Captivating the Captors: Re-defining masculinity, Identity and Post-Colonialism in Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*

This paper investigates 1st-2nd century CE biographer and philosopher, Plutarch’s, manipulation and construction of gender ideals in two sets of his *Parallel Lives*, *of Coriolanus and Alcibiades* and *of* *Pelopidas and Marcellus*, in which he presented his version of the ideal man and route to manhood. Plutarch discouraged traditional paths to gaining masculine status and simultaneously promoted a type of masculinity that benefited other aspects of his identity, particularly promoting his social and economic position and ethnicity. In addition, this sub-discourse served as a reaction to Roman rule and the position of Greek men in the Roman Empire. Although Plutarch wrote centuries after the Roman annexation of Greece, he and his contemporaries continued to negotiate and redefine the complex power relations that existed between Greece and Rome. Living and writing at the beginning of the Second Sophistic (60-230 CE), Plutarch’s work reflects a wider phenomenon that was occurring within Greece between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE.

In the *Lives* examined here, rather than promoting martial or even political success as the sole route to becoming an ideal ‘man’, Plutarch asserted that Hellenic education, or *paideia*, and more specifically philosophy would teach a male how to be a ‘man’. He utilized these biographies to demonstrate that individuals who disregarded intellectual training for physical and military exploits were deficient men, out of control and under the influence of their own emotions and desires. Education and philosophical training alone taught an individual how to control their inner impulses, as well as providing other admirable masculine qualities. Recent studies of gender and sexuality in the ancient Greek and Roman world have discovered the centrality of control for ideal masculinity (Dover 1973, Dench 1998). In order to be a ‘man’, one had to maintain control not only over individuals, but also over one’s emotions and desires. Therefore, Plutarch’s description of martial men as dominated by their own emotions provided a powerful critique of this type a masculinity. Also following recent scholarship in gender and sexual ideology, throughout this paper, I make the distinction between a biological male and ‘man’, by which I mean the status achieved through the proper display of a set of community-approved characteristics. It was this aspect that Plutarch addressed, and via this discussion he was able to assert the superiority of Greece over Rome.

Although Plutarch portrayed Greek as well as Roman military men as dominated by their emotions, throughout the *Lives* he emphasized Roman proclivity to martial excellence and thus they were more susceptible to these flaws. In addition, he consistently pointed out that the Romans were unable to fully attain Hellenic education; therefore, he excluded the Romans from his ideal route to masculinity while asserting that the Greeks were the superior ‘men’ and thus more equipped for the exercise of authority that accompanied elevated masculine status (Swain 1996). This allowed him to contradict the Roman perception of the Greeks as *graeculi*, effeminate, luxury-prone and incapable of ruling themselves, which had been articulated by a number of Roman men such as Cato the Elder, Cicero, Vespasian (as reported by Pausanias) and Juvenal. This reaction to Roman rule and assertion of masculine superiority also promoted aspects of his socio-economic identity as well as his ethnic identity; the version he advocated was only fully attainable for Greek, elite men (such as Plutarch) who had the leisure and means to master intellectual pursuits. This study is therefore multi-layered, investigating not only how gender ideology is constructed and redefined but also how it can be manipulated to suit social and political circumstances in order to participate in discourses about identity, authority and power.

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