agis’ interests, which for them are one with Sparta’s. They act in unison, sharing identical virtues and character traits.⁴¹

All other instances of mother-daughter relationships in *Lives* pertain to a specific kind of family type that excludes male relatives such as fathers, brothers, and sons. This refers to family groups consisting exclusively of *hetairai* (courtesans)⁴² and their

³⁸ H. Baltussen, “the degree of intimacy in this letter is quite unusual compared to many other extant consolations”: “Personal Grief and Public Mourning in Plutarch’s *Consolation to his Wife*,” *AJP* 130 (2009) 67–98, at 67.

³⁹ Baltussen, *AJP* 130 (2009) 77.

⁴⁰ The surviving Roman literary texts overwhelmingly “concentrate on fathers and daughters or mothers and sons rather than on the wholly female world of mothers and daughters” (Dixon, *The Roman Mother* 210).

⁴¹ *Agis* 7: “They were so excited by the young man’s objectives, and so taken over by a kind of inspired enthusiasm for doing good, that they urged him to act, and to act quickly.”

⁴² The terminology used to denote prostitution in ancient literature is imprecise and overlapping (Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons* 223). L. Kurke has noted that there is a frequent discrepancy between the use of the terms *hetaira* and *porne* in ancient sources: “Inventing the *Hetaira*: Sex, Politics, and Discursive Conflict in Archaic Greece,” *CLAnt* 16 (1997) 106–150, at 108.

daughters, wherein we see the majority of mother-daughter bonds in Plutarch's *Lives*. Lucian of Samosata, born shortly after Plutarch's death, also famously explored mother-daughter relationships. In several of his *Dialogues of the Courtesans* (3, 6, 7), the characters include a mother and her daughter, with one or both being courtesans. More than twenty *hetairai* are featured in *Lives*,⁴³ as well as the mothers of Themistocles, Cimon, and Pyrrhus, who were likely *hetairai* or *pallakides* (*Them.* 1, *Cim.* 4, *Aem.* 8), and numerous unnamed prostitutes (*Dem.* 4, *Phoc.* 38, *Cleom.* 29, *Cat. Mai.* 24, *Sull.* 36).⁴⁴

Plutarch draws attention to the potential dangers that *hetairai* pose to the male-dominated sphere, particularly the political leverage that they can exert over men. His depictions seem to

⁴³ Aspasia (*Per.* 24); Targelia as Aspasia's role model (*Per.* 24); Milto, nicknamed Aspasia by Cyrus (*Per.* 24, *Art.* 26–27); Lais (*Nic.* 15, *Alc.* 39); Timandra (*Alc.* 39); Pythionice (*Phoc.* 22); Thais (*Alex.* 38); Lamia (*Demetr.* 16, 19, 25–27); Demo, called Mania, and Thonis (*Demetr.* 27); Phylacion (*Demetr.* 11); Hypsicrateia (*Pomp.* 32); Agathocleia and Oenanthe (*Cleom.* 33); Stratonice (*Pomp.* 36); Monime, Asteria, and Mnestra (*Cim.* 4); Chrysis and Anticyra (*Demetr.* 24); Flora (*Pomp.* 2); Praecia (*Luc.* 6); Barsine (*Alex.* 21); Antigone (*Alex.* 48). There is some uncertainty about the previous social status of Berenice from Chios, one of Mithridates' wives (*Luc.* 18), but his second wife, Monime, "most talked about among the Greeks" and a famous beauty (*Pomp.* 37, *Luc.* 18) may have previously been a courtesan. Athenaeus usually records the courtesans' nicknames next to their names, while Plutarch pays less attention to that.

⁴⁴ Plutarch uses various denominations for courtesans: *ἑταίρα* (*Demetr.* 11, 27; *Alex.* 38; *Phoc.* 22; *Alc.* 39; *Nic.* 15; *Pomp.* 2); *ἑταιρούσα γυνή* (*Luc.* 6); *πόρνη* (*Demetr.* 24, 25); *παλλακίς* (*Pomp.* 32, 36; *Per.* 24); *ἑρωμένη* (*Cleom.* 33); *γύναιον* (*Alex.* 38, 48; *Per.* 24); even brothel keeper (*Cleom.* 54 *πορνοβοσκός*; *Per.* 24 *προεστῶσαν ἐργασίας οὐδὲ σεμνῆς ... παιδίσκας ἑταιρούσας τρέφουσα*). The earliest attested use of *ἑταίρα* meaning 'courtesan' is found in Herodotus 2.134–135 (see Kurke, *CLAnt* 16 [1997] 107). K. Kapparis has listed the terms for prostitution in ancient texts, nearly 70 denominations of female prostitutes: "The Terminology of Prostitution in the Ancient Greek World," in A. Glazebrook et al. (eds.), *Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE–200 CE* (Madison 2011) 222–255, at 232–243. The terminology is imprecise and overlapping (Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons* 223; Kurke 108).

suggest that when *hetairai* gain ascendancy over men and gender roles become inverted, the result is not just domestic disruption.⁴⁵ This breach of established social and cultural norms is also a threat to both social and political stability. Men who succumb to the dominance of women are neither highly esteemed nor overtly condemned. Rather than directly denouncing them, Plutarch hints at their notoriety in more subtle ways.⁴⁶ Among these is a notable focus on maternal lineage, a detail he particularly brings to light in the context of courtesans.⁴⁷ Lais, for instance, is introduced as Timandra's daughter, and Agathoclea is identified as the daughter of brothel-keeper Oenante. Even when a mother's name is not provided, *hetairai* are said to be residing with their mothers. For example, Demo mentions her mother, likely a fellow courtesan, as a potential rival to Lamia. More tragically, Berenice dwells with her mother in Mithridates'

⁴⁵ For example, Aspasia brought discord into Pericles' family (*Per.* 36). Alcibiades' wife Hipparete decided to divorce from Alcibiades because of his affairs with courtesans (*Alc.* 8), while Phila, Demetrius' wife, felt humiliated that he preferred courtesans to her and showed her no respect, so she committed suicide (*Demetr.* 14).

⁴⁶ Antony was entirely an appendage of Cleopatra (*Ant.* 62, προσθήκη τῆς γυναικὸς ἦν); Sulla was vulnerable as a young man to flirtation and the most disgraceful feelings (*Sull.* 35, ὄψει καὶ λαμυρία μειρακίου δίκην παραβληθεῖς, ὑφ' ὧν τὰ αἰσχίστα καὶ ἀναιδέστατα πάθη κινεῖσθαι πέφυκεν); the tomb that Harpalus built for Pythionice added to his disgrace (*Phoc.* 22, οὐσαν δὲ τὴν ὑπουργίαν τὰύτην ἀγεννή).

⁴⁷ Including maternal filiation when speaking about men is a rhetorical strategy designed to degrade the opponent's masculine identity, to show contempt, as in Antonius Honoratus' speech (*Galba* 14): "But when it was evening, the leading military tribune, Antonius Honoratus, calling together the soldiers under his command, reviled himself, and reviled them for changing about so often in so short a time, not according to any plan or choice of better things, but because some evil spirit drove them from one treachery to another. [...] 'Shall we, then, sacrifice Galba after Nero, and choosing the son of Nymphidia as our Caesar, shall we slay the scion of the house of Livia, as we have slain the son of Agrippina? Or, shall we inflict punishment on Nymphidius for his evil deeds, and thereby show ourselves avengers of Nero, but true and faithful guardians of Galba?'" (transl. Perrin)

palace, and when Mithridates VI orders his family to commit suicide to evade capture by the Roman consul Lucullus, Berenice is forced to comply, and her mother has no alternative but to perish alongside her.

In the narratives featuring three notable mother-daughter pairs (Timandra/Lais, Oenanthe/Agathocleia, and Demo/her mother) in each case both mother and daughter are explicitly described as courtesans.⁴⁸ While their cohabitation may arise from necessity, with the aging mother depending on her daughter for support after teaching the daughter her profession, Plutarch often places greater emphasis on the daughter's role than the mother's in his portrayals. Absent from these accounts are any expressions of maternal or filial affection, and there is no allusion to reciprocal loyalty or devotion. Instead, their union seems to be rooted primarily in economic pragmatism and mutual dependence. In Plutarch's narrative, the shared experiences of these women render them unmistakably connected, with their marginalized position serving as an indirect marker of their moral deviations.⁴⁹

Conclusions

Through a critical analysis of selected narratives of motherhood in *Lives*, we have seen that Plutarch constructs a distinctive paradigm of the exceptional mother—one that transcends the traditional limitations placed upon women in Classical and Hellenistic Greece and Rome. At times, the maternal role in the

⁴⁸ Athenaeus names more mother-daughter couples, e.g. Corone, nicknamed Tethe, the daughter of Nannion, nicknamed Proskenion (587B); Callisto, nicknamed Sow, stayed with her mother, nicknamed Crow (583A); Gnathaena's granddaughter Gnathaenion also was a *hetaira* (582A).

⁴⁹ The same stereotype was prevalent in Rome, as A. K. Strong has noted: "The ancient evidence categorized Roman women as immoral if they lacked familial ties and acted in their own economic self-interest, largely regardless of the women's sexual behavior or actual economic activities" (*Prostitutes and Matrons* 205).

ethical cultivation and education of sons surpasses even the father's influence. Mothers such as Volumnia, Olympias, Demariste, Rhea, Cornelia, Agesistrata, Cratesicleia, and Aurelia play a decisive role in shaping their sons' characters and education, inspiring heroic deeds and fostering societal improvement. These are examples that illustrate how the maternal role empowers women to transcend traditional gender boundaries and contribute significantly to public life. Consequently, Plutarch's discourse on motherhood acts as a bridge linking the private and public spheres, a theme aligned with the ethical precepts articulated in his *Moralia* (*Coniugalia praecepta*, *De mulierum virtutibus*, *Consolatio ad uxorem*, *Amatorius*, *De amore proliis*, *De liberis educandis*, *Lacaenarum apophthegmata*).

However, Plutarch's *Lives* also reveals a troubling dichotomy: while mothers of sons are often elevated, mothers of daughters seldom receive similar recognition. Although Plutarch acknowledges the importance of maternal bonds with daughters, as evidenced in his personal letters, *Lives* as a rule lacks emotionally charged mother-daughter relationships. Rather than portraying mothers as positive influences on their daughters, he often relegates these relationships to the socially marginalized realm of *hetairai*. In *Lives*, the connections between mothers and daughters are primarily portrayed as stemming from necessity rather than mutual affection.

We have observed that Plutarch places significant emphasis on the role of mothers in shaping the destinies of eminent men, notably statesmen. These mothers continue to exert their influence as their sons enter public life. What, then, constitutes Plutarch's unique contribution to the evolving conception of ideal motherhood? Overall, he crafts an image of the ideal mother in line with Roman models but enriches it with a novel approach by including the affectionate and selfless bond of love. By highlighting the positive impact of mothers on their sons in *Lives*, Plutarch not only challenges conventional gender norms but also underscores the essential role of maternal influence in shaping the destinies of remarkable men, thereby foregrounding

women's influence on society at large. In *Lives*, exemplary mothers are not confined to the domestic sphere; they actively participate in public affairs and exercise influence over their sons who in turn emerge as distinguished political leaders. In Plutarch's view, the epitome of womanhood centers around mothering a son, with the ultimate goal being the son's commitment to the state. Within this framework, the virtues of an admirable mother are mirrored in those of an exceptional son.⁵⁰

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