

## Female Power in Plutarch's *Artaxerxes*

Plutarch's *Artaxerxes* stands out among his biographical corpus for being one of only two independent biographies, without explicit comparison, (with the *Aratus*), and being the only biography about a 'barbarian' figure. Although a long neglected work of Plutarch, scholarship on this biography has increased over the last several decades, but several noticeable gaps remain in our reading of this text and how it fits into Plutarch's larger corpus. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Plutarch's use of female characters in the *Artaxerxes*. As Judith Mossman has argued, it is not Artaxerxes himself, but "the real star of this life is the Persian court and its luxury and cruelty" (Mossman-2010 148). Achaemenid royal women have long acted as literary tropes for Greek writers, especially Historiography. In particular the figures of Atossa and Amestris in Herodotus stand out for the frequent cruelty and their meddling in court life and politics (Brosius-2021 149). Plutarch's characterization of the Persian court in the *Artaxerxes* maintains many of these tropes from Greek historiography chiefly through the character of Parysatis, the mother of the titular Artaxerxes. I argue that Plutarch uses Parysatis in this Life as the primary driver of narrative and the conduit by which Artaxerxes himself changes in personality throughout the life. Furthermore, Plutarch's *Artaxerxes* spends considerable time discussing the different characteristics of women, both positive and negative. When compared with his discussion on female virtue in his *Moralia*, this suggest that the *Artaxerxes* ought to be examined most of all to reveal Plutarch's concept of positive female agency in political systems.

Scholarship on Plutarch's perceptions on women has also received wide ranging views, from the overly pessimistic views to readings of Plutarch as a proto feminist. More nuanced, Linette Warren writes, "It is my view that in reality, his interactions with women were varied and

informed by ideology...it is perhaps unreasonable, and certainly unfair, to treat women as a monolithic category which can be studied as such” (Warren-2018 78). In the beginning of his treatise *mulierum virtutes*, Plutarch explicitly states that, “man’s virtues and women’s virtues are one and the same” (243 A). Later in the treatise, Plutarch expresses that although the virtues of men and women are the same, it is the circumstances in which they exist that lead to a differing expression of them (243 C-D). Through his *Lives* Plutarch consistently stresses the ways a differing nature (φύσεις) and mode of life (διαίταις) will conclude in the different expression of virtue and vice within his male characters. I argue that it is thus right to analyze the ways Plutarch employs both virtue and vice in his female characters in much the same way scholars have done so for his male characters; and furthermore, it is right to see the ways in which female characters embody virtue and vice as having a similar agency of expression for their culture and effect on narrative to male characters.

The most prominent female character in the *Artaxerxes* is undoubtedly the queen mother Parysatis, mother of both Artaxerxes and Cyrus the Younger. Although other female characters play prominent roles in the narrative, it is Parysatis who stars in a significant number of episodes and receives some of the strongest characterization in the life. She drives the most prominent action of the first half of the biography, the rebellion of her son Cyrus against Artaxerxes and afterwards performs numerous cruel actions which Plutarch describes in detail, such as intricate forms of torture and the assassination of Artaxerxes’ primary wife, Stateira. Parysatis’ depravity and cruelty begin infecting other women too, chiefly Atossa, the daughter of Artaxerxes whom Parysatis persuades to marry her father and ultimately helps bring the horrible king Ochus to power. Through a close reading of Parysatis’ cruel presentation in the *Artaxerxes* and comparison with other writings on women from Plutarch, I argue that Plutarch presents Parysatis as a virus within the

Persian court, whose incorrect performance of femininity is responsible for the corruption of her son Artaxerxes and the beginning of a cycle of violence in the Persian court which leads to its eventual downfall.

### Bibliography

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