

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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(eds.)

IMPRESA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANNABLUME

“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.

¹ I am grateful to Professor J. Ribeiro Ferreira for commenting on an earlier version of this paper, and to Professor Manuel Tröster, who helped to improve the English text.

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.

However, even if the recreated banquets in *Quaestiones Coniuales* did not accept the presence of women, it is a recurrent subject in several contexts, as we will see. This is what we will try to do in this paper: analyse specifically the treatment of women in *Quaestiones Coniuales* in their various evocative contexts.

A. Nikolaidis (1997, p. 97), following in the footsteps of Vernière⁵, views Plutarch as the precursor of “feminism”, as a believer in women’s innate abilities, both defending and praising the benefits of female education, the most precious of her jewels. Plutarch himself was an example of this conviction, since he admitted women to his own school in Chaeronea⁶:

For a woman studying geometry will be ashamed to be a dancer, and she will not swallow any beliefs in magic charms while she is under the charm of Plato’s or Xenophon’s words. And if anybody professes power to pull down the moon from the sky, she will laugh at the ignorance and stupidity of women who believe these things (...) (145c-sqq)⁷

In the *Banquet of Seven Sages*, Plutarch allows the presence of Cleobulina, a twelve-year-old girl, and Melissa, Periandro’s wife. They were indeed present during the meal (148CD, 150D, 154B) but left when the men started drinking more (155 E), and therefore they did not take part in the discussion⁸. However, this would not happen again in the dialogue, at least under the same conditions,

⁵ See Y. VERNIÈRE, “Plutarque et les femmes”, *Anc. W.* 25 (1994), p. 165 apud A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997, p. 88, a feminist point of view also shared by R. FLACELIÈRE, a theoretician of feminism in antiquity. See idem, *L’Amour en Grèce*, Paris, 1971, passim; *Le Féminisme dans l’ancienne Athènes*, Paris, 1971, passim. The exhaustive study of F. LE CORSU, 1981, as well as the studies by P. SCHMITT PANTEL and G. SISSA, 1991 (apud K. BLOMQUIST, 1997, p. 73) and K. BLOMQUIST, 1997 contested this feminist interpretation, thinking that Plutarch conserves the ideal of female inferiority: “Accepting her supposedly natural inferiority, a woman was herself accepted as morally equal and allowed to give proof of virtue and magnanimity” (idem, p. 90).

⁶ Cf. *Moralia* 138C. Nevertheless, Plutarch’s attention to the woman’s philosophic education is not new. This subject had been already proposed by Plato in his *Republic* (451–457) and refused by Aristotle in *Politics* (1264b). In the Hellenistic period, some philosophical schools granted access to women, like Epicureanism, Cynism and Neo-Pythagorism. The Roman Musonius Rufus, following in the footsteps of Stoic tradition, accepts the natural equality between man and woman and holds that anyone should have different privileges (frgs. 3 e 4 Hense). However, in spite of defending equal access to education, he never admits the same in politics (fig. 4). See F. de OLIVEIRA, 1992, p. 97, 100. As I. RODRÍGUEZ MORENO, 2005 says: “En definitiva, todas estas mujeres, con Hipatia a la cabeza, supieron ganarse un lugar destacado en el pensamiento griego, donde aportaron su grano de arena, aunque, en ocasiones, sólo conoczamos sus nombres y apenas nada de sus doctrinas, salvo por algunas breves referencias de sus discípulos.” (p. 122). The Cynic movement (about IV BC-V AD) had a famous member, Hipparchia (fl. 336–333 BC), a woman scholar from Thrace that was a pupil of Crates of Thebes, besides being her husband and having followed him everywhere.

⁷ All translations are those of the Loeb Classical Library.

⁸ With regard to this complex figure, D. F. LEÃO, 2002 concluded: “Por último, Cleobulina contribui, também, para transformar o espaço do banquete numa cosmópolis dos vários tipos de sapiência: ela representaria, assim, uma sabedoria mais simples, permeada de intuição política e de humanidade, conforme se depreende as palavras que Tales profere a respeito dela.” (p. 91).

since the women that took part in the banquet were only flute-players or *hetairai*, branded women in a moral sense⁹. Nevertheless, this episode shows, as F. Facq (2006/2007, p. 44) notes, that young Greek girls were not resigned to gynoeceium but had contact with the male sphere: “chez Plutarque, les filles sont importantes aux yeux de leur père mais elles revêtent aussi un caractère particulier pour les étrangers qui connaissent cet attachement: elles ont même un rôle” (p. 46)¹⁰.

The access of women to this kind of male private events was different in Greek and Roman culture¹¹, as well as the meaning of the banquet itself, named *comissatio* in Rome¹². The cultural difference becomes more manifest in the Imperial period, when it became common to see Roman women reclined with men¹³. E. Fantham and M. Roller¹⁴ mention this kind of behaviour, characteristic of the new conscience of gender roles, motivated by equally new social and moral dynamics¹⁵. On the other hand, the Greek banquet did not accept the access of women to this space, a cultural aspect witnessed by Cornelius Nepos¹⁶:

Many actions are seemly according to our code which the Greeks look upon as shameful. For instance, what Roman would blush to take his wife to a dinner-

⁹ Cf. F. LE CORSU, 1981, pp. 149-65.

¹⁰ Cf. *Moralia* (198A) and F. LE CORSU, 1981, pp. 85-95.

¹¹ On the legal, social and family condition of Athenian women see: F. LE CORSU, 1981, pp. 11-5; A. CAMERON & A. KUHRT, 1993; D. COHEN, 1989; R. OLMOS ROMERA, 1986?; S. POMEROY, 1975; J. P. GOULD, 1980. With regard to the situation of Roman women, see F. LE CORSU, 1981, pp. 21-5; K. M. D. DUNBABIN, 2003, pp. 22-3.

¹² See R. CORTES TOVAR, 2005; A. DEL CASTILLO, 1986?; M. ROLLER, 2003; O. MURRAY, 1990. As a matter of fact – as noted by K. M. D. DUNBABIN, 2003, p. 20 – the *comissatio* did not have the same relevance for the Romans that the Greek *symposion* had for Plutarch's people.

¹³ As M. ROLLER, 2003, p. 400 noted: “Representations of women's conviviality become more plentiful in Augustan and imperial texts. These representations confirm that a woman's dining posture – at least in elite male company- expresses her sexuality, but they show considerable ambivalence about the consequences of such expression”. See also in the same study, 2003, p. 402 (n. 58) and p. 403, who mentions some situations that reveal the licentiousness that characterize the *conuiuia*. Cf. Plu., *Mor.* 759F-60, Suet., *Aug.* 69.1 and *Cal.* 25.1, 36.2, Sen., *Const.* 18.2.

¹⁴ See E. FANTHAM ET AL., 1995, pp. 280-93 and M. ROLLER, 2003, p. 400.

¹⁵ Note that the parties organized exclusively for women would be characterized by the very same kind of activities that men had in banquets, like the festival of Demeter, for example. See J. BURTON, 1998 whose study offers a new look at female sociability, which was not restricted to the gynoeceium but rather created a large number of contexts in which women could interact with men: “The evidence makes it clear that women were active in commensal activities, both inside classical Athens and certainly outside. This survey of the variety of Greek women's drinking and dining activities emphasizes the need to include women more centrally in histories of commensality and sociality in the ancient Greek world.” (p. 161).

¹⁶ See *Vitae*, Praef. 6-7: Contra ea pleraque nostris moribus sunt decora, quae apud illos turpia putantur. Quem enim Romanorum pudet uxorem ducere in conuiuuium? Aut cuius non mater familias primum locum tenet aedium atque in celebritate uersatur? Quod multo fit aliter in Graecia. Nam neque in conuiuuium adhibetur nisi propinquo, neque sedet nisi in interiore parte aedium, quae gynaeconitis appellatur; quo nemo accedit nisi propinqua cognatione coniunctus. On the literary and iconographic representation of Roman woman in the first century see the chapter of E. FANTHAM's study, 1995, pp. 280-93: “The “New Woman”: representation and reality.”

party? ... But it is very different in Greece; for there a woman is not admitted to a dinner-party, unless relatives only are present and she keeps to the more retired part of the house called “the women’s apartment” to which no man has access (...)

Cicero too (*In Verrem* 2.1.26.66) quotes an episode which took place in an *ut Graeco more biberetur* (“drunk in the Greek way”) banquet, when Rubrius asked Philodamus, a Greek himself, to invite his daughter to the banquet¹⁷:

“Tell me, Philodamus, why not send for your daughter to come in and see us?” The respectable and elderly father received the rascal’s suggestion with astonished silence. As Rubrius persisted, he replied, in order to say something, that it was not the Greek custom for women to be present at a men’s dinner-party.

As a matter of fact, it is Plutarch who ascribes to Cato the Elder (8. 4) the saying that “all other men rule their wives; we rule all other men, and our wives rule us” (*Them.* 18.7). Roman women enjoyed a superior social condition when compared to the Greek world¹⁸, where the life of women was associated with the gynoeceum and the preservation of their own *oikos*, being therefore far from male activity. As a Greek, Plutarch does not allow women to join these banquets, a position well expressed in Book I (*Quaest. Conv.* 613A), when the guests discuss whether it is convenient to have philosophical discussions at the table once the wine makes serious argumentation impossible:

<ἐγώ> δ’ εἶπον ἄλλα γὰρ εἰσίν, ὧ ἑταῖρε, καὶ πάννυ γε σεμνῶς κατειρωνευόμενοι λέγουσι μὴ δεῖν ὡσπερ οἰκοδέσποιναν ἐν οἴνῳ φθέγγεσθαι φιλοσοφίαν, καὶ τοὺς Πέρσας ὀρθῶς φασὶ μὴ ταῖς γαμεταῖς ἀλλὰ ταῖς παλλακίσσι συμμεθύσκεσθαι καὶ συνορχεῖσθαι· ταῦτό δὴ καὶ ἡμᾶς ἀξιοῦσι ποιεῖν εἰς τὰ συμπόσια τὴν μουσικὴν καὶ τὴν ὑποκριτικὴν ἐπιεισάγοντας φιλοσοφίαν δὲ μὴ κινουῦντας (...)¹⁹

And I replied, “Certainly there are, my friend, and the pretext they very solemnly employ is that philosophy should no more have a part in conversation over wine than should the matron of the house. They commend the Persians for

¹⁷ Note that iconography does not always confirm this vision. There are, in fact, Greek monuments with representations of respectable women participating in mixed banquets. However, as K. M. D. DUNBABIN, 2003, p. 22 noted, this kind of representation corresponds to an older iconography where the figures are identified as heroes or gods. There are also funerary representations where the woman appears sitting in the chair or at the end of the bed where the man, the husband, is reclined. This kind of iconography has a more conservative character due to its funerary specificity. See also M. ROLLER, 2003.

¹⁸ In regard to women’s place in Rome, see A. DEL CASTILLO, 1986?. As R. CORTÉS TOVAR, 2005, observes: “Podríamos decir gráficamente que, en términos generales, los espacios de poder que las mujeres ocupan en Roma son una prolongación del ámbito familiar y privado (...)” (p. 125). Cf. n. 10. See also K. BLOMQUIST, 1997.

¹⁹ For the Greek text of the *Table-Talks*, we use C. HUBERT, *Plutarchus. Moralia*, IV, Leipzig, 1971.

doing their drinking and dancing with their mistresses rather than with their wives; this they think we ought to imitate by introducing music and theatricals into our drinking-parties, and not disturb philosophy.

The οἰκοδέσποιναν mentioned in the text should be some kind of housekeeper, maybe a slave for taking care of the house and the children; that is why the host's wife was not supposed to take a seat in the *symposium*, always eating with the youngest ones²⁰. It is still interesting that Plutarch ascribes to the barbarians what we all know to be also a Greek custom: the participation of concubines and *hetairai* – both slaves and even young foreign girls –, along with music and pantomime²¹.

The very same issue is discussed in Book VII of *Quaestiones Convivales* (710B) by a sophist, who dismissed the flute-player girls that animated the banquet, judging that their presence compromised the κοινωνία τῶν λόγων by absorbing all men's attention:

Περὶ ἀκροαμάτων ἐν Χαιρωνείᾳ λόγοι παρὰ πότον ἐγένοντο Διογενιανοῦ τοῦ Περγαμηνοῦ παρόντος, καὶ πράγματ' εἶχομεν ἀμυνόμενοι βαθυπώγωνα <σοφιστήν> ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς, ὃς ἐπήγαγεν τὸν Πλάτωνα²² κατηγοροῦντα τῶν ἀύλητρίσι χρωμένων παρ' οἶνον, ἀλλήλοις δὲ συγγίνεσθαι διὰ λόγου μὴ δυναμένων.

When I gave a dinner party, in Chaeronea, for Diogenianus of Pergamum, there was some discussion of types of entertainment, and we had considerable difficulty in beating off the attack of a long-bearded sophist of the Stoic persuasion, who brought up Plato's indictment of people who listen to flute-girls over their wine because they are unable to entertain themselves by conversation.

The “woman dressing up for the banquet” had some moral characteristics and a *sui generis* style: “gold brooches”, “finely wrought earrings” and “Aphrodite's magic band”, a symbol of seduction. All these separated her from the married woman, who was forced to follow a distinct model (*Quaest. Conv.* 693C):

μέχρι τούτων ἐπιμέλεια [καὶ] καθαριότητός ἐστιν· ὅταν δὲ τὰς χρυσαῖς περόνας ἀναλαμβάνῃ καὶ τὰ διηκριβωμένα τέχνη ἐλλόβια καὶ τελευτώσα τῆς περὶ τὸν κεστὸν ἄπτηται γοητείας, περιεργία τὸ χρῆμα καὶ λαμυρία μὴ πρέπουσα γαμετῇ γέγονεν. οὐκοῦν καὶ τὸν οἶνον οἱ μὲν ἀλόαις χρωτίζοντες ἢ κινναμώμοις καὶ κρόκοις ἐφηδύνοντες ὥσπερ γυναῖκα καλλωπίζουσιν εἰς τὰ συμπόσια καὶ προαγωγέουσιν·

So far she is showing concern for cleanliness, but when she picks up those gold brooches and finely wrought earrings, and, lastly turns to the witchery of

²⁰ See F. MARTÍN GARCÍA, 1987, p.49 n.11.

²¹ Plutarch refers to the same custom with regard to the Persian kings in *Coniugalium Praecepta* 140 b. See more about “music and theatricals” in *Quaestiones Convivales* 711E-F, 747C.

²² See *Prot.* 347 c and *Mor.* 176e.

Aphrodite's magic band²³, it is plainly a case of overdoing things and a wanton conduct unbecoming to a wife. Even so, those who color wine with aloes or sweeten it with cinnamon or saffron are adorning it like a woman's face in preparation for a gay party, and are acting as a kind of pander;

Excessive luxury and female style of dress were, as we all know, a very polemical issue, being actually legally prohibited in Syracuse²⁴. It may be interesting to note that Lucian of Samosata (125-180 AD), in his work *De domo* (7-15) also presents an ideal female decency very similar to the one outlined by Ariston, Plutarch's guest:

but only in such degree as would suffice a modest and beautiful woman to set off her beauty – a delicate chain round her neck, a light ring on her finger, pendants in her ears, a buckle, a band that confines the luxuriance of her hair and adds as much to her good looks as purple border adds to a gown.

Being a social educator and caring for the preservation of traditional values, Plutarch stands for a noble image of the woman and for family values. In Book I of *Quaestiones Coniuviales* (619D), when discussing “Why the place at banquets called the consul's acquired honor”, he draws the model of a consul's political presentation; he is not valuable only by himself, but also on account of those who are related to him, both paying him social respect and giving him the guarantee of his own status, at least during the banquet.

τῶν <δὲ> συνέγγιστα τόπων ὁ μὲν [γὰρ] ὑπ' αὐτὸν ἢ γυναικὸς ἢ παίδων ἐστίν, ὁ δ' ὑπὲρ αὐτὸν εἰκότως τῷ μάλιστα τιμωμένῳ τῶν κεκλημένων ἀπεδόθη, ἵν' ἐγγὺς ἦ τοῦ ἐστιῶντος.

And of the places nearest him the one which is below him belongs either to his wife or his children, while the one above him was given properly enough to the guest of honor in order that he might be near his host.

On the other hand, if a governor's political dignity requires the presence of his family, as a symbol of individual and social stability, the same is demanded of women, who are not supposed to take a seat in public meals without their husbands, where both men and women are present:

ἔτι πολλὰ τῶν γαμικῶν ἢ τὰ πλεῖστα δρᾶται διὰ γυναικῶν ὅπου δὲ γυναῖκες πάρεσι, καὶ τοὺς ἄνδρας ἀναγκαῖόν ἐστιπαραλαμβάνεσθαι.

Besides, many or most of the activities relating to a wedding are in the hands of women, and where women are present it is necessary that their husbands also should be included. (667B)²⁵

²³ It corresponds to the magic band that Aphrodite offered to Hera (*II*. 14. 214).

²⁴ Phylarchus apud Athen. 512 B. Plutarch also emphasizes this censure in *Moralia* 142B.

²⁵ The scholar from Chaeronea gives the same advice to Eurydice in *Coniugalia Praecepta* 139D: τὴν δὲ σῶφρονα γυναῖκα δεῖ τοῦναντίον ὀρᾶσθαι μάλιστα μετὰ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς οὔσαν,

Nevertheless, Plutarch goes even further. Indeed, besides establishing a family stereotype for appearances in public²⁶, he also interferes with the private sphere. Here is an example: if a man comes more sexually inspired from a banquet, “bringing a garland and his own body perfumed” (654E), he is supposed to lie down with his own wife and not with any concubine²⁷. However, he must do it during the night, because it would be very uncomfortable to take his wife out of the gynoeceum just to fulfil his wants ἀλεκτρονόος (“like a cock”). That is to say that the male spaces are different from the female ones, but respect must be reciprocal²⁸. The scholar from Chaeronea treats this theme at greater length in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*, a wedding present to his married friends Eurydice and Pollianus, a treatise that M. Foucault (1984, p.192) considered a key text of a new morality of marriage²⁹. This attitude may have emerged around the first century AD and manifests a change of the view of marriage due to the new status of women, as we will see further on:

Τῶν σωμάτων οἱ φιλόσοφοι τὰ μὲν ἐκ διεστῶτων λέγουσιν εἶναι καθάπερ στόλον καὶ στρατόπεδον, τὰ δ' ἐκ συναπτομένων ὡς οἰκίαν καὶ ναῦν, τὰ δ' ἠνωμένα καὶ συμφυῆ καθάπερ ἐστὶ τῶν ζώων ἕκαστον. σχεδὸν οὖν καὶ γάμος ὁ μὲν τῶν ἐρώντων ἠνωμένος καὶ συμφυῆς ἐστὶν (...). (*Mor.* 142F)

οἰκουρεῖν δὲ καὶ κρύπτεσθαι μὴ παρόντος, “a virtuous woman ought to be most visible in her husband’s company, and to stay in the house and hide herself when he is away”.

²⁶ Note the well-known image used by the Stoic Antipater of Tarsus (frg. 3.63.11.16 von Arnim), as expressed in *Amatorius* 769F: “The same is true for lovers; (...) for this truly is what is called ‘integral amalgamation’ [ὅλων κρᾶσις] that of a married couple who love each other”. K. BLOMQUIST, 1997, pp. 73-4 commented this passage, noting that the complete union suggested by this metaphor is illusory, since the mixture between wine and water is always called “wine”, showing that a hierarchy within the marriage still persists. Cf. *Mor.* 142F. See “Plutarch on marriage: the element of communality” and “Plutarch on marriage: reciprocity, the secret for a happy wedlock” in A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997, pp. 51-7, 63-76, as well as F. LE CORSU, 1981, pp. 25-38.

²⁷ We can find the very same advice in Plato’s *Leges* (VIII, 839a-b): “That was precisely the reason why I stated that in reference to his law I know of a device for making a natural use of reproductive intercourse and, on the other hand, by abstaining from every female field in which you would not desire the seed to spring up. (...) For, in the first place, it follows the dictates of nature, and it serves to keep men from sexual rage and frenzy and all kinds of fornication, and from all excess in meats and drinks, and it ensures in husbands fondness for their own wives”.

²⁸ Note that Plutarch (*Coniugalia Praecepta* 144C-D) advises, however, the woman to accept that the man can choose to have sexual relations with a slave woman, because that would be a mark of respect for his wedded wife: “If therefore a man in private life, who is incontinent and dissolute in regard to his pleasures, commits some peccadillo with a paramour or a maid-servant, his wedded wife ought not to be indignant or angry, but she should reason that it is respect for her which leads him to share his debauchery, licentiousness, and wantonness with another woman.” Plutarch also refers to the example of the Persians kings mentioned in note 21 above.

²⁹ For an analysis of Foucault’s view of Plutarch’s *Coniugalia Praecepta*, see C. PATTERSON, 1992.

Philosophers³⁰ say of bodies that some are composed of separate elements, as a fleet or an army, others of elements joined together, as a house or a ship, and still others form together an intimate union as is the case with every living creature. In about the same way, the marriage of a couple in love with each other is an intimate union.

Actually, we also find this new marital morality in other contemporary Stoic texts, for example, Antipater's *Peri Gamou* (Stobaeus, IV), some passages of Musonius Rufus (Stobaeus III, 6.23, IV. 22.20) and Hierocles (Stobaeus IV. 22. 21)³¹ about this subject. However, as Cynthia Patterson (1992, p. 4714) noted, although this attitude may sound new, it may also reflect the popular discourse about marriage: "(...) it seems to me that Plutarch's advice is grounded in and reflects traditional, popular and pragmatic marital concern, and would strike a common chord in readers both Roman and Greek".

Elaborating on the subject of female ethics in the social and private spheres, the philosopher discusses the constitution of the woman's body, which is, from our point of view, actually a reflection of the idealistic social construction of the female and female psychology. In order to confirm this, we may look at the adjectives used by Plutarch in order to describe the woman's body functions when comparing both the elders' and the women's bodies: while the former is "dry", "rough" and "hard", the latter is "moist", "smooth" and "soft", qualities that go far beyond the physiological assumption and somehow reflect a gender construction, a female stereotype³² (*Quaest. Conv.* 650 A-B):

ἔφη τοίνυν ὁ <Σύλλας> θατέρῳ θάτερον ἐμφαίνεσθαι κἄν εἰ περὶ τῶν γυναικῶν ὀρθῶς τὴν αἰτίαν λάβοιμεν, οὐκ ἔτι πολλοῦ λόγου δεήσεισθαι περὶ τῶν γερόντων· ἐναντίας γὰρ εἶναι μάλιστα τὰς φύσεις τῇ θ' ὑγρότητι καὶ ξηρότητι <καὶ λειότητι> καὶ τραχύτητι καὶ μαλακότητι καὶ σκληρότητι. 'καὶ τοῦτ' ἔφη 'λαμβάνω κατὰ τῶν γυναικῶν πρῶτον, ὅτι τὴν κρᾶσιν ὑγρὰν ἔχουσιν, ἢ καὶ τὴν ἀπαλότητα τῆς σαρκὸς ἐμμεμιγμένη παρέχει καὶ τὸ στίλβον ἐπὶ λειότητι καὶ τὰς καθάρσεις·

Sulla replied that one part of the problem threw light upon the other. If we should rightly determine the cause where women are concerned, there would be no further need of much speculation where old men are concerned, for their natures are very emphatically opposites: moist and dry, smooth and rough, soft

³⁰ Plutarch is referring to Stoic philosophers, see *De Defectu Oraculorum* 426a.

³¹ See M. FOUCAULT, 1982, p.174 and his analysis of Stoic texts about marriage in the same study, pp. 177-216. The same author also refers to Seneca, Epictectus and some Pythagoric texts.

³² Actually, this comparison is also found in Aristotle (fr. 107 Rose), according to Athen. 429 C and *Geop.* VII 34.2. Moreover, we find the same characterisation at Ps-Arist. *Probl.* 880a 13. There are two main sources in Greek Literature that make explicit reference to female anatomy or physiology: the Hippocratic Corpus and Aristotle's *History of Animals*, *Parts of Animals* and *Generation of Animals*. See L. DEAN-JONES, 1991, pp. 111-37. On this subject see also S.-T. TEODORSSON, 1989, p. 327.

and hard. “The first thing about women”, he continued, “I take to be this, that they possess a moist temperament which, being a component of the female, is responsible for her delicate, sleek, smooth flesh, and for her menses.

Plutarch discusses another subject related to female physiology again in Book III (650 F): “Whether women are colder in temperament than men or hotter”. Only earth is “moist” (ὕγρότητι) as women, both being promises of live and the support of mankind, as is said by Plato about all rational or animal female beings (*Quaest. Conv.* 638 A):

οὐ γὰρ γῆ' φησὶν ὁ Πλάτων 'γυναῖκα, γῆν δὲ γυνὴ μιμεῖται' καὶ τῶν ἄλλων θηλέων ἕκαστον.

‘For earth does not imitate woman,’ says Plato (*Mx.* 238 A), ‘but woman earth,’ as indeed does each of the other females.

Indeed, as Plato insists, “earth does not imitate woman, but woman earth”, meaning that both are able to reproduce. A linguistic sign of this theory is the adjective θήλυς; for it may be translated as either “female” or “fertile”, being anyway usually more related to the female gender (*Il.* 8.7; 19.97; *Hdt.* 3.109, *X. Mem.* 2.1.4). Let us attend to the following quotation from Book II (640 E-F):

μὴ κρατεῖσθαι μηδὲ μεταβάλλειν. ἔτι δ' εἶπεν 'οὐκ ἄδηλον ὅτι δεῖ πρὸς τὸ ἐμφυτευόμενον χώρας λόγον ἔχειν τὸ δεξόμενον· τὴν δὲ χώραν δεῖ θήλειαν ἔχειν καὶ γόνιμον· ὅθεν τὰ πολυκαρπώτατα τῶν φυτῶν ... ἐκλεγόμενοι παραπηγνύουσιν, ὡσπερ γυναιξὶν <πολυ>γαλακτούσαις ἕτερα <βρέφη> προσβάλλοντες.

“Further”, he continued, “it is quite clear that the stock to be grafted fulfils the function of soil for the scion; soil and stock must be fertile and productive³³, and so they select the most fruitful of plants and insert the scions in them, much like putting infants out to nurse with women who have abundant milk.

Their similar qualities are proved in the text, for πολυκαρπώτατα (“the most fruitful of plants”) are compared to γυναιξὶν <πολυ>γαλακτούσαις (“women who have abundant milk”). Again we may confirm the Platonic theory of women as an imitation of earth.

As A. G. Nikolaidis (1997, p. 28) suggests, this Plutarchan “feminism” must have been strongly inspired by the Roman *matrona*’s status, far superior to that of the Greek woman³⁴; and the same should have

³³ Lac. 4-7 T: ἐμβολάσιον Hubert, “for grafts”, or the like προσελεγόμενα Bernardakis.

³⁴ K. BLOMQUIST, 1997, p. 90 draws the same conclusion: “In this area, as so often, Plutarch adopts a Roman ideal; his heroines are essentially Roman matrons, strong and virtuous, even

happened in the social and family spheres, where women “enjoyed a dignity and independence at least equal if not superior to those claimed by contemporary feminists”³⁵.

The truth is that the analysis of the woman’s evocations in *Quaestiones Coniuvales* comes to justify Plutarch’s *avantgarde* thoughts in relation to the female place in the family, an institution to be preserved in society. As a matter of fact, as noted by J. Burton (1998, p. 149), a new horizon of opportunities for women had begun to develop as early as the Hellenistic period, given the questioning of the ideal of the citizen-soldier after the gradual disintegration of the polis, which had mostly determined the erased image of the Greek woman. The marriage contracts change – protecting also the woman –, the chance of having property and being elected to political office, along with increasing economic power, all together came to build a new gender conscience, as S. Blundell points out³⁶:

But in general it can be said that there was an erosion of the asymmetry between the sexes during the Hellenistic Age, and a consequent improvement in the status of women. In the political arena, the most spectacular advance was made by the women of the Hellenistic royal families. (1999, p. 199)

In relation to literary tradition, Plutarch is therefore actually an innovator, not accepting an old misogynic tradition supported by Hesiod (*Tb.* 590-612), Homer (*Od.* 11. 426-34), Semonides or Euripides, excluding only Socrates, Plato, the Cynic philosophers³⁷ and the Stoics – including the Roman Musonius Rufus – who admitted the equality of both genders³⁸. As for Plutarch, he builds the image of a woman full of ethical and intellectual

when dressed in the traditional Greek *peplos*.”

³⁵ Vide J. CARCOPINO, 1956, p. 98.

³⁶ The same scholar also refers to a papyrus from Egypt that reveals that, during this period, women could buy and sell, such as happened in Greek cities, where inscriptions refer to women as having property and owning slaves. In Sparta, moreover, there are many cases of women that accumulate great riches. See IDEM, 1999, p. 199. On the female condition in the Hellenistic period see the chapter “The Hellenistic Period: women in a cosmopolitan world” in E. FANTHAM ET AL. (eds.), 1995, pp. 136-81. See also L. FOXHALL, 1989, p. 31 on women’s property in Classical Athens and, for a most extensive treatment of the subject, D. SCHAPS, 1979.

³⁷ Cf. n. 5 and L. PAQUET, 1975, p. 24. See Diogenes Laërtius (6, 12) on Antisthenes, an early Cynic, and on his pupil Diogenes (6, 72), as well as the passages on Crates (Plut., *Mor.* 141 E) and his wife Hipparchia (D. L., 6, 96). Apud L. PAQUET, 1975, pp. 40, 91, 113, 116.

³⁸ See A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1997, p. 29; C. PATTERSON, 1989, p. 4720 has come to a similar conclusion about the *Coniugalia Praecepta*: “But what is unusual (within at least the Greek literary tradition) is his enunciation of the ideals of marriage in an essentially positive form”. Note the famous passage of *Politics* (1260a 6), where Aristotle compares the woman to a slave on account of her weak nature, condemned to obey to a male, who is distinguished by intellectual skills: “for the soul by nature contains a part that rules and a part that is ruled, to which we assign different virtues, that is, the virtue of the rational and that of the irrational. It is clear then the case is the same also with the other instances of ruler and ruled. Hence there are by nature various classes of rulers and ruled. For the free rules the slave, the male the female (...)”. See also 54b 13, 59a 39, 60a 9.

arete, still not allowed to access the masculine circles of power – as K. Blomquist, 1997 showed³⁹ – or conviviality, as we can conclude from his attitude of keeping women away from the *symposion* and philosophical discussions.

In fact, he does not completely avoid the former popular tradition of the image of women in the private and social circle saying, for example, that “where [women] are present it is necessary that their husbands also should be included” (*Quaest. Conv.* 667B). Thus, if in the texts on marital ethics⁴⁰, conjugal intimacy and feminine education Plutarch actually follows the Stoic and Cynic traditions, admitting the equality of women, he does not abandon the norm of traditionalist behavior in the public sphere.

As for the banquets, the presence of women is still not allowed – for these reunions are made (or described) in the Greek way, because Greek is also his point of view.

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³⁹ Blomquist analyses some cases of Plutarch’s women that were very close to politics, either by supporting men – Octavia, Aretaphila, Pompeia Plotina – or by manipulating them – Aspasia, Cleopatra, and Olympias – and concluded: “Women are not wicked or morally depraved unless they transgress the rules of their sex and strive to achieve privileges reserved for men. Women are capable of courageous defiance of tyrants and external enemies – but after their exploits, they are to renounce all power.”(p. 89)

⁴⁰ Cf. n. 25.

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