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Chapter 15

Mothers and sons in Plutarch's Roman *Parallel Lives*. *Auctoritas* and maternal influence during the Roman Republic¹

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Introduction

In order to have a better understanding of Plutarch's opinion of women, we need to go further into the *Moralia* than into the *Parallel Lives*. This erroneous approach was one of the most important criticisms made in relation to the work *Plutarque et les femmes* by F. Le Corsú (1981). Spread all over this immense *corpus* of different kinds of treaties, there are several clues which will help us to make a better analysis of those passages which make up the central idea of this text, and which are dealt with below.

At the beginning of the 1990s, some authors defended the revival of the family ideal from the end of the Republic and the beginnings of the Empire, in a process which would coincide in time with the political and legislative reforms made by Augustus in relation to family and marriages (Dixon 1991, 102–103). Therefore, it is no wonder that sons and daughters are, *prima facie*, one of the most important causes of pride for Roman mothers, seeing that they achieved prestige and social standing through their children.²

In Plutarch's ideology, daughters and sons are seen as an integral part of each one of the spouses, as they have been created from their union. As has been widely shown, in pre-industrial societies, infancy was never so little valued as Ariès (1960) and Stone (1977) maintained in their works.³ Childhood and youth are differentiated periods in human life, as is shown in the *Lex Plaetoria* in the Roman case. This law protected the patrimonial interests of youths under 25 against those who might take advantage of their inexperience. Up to that age it was considered that youths may not have fully developed their wisdom (Golden 1990, 6). In practice, in Plutarch's Roman *Lives* his characters' period of youth usually lasts up to the age of 30, the minimum age at which, theoretically, a man could start his political career as a magistrate (Flores 2014, 123–124).

Aside from these considerations, one of the main interests in Plutarch's works has to do with the grief experienced by the family when a child dies an early death.⁴ Indeed, as far as we know, he himself had to cope with the death of two of his children, a daughter and a son. In his works, he comes over as a caring father who has brought up his offspring at home with his wife (Soares 2008, 720).⁵ In this sense, his *Consolation* can be regarded as a kind of manual for mothers who have recently lost a child. In this work, Plutarch offers them enough support to carry on with rational behaviour even at those hard moments of their lives.⁶ On the other hand, it is evident how he criticises those who are invaded by irrational feeling (cf. *Cons. ad Apoll.*, 112E–F, and Seneca, *Ad Marc.* 7.3). In accordance with Plutarch's stoical philosophy, the rational component of human behaviour is what should prevail over others (Hope 2017, 95–96).

In order to guarantee their children's proper education, spouses should ideally keep up a relationship based on companionship (cf. *Brut.* 13), respect and mutual fidelity (Marasco 2008, 663). In several parts of his *Moralia*, Plutarch considers that a man and a woman complement each other, and that women are not inferior to men either in nature or in their learning capacity.⁷ Having said this, we should point out that his point of view is not totally egalitarian. According to him, males are ontologically superior to females, who should remain in a subordinate position. In his opinion, women should take a back seat, heeding the wisdom of their husbands, who should take on the role of guide and educator of their wives (*Con. praec.* 145A–C). Therefore, a woman's character should remain as something unknown to everyone, except her husband.

The *auctoritas* within mother–son relationships in Rome. Ties which last a lifetime

In this part, a global perspective on mother–son relationships will be given, taking into consideration everything from the role of mothers in their children's education to their feelings towards them. We will also look at the female *auctoritas* as a means of influence on society in general and especially on their sons. The particular cases of Volumnia⁸ and Cornelia will be analysed more thoroughly later on.

As far as education is concerned, a father's and a mother's role are completely different (Dixon 1988, 3–4). Ideally, it was the father who should be in charge of this (*Cat. Ma.* 20.5–6),⁹ teaching them their first letters and the basic rules of law. However, if a Roman mother with small children should be a widow, or her husband should be far away for a long period of time, she herself could choose the most suitable instructors for them.¹⁰ Valerius Maximus, in his *Facta et Dicta memorabilia* (V, 8), cites several examples of how fathers, at least at the beginning of the Republic, were not emotionally close to their sons, and it was the mothers who were established as guardian figures primarily prepared to instill traditional values.¹¹ As we will see, Plutarch's Volumnia fits perfectly into this model. In this way, how they would behave as future citizens may depend on the words they used and the games they played when

they were children. Sons and daughters were generally educated by their mothers inside their homes until the age of 7 (Soares 2011, 86), although other providers of care were also common. From that moment onwards, boys and girls began to be separated in terms of education, thus becoming well prepared for the roles they should carry out in society. The objective of this system was to keep some families at the top of the Roman social pyramid (Dixon 1992, 109).

The power of widowed mothers over their children was limited by law. Roman women, for example, could not be the legal guardian of their children.¹² However, the tutor was often limited to looking after the children's estate, keeping it safe until they themselves could manage their own affairs. So, it is understandable that the mothers were in strict control of the tutor, and they were the ones who, in fact, oversaw their children's education.

Undoubtedly, some of the mother figures who appear in Plutarch's *Lives* would still greatly influence their children even when they reach adulthood (Dixon 1988, 134–135; Seneca, *Ad Marc.* 24.1). This could, partly, be due to the peculiar relationship between mothers and sons, which was very different to that of fathers and sons (Golden 1990, 100).¹³ Demographic aspects should also be taken into account, as certain statistical studies have shown that only one in four males reached the age of 30 with their father still alive, while for mothers this was nearly 50% (Krause 2011, 630; Parkin 2011, 282). As a result, it was common for women to have a longer-lasting relationship with their sons, which in some cases would last throughout almost all their lives. In the following pages, we will see a mature man, turned down from his candidacy to the consulate (cf. *Cor.* 14–15.3), and how he is publicly scolded by his elderly mother for having become an enemy of Rome. For Plutarch, selfish motives should not be the ones which lead a man into politics (Teodorsson 2008, 341), as it was not regarded as an obligation, but as a way of life (*Bíos*) (cf. Xenophontos, 2015, 343).

For Romans, *pietas* was the basis on which internal family relationships should be sustained (Grubbs 2011, 377). Contrary to what it may seem, Romans went beyond the purely legal meaning of this term (i.e. submission to the *paterfamilias*) to also include mutual affection and duties shared by all the members of the family (Saller 1986, 395, 399; Dixon 1992, 151). Roman sons and daughters should show *obsequium* (obedience) and *reverentia* (respect) towards their parents. They also had the moral, even legal, duty to take care of them in their old age or in sickness.

This perfect state of things could however be violated in certain circumstances. In ideal Roman society, the collective interest should prevail over individuals. Cicero, in *Off.* 1.58, includes a kind of preference order in relation to citizens' duties. The State and the parents would be on the first scale, followed by, in this order: the sons, the household and the relatives.

In Plutarch, very rarely do we see women as active members of their communities. Consequently, when they act outside their traditional roles they are almost always criticised (cf. Stadter 1999, 173). This scholar argues that those actions would only be acceptable if they were carried out in response to male weakness or to violence. The

women in his moral treatises (e. g. in his *Mulierum Virtutes*) only abandon their homes in order to defend their land, filled with fervour and determination, in times of general political crises (Cid 2010, 125–126). To try to keep women within the constraints of the home would be to diminish their value inside Roman society, as we would be ignoring certain types of participation which are included in different ancient sources. In this sense, some interesting recent pieces of research have pointed out that, although women did not have *potestas*, as this was exclusively held by a Roman magistrate, they did possess *auctoritas* in the sense that they had the moral obligation to keep society together.¹⁴ In practice, this ‘power’ could be exercised in certain areas, even in some which were in theory beyond their limits, such as politics.

Next, we will analyse two women in *Parallel Lives* who, in demonstrating their *auctoritas*, and defending the higher interests of the state and their sons, abandoned their homes at critical moments, occupying public spaces and going to places where the greatest decisions were being made. Despite stepping outside the traditional gender roles, they were not socially condemned for their behaviour, but were rather praised for their bravery and patriotism.

Two model mothers? Volumnia and Cornelia in Plutarchean Lives

Both *Coriolanus* and the *Gracchi* brothers lost their fathers at an early age. Therefore, to substitute the absent father, both Cornelia and Volumnia, who decided to remain *uniuirae*, had to set themselves up as models to be imitated by their sons.¹⁵ Taking into account these special circumstances, it is not surprising that they would feel entitled to actively intervene in the lives of their adult sons (Dixon 2008, 175–179). This was especially true at those times when their sons were going through moments of physical, political or moral weakness (Xenophontos 2015, 342).

Another common aspect in these two *Lives*, which up to now has not been fully highlighted, is the relationship between the two *matronae* and their daughters-in-law. In the *Lives* of their husbands, they take on a secondary role, appearing as mere companions to their mothers-in-law, who overshadow the other female figures in the story with their brilliance.¹⁶ Now we will focus individually not only on the actions of Cornelia and Volumnia but also on the special relationships that they had with their sons.

The *Life* of *Coriolanus* is particularly interesting inside the Plutarchean biographies, as in that piece of writing he does not limit himself to merely characterising him, but also tries to go deep into his psyche, so that the reader can catch sight of his true personality.¹⁷ Despite this, Plutarch does not concern himself with delving into *Coriolanus*' mind, as in general he was not interested in dealing with his protagonists' internal struggles. This kind of worries doesn't bother Plutarch, contrary to what usually happens today in modern biographies (cf. Pelling 2002a, 325–326).

Coriolanus did not receive a good enough education to harness his nature and his behaviour (*Cor.* 1.5).¹⁸ Over time, this lack would become a decisive factor in his

character's fall from grace. For Plutarch, a privileged nature alone was not a guarantee of good character, as it had to be moulded by education (cf. Xenophontos, 2016, 61–62).

Plutarch shows us a Coriolanus who is absolutely dependent on his mother. So, right from when he was little, 'he found the chief end of glory in his mother's gladness. That she should hear him praised and see him crowned and embrace him with tears of joy' (4.5).¹⁹ Coriolanus' need for physical contact in this passage reflects his affection towards his mother. Later on, in 33.4, he will again seek physical contact with Volumnia when she comes into the Volscian military camp alongside her daughter-in-law and her grandchildren. Once again, Plutarch's narrative dismantles the image of the old Roman mother as someone who is cold and distant towards her sons and daughters.

The culminating point in Coriolanus' biography is the angry speech in which Volumnia criticised her son's action inside the Volscian camp. At that moment he had been a Roman exile and the chief of an Italic coalition which was holding Rome under siege. This 'female embassy', which included, apart from other women, Volumnia, Vergilia and Coriolanus' children, only dared to act once the actions undertaken by the Senate had failed to resolve the crisis. During his mother's speech, Coriolanus would see in her a personification of Rome, according to some researchers.²⁰ In *Cor.* 33.4 we can see that Volumnia, in her son's absence, is the head of his household. The virtuous Roman women, headed by Valeria, go to Volumnia as they are desperate to find a way of solving the crisis that will preserve the integrity of their land. During the speech itself, Coriolanus was completely overwhelmed by his mother and her powerful rhetoric, and this reduced him to silence.²¹

In contrast to how Coriolanus acted here, Greek and Roman writers tend to praise sons who leave interfering mothers in their places. Otherwise, as happens here, the son's masculinity would be diminished and questioned (Xenophontos, 2015, 341). Here, Coriolanus' reaction to his mother's speech is to accept his defeat, which he does eloquently: 'Thou art victorious, and thy victory means good fortune to my country, but death to me' (*Cor.* 36.4). In fact, shortly afterwards Coriolanus would be killed by the Volscians. The building of the temple of *Fortuna Muliebris* should therefore not be interpreted as a mere triumph of Volumnia's *auctoritas* over her son. Consequently, the temple does not commemorate Coriolanus' submission to his mother but the public benefit achieved by this, which is so unusual for a Roman male.²²

Lastly, we will analyse the figure of Cornelia, the Gracchi brothers' mother. For many scholars of the Ancient World, Cornelia represents the Roman *matron* par excellence. Nevertheless, the way Plutarch portrays her in her sons' *Lives* is halfway between traditional gender roles and an overthrowing of such roles.

In *TG* 1.6–7 it is written that Cornelia, once widowed, takes charge not only of her son's and daughter's education but also oversees their estates.²³ Her children were brought up in a careful and scrupulous way, giving priority to discretion, magnanimity and kindness. Considering the Hellenistic teaching that Cornelia would have been given in her parents' house, this model is likely to have been used in her children's education.²⁴ Unlike what we have seen regarding Coriolanus in his *Life*, in this case

her son's good nature was accompanied by a good education. Cornelia was highly likely to have been a very cultured woman, as the intellectual conversations held in her villa at *Misenum* have been referred to by many authors.²⁵ This female wisdom, though regarded with suspicion by many Romans, was socially tolerated as long as the resulting knowledge was used for socially acceptable aims, one of which was the proper education of children.²⁶

In GG. 4.3–4, Gaius presents Cornelia's intercession as a reason for the withdrawal of a law in which it was written that, if citizens dismissed a magistrate, he could not be eligible for any future public position. Accepting his mother's demands, Gaius tries to come across as somebody who honours his mother. Later on, when he defends her against those who insulted her (GG. 4.5–6), Gaius, apart from standing out as a guarantor of his family's reputation,²⁷ also shows a public demonstration of the strong ties to his mother. Tiberius' instrumental use of his wife and children to manipulate the electorate (cf. TG. 13.6) is less compassionate. In this sense, in a critical moment for his faction, he thought that by dressing in mourning and showing his family members as defenseless would be the best way to guarantee the sympathy of the Roman people towards his cause.

Slightly before Gaius' death, Cornelia took an active part in her son's political ambitions. Plutarch wrote that she paid a number of reapers to go to Rome in order to defend Gaius' political measures (GG. 13.2).²⁸ Seneca (*Ad Helv.* 14.2) criticises mothers who, with a woman's passion (*muliebris impotentia*), try to fulfil their own personal ambitions through their children. It could be considered that Cornelia's social triumph or disgrace could only come through her offspring's actions (Hallett 1984, 36), as her father and her husband had died many years before.²⁹ These reapers could have been seasonal workers taken to Rome by Cornelia as a way of exerting political pressure in favor of her son. This procedure would become common practice in the last century of the Republic.

Unlike many other women, whose behavior was marked predominantly by an element of irrationality, which we have mentioned before, Cornelia accepted the loss of her sons nobly and with spirit. She was, in fact, able to speak to her visitors about them without sorrow or tears, as if they were characters from a long time ago (GG. 19.1–3).³⁰ This ability to accept grief with reasoning, also defended by Plutarch in his *Advice to the Bride and Groom*, differentiates Cornelia and Timoxena from other women, who were overwhelmed with unfathomable grief. In this type of texts, therefore, being able to control emotions is an indicator of social and economic status.

Conclusions

In this text I have tried to highlight above all that, despite the limited role reserved for women by Plutarch in his *Moralia*, the *Lives* show us how some of the most noteworthy among them did step outside those narrow limits without completely breaking away from what society expected of them. This would account for why the bold actions

of some women, like Cornelia and Volumnia, have been remembered favourably by many Greek and Roman authors as, ultimately, they were only seeking to guarantee the reinforcement and perpetuation of the patriarchal system.³¹

Despite this, we must remember that this kind of stories are a minority within the *Parallel Lives*. Thus, more than 90% of the women in them correspond to the model of a socially accepted or denigrated woman, so they are only mentioned in passing. The fact that our biographer has returned to the figures of Volumnia and Cornelia in several parts of the *Lives* of their sons, accounts not only for their importance in the narrative but also for the wide range of influence exerted by some women in Roman society. It is a pity that hardly anything is known about these female figures beyond this sort of male-biased reconstructions. But the virtual absence of any type of information related to women belonging to the lower classes is, in my opinion, even more regrettable.

Notes

- 1 All quotations from classical writers have been taken from the bilingual editions of the Loeb Classical Library.
- 2 McWilliam (2013, 265) states that ‘the procreation of children was the explicit aim of Roman Marriage’; in the same sense, cf. Aulus Gellius, *NA*. 4.3.2 and 1.6.1–8.
- 3 Eyben (1981) was one of the first scholars to claim that childhood and adolescence should have their own space within the ancient Graeco-Roman world. Golden (1990, 84), from comparative studies, has accurately stated that, in general, children are highly regarded in societies where child mortality is high.
- 4 The subject of grief surrounding a child’s death is talked about, for example, inside the *Lives*, in *Sol.* 6. 2–5.
- 5 The Roman ideal was not to delegate the care of children to servants. *Tacitus*, in *Dial* 28.6–7, collects examples of mothers well-known for the correct upbringing and education of their sons.
- 6 For some authors, the *Consolation to His Wife* is a text in which Plutarch tries to indoctrinate his wife about how she should feel in the face of the death of her 2-year-old daughter. Some authors have shown the methodological difficulty of quantifying with literary and epigraphical expression, the extent of the parents’ grief when a child dies (cf. Finley, 1981, 159). For a brief, but clever analysis of Plutarch’s intentions during the writing of this text, cf. Xenophontos (2016, 56–58).
- 7 For a similar thought to that of Plutarch, cf. some of the *Discourses* by *Mussonius Rufus*.
- 8 In Plutarch’s work, Volumnia is the name of *Coriolanus*’ mother, whereas in the works of *Titus Livius* (II, 40) and *Dionysius of Halicarnassus* (VIII, 40.1–2), she is called *Veturia*, and Volumnia is the name of *Coriolanus*’ wife, who in Plutarch is *Vergilia*. In my opinion, given that *vetus*, in latin, means ‘old’, I am more inclined towards *Livian* and *Dionysian* version.
- 9 According to Plutarch, fathers should provide their children with intellectual and moral foundations which will be useful for them in the future (*De aud. Poet.* 15A-B). Therefore, the role of women in their children’s education was rather limited.
- 10 Cornelia, for example, provided her children with the instruction of two Greek teachers, *Blosius* of *Cumae* and *Diophanes* of *Mitylene* (*TG.* 8.6). For the use of *exempla* as ways of instilling in young Romans the values and institutions of Rome, see McWilliam, 2013, 269, and Sciarrino, 2013, 236. As regards the importance of education in Plutarch’s work, some researchers have

stated that 'es posible que ningún otro griego después de Platón haya concedido a la formación del hombre una importancia tal como Plutarco' (cf. Velázquez 2001, 441).

- 11 Filial devotion towards their mother is more common in Roman *Lives* than in the Greek ones, where the only cases were Alcibiades and an anecdote included in the *Life* of Solon (cf. 27.7). Plutarch was fully aware that fathers were more lenient towards their daughters, whereas mothers were closer to their sons. In his opinion, this was a result of women needing male support (*Con. Praec.* 143B). For Plutarch, as a woman was weaker than a man, she needed his protection (*Quast. Graec.* 289E). While Hallett (1984, 246) defends this idea, for Dixon (1988, 209, n. 90), this was a very Greek interpretation.
- 12 Widows, in the *Senatusconsultum Tertullianum*, were obliged to find a tutor for their sons and daughters, and he was named by the magistrate (the praetor or a provincial governor), and not by her (cf. Grubbs 2011, 384). If this procedure was not followed, they were in danger of losing their children's hereditary rights.
- 13 Some authors (cf. Hallett 1984; Dixon 1992, 77), from Freudian theory, have highlighted the fact that the small age gap between mothers who married very young and their sons could bring about a kind of sexual attraction in some cases. They argue that this feeling could give an explanation for the strong feelings of loyalty on the part of women towards their blood relatives in comparison to their husbands. For an example of the (excessive) grief experienced by a son after the death of his mother, cf. *Sert.* 22.9–12.
- 14 Martínez (2012, 160) stated that women brought to the *ciuitas* 'aquello que era considerado permanente, lo que sustentaba la vida, más allá de las formulaciones coyunturales que los varones eran capaces de crear con la política y las armas'.
- 15 Some authors, like Hallett (1984, 255–256) have stated that widowed mothers emotionally involved with men other than their sons were looked down on in society.
- 16 For the suspicion which is constantly cast over mothers-in-law in Latin and Greek literature, see Walcot (1999, 181). For the possibility that newly married young women were educated under the supervision of their mothers-in-law or other female relatives of their husbands soon after their entry into his house, cf. *Cid* 2001, 38.
- 17 Christopher Pelling (2002b, 286) has proved the pre-eminence of the irrational element in this biography.
- 18 Pinheiro (2013, 157) states that Coriolanus did not have the chance to receive a Greek education. This type of tuition, if it was given to Plutarch's biographical characters, would guarantee being dealt with kindly by him. In this sense, the plundering made by Marcellus after the siege of Syracuse (cf. *Marc.* 21.1) was only slightly criticised by Plutarch. After all, all the works of art taken by the Romans were used to make Rome look beautiful for the first time in its history.
- 19 In Soares' opinion (2008, 724), boys and girls needed their parents' recognition for their success to take on a social and personal meaning. The same author (2011, 93) has pointed out the suffering that could be detected in this little quotation.
- 20 This line of argument has been followed, among others, by Pérez (2000), Pinheiro (2013, 164) or Buszard (2010, 105–107), who related it to the same episode in Titus Livius' works.
- 21 For Xenophontos (2016, 65) silence has a different meaning depending on the character. Thus, 'in self-disciplined characters, silence is traditionally a manifestation of self-restraint, whereas in weak characters it points to emotional ambivalence'. For an interesting psychological analysis of this meeting between Coriolanus and his mother, cf. Pelling (2002a, 326–327).
- 22 Regarding this temple, see Champeaux (1982, 360–373) and *Cid* (2014).
- 23 Cornelia is analysed by many authors as a perfect example of the power gained by some women through money (cf. Medina 2014).
- 24 López (1994, 33) highlights the role of the Scipions in the introduction of Greek culture into Rome. Besides, they were one of the first families to place great importance on their women's education.

- 25 For Hemelrijk (1999, 97) Cornelia was ‘the earliest example of a Roman woman who acted as a patroness of literature and learning’. Van den Bergh (2000, 358) comments on the possibility that some Roman aristocratic women may have continued being educated after marriage in their husbands’ houses.
- 26 In this sense, see Cicero (*Brut.* 104; 211), Quintilian (*Inst.* I, 1, 6) and Tacitus (*Dial.* 28.6), who praised women well-known for giving a correct education to their children.
- 27 In fact, at this time of his life, after his brother’s death, he was already the *paterfamilias*.
- 28 In this text there are ‘dark allusions’ to this fact, which may have appeared in Cornelia’s famous letters, and which Plutarch undoubtedly knew about. López (1994, 41–42) includes in her work an extensive catalogue both of those who attribute the letters to Cornelia and those who regarded them as a later fiction. More recently, Dixon (2007, 27) has stated, in relation to the letters preserved through the work of Cornelius Nepos, that ‘these fragments are at best perverted versions of something she might have written’.
- 29 Below Cornelia’s statue there was originally placed an inscription which shows us how this *matrona* preferred to be remembered as the Gracchi’s mother rather than as Scipio’s daughter. The text just said: ‘Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi’ (*CIL* VI, 10043 and *TG.* 8.7). This statue, probably erected at the end of the 2nd century BC, was refurbished during Augustus’ government to also include Cornelia’s famous father: ‘WORK OF TISICRATIS. CORNELIA. D[AUGHTER] OF AFRICANUS OF THE GRACCHI’ (*CIL* VI, 31610). For a contextualization of both the statue and the inscription, see Dixon (2007, 29–31; 56–8) and Etcheto (2012, 282–287).
- 30 Cf. Seneca, *Ad Helv.* 16.6, and *Ad Marc.* 16.3.
- 31 Some scholars (i.e. Cid 2010 and Hallett 2004, 33) have pointed out the parallelism between the speeches of Veturia-Volumnia and the letters attributed to Cornelia. Hallett has even qualified this kind of behaviour as ‘matriotic’.

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