

LESBIANTIQUITY

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PLUTARCH
PLOUTARKHOS

BEAUTIFUL & GOOD

SPARTAN WOMEN
IN LOVE

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Plutarch translation, introduction, and notes © Sophie Mills 2024

Greek text from: Bernadotte Perrin, ed., *Plutarch: Lives, Volume I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914)

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THE TRANSLATOR

Professor Sophie Mills

I am Professor of Ancient Mediterranean Studies at the UNC Asheville, where I have taught for 28 years. I am increasingly drawn to exploring translation of all kinds, from creating performance translations of tragedy with my undergraduates, to this small piece of Plutarch, which gave me the chance to think about an author not regularly on my menu, and to view standard textbook interpretations of it with some scepticism. I live in Asheville, NC with my partner Amy and five much-loved and indulged cats, so am something of a stereotype.



ΠΛΟΥΤΑΡΧΟΣ

Plutarch (or Ploutarkhos; c. 46 CE to after 119 CE) was a Greek writer who lived under the Roman empire. He was a prolific writer on a variety of subjects, and an unusually large quantity of his work has survived to the present day. In particular, his series of *Parallel Lives*, comparing and contrasting one famous Greek man with one famous Roman, contains a wealth of historical and cultural material. It is also very readable, and the series has always been popular in the western world. This passage is taken from his life of Lycurgus, a revered, if quasi-legendary, Spartan lawgiver, to whom all aspects of Sparta's unique customs were ascribed. Lycurgus' life is traditionally dated to the eighth century BCE, some nine centuries before Plutarch's own life.

This passage is taken from Plutarch's account of the strict education Lycurgus prescribed for Spartan boys. The paragraph begins by discussing love between older and younger men; adds that women too had similar relationships; and ends by talking about the absence of rivalry in love – once again, between men. The paragraph is all one sentence: evidently it is all one idea, and a consideration of its structure complicates some of the usual interpretations of Plutarch's claims about love between women in archaic Sparta. It seems that the reference to women is only made in passing to illuminate male relationships: Sparta took male same-sex relationships so seriously that even the women were inspired to follow suit, but really, it is the men who matter.

The phrase καλὰς καὶ ἀγαθὰς – 'beautiful/fine and good' – is the most interesting in this passage. It is an unusual feminine form of the much more common masculine καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός. Someone καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός was essentially the male ideal in Greece. The term implies good looks, good birth, intelligence, moral uprightness: in short, the perfect gentleman that every Greek man wanted to be, especially

if he wanted to attract a youth of similar breeding, good looks, and moral and intellectual potential in the sort of relationship commended in many of Plato's dialogues, especially the *Symposium*. Women, because they were not male, simply could not aspire to such heights. Plutarch's use of the term here has an important implication: female same-sex relationships use male relationships as a template – any uniquely female forms of same-sex relationships that do not have the age hierarchy typical of acceptable male relationships are apparently unimaginable to Plutarch.

Plutarch's emphasis on men and modelling of female sexual relations on those between men casts doubt on the validity of his testimony about women. This testimony has often been used – in the absence of much other information about sexual practices in archaic Sparta – to shed light on the world of Alcman's *Partheneia*, seventh-century Spartan poems which seem to imply that erotic relationships between women were a feature of archaic Sparta.¹ However, Plutarch and Alcman are 800 years apart, and it is by no means certain that Plutarch's claims can be clearly connected with what is implied by Alcman's poetry, or prove that erotic relationships between women were a convention of archaic Sparta.

¹ See LESBIANTIQUITY 2.



ROOT & BRANCH READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore
a variety of options for the text:
any variants in the original <Greek
Latin> texts
and the various possible meanings in English.

Our translations are rooted in the words
of the original text, replicating when possible
word order, root meanings of words, and
grammatical gender $\left(\begin{matrix} [n] \\ [f] \\ [m] \end{matrix} \right)$ of words about people.

You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

LYCURGUS 18.4

And the lovers [m] used to share with <the
their> boys in their
reputation in both ways and it is said that once, a boy in fighting
having let loose an ignoble (sound
cry
speech), <the
his> lover [m] was fined
by those in charge, and loving being so accepted among them,
that even the (young women
unmarried women
virgins
maidens) were loved by <beautiful
fine>
and good [f] women, rivalry in love did not exist, but rather
they [m] would make a (beginning
cause
foundation) of <friendship
affection> towards
one another, the ones [m] who <had loved
loved> the same [boys],
and they <ended up
continued> in shared efforts as to how they could
<make the best of their <loved one
beloved>
bring their <beloved
loved one> to perfection>.



ἐκοινώνουν δὲ οἱ ἐρασταὶ τοῖς παισὶ τῆς δόξης ἐπ' ἀμφοτέρα: καὶ
λέγεται ποτε παιδὸς ἐν τῷ μάχεσθαι φωνὴν ἀγεννῇ προεμένου
ζημιωθῆναι τὸν ἐραστὴν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀρχόντων, οὕτω δὲ τοῦ ἐρᾶν
ἐγκεκριμένου παρ' αὐτοῖς, ὥστε καὶ τῶν παρθένων ἐρᾶν τὰς καλὰς
καὶ ἀγαθὰς γυναῖκας, τὸ ἀντερᾶν οὐκ ἦν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἀρχὴν ἐποιοῦντο
φιλίας πρὸς ἀλλήλους οἱ τῶν αὐτῶν ἐρασθέντες, καὶ διετέλουν
κοινῇ σπουδάζοντες ὅπως ἄριστον ἀπεργάσαιντο τὸν ἐρώμενον.

NOTES

- *lover...loving...rivalry in love...loved one / beloved*: ἐραστής, ἐρᾶν (and other forms of the verb), ἀντερᾶν, and ἐρώμενος all share a common root which usually implies sexual love (the English word 'erotic' comes from this root). The god/personification of sexual love, Eros (Cupid in Latin), also lurks behind the word.
- *reputation*: δόξα can mean 'glory' or 'opinion', often how a person seems in others' opinion. I chose 'reputation' because of its faintly sexual connotations in English, where girls have traditionally been warned against getting a 'bad reputation'.
- *in both ways*: this phrase evidently implies 'both good and bad' and is perhaps a little euphemistic (see Thucydides 1.83.3).
- *loving*: I interpret this verb (ἐρᾶν) as meaning that physical and emotional relationships existed between the older and younger women.
- *beautiful/fine and good [f] women*: see my introduction for a discussion of this phrase.
- *they [m] would make*: at first, the subject of the verb ἐποιοῦντο, 'they would make', is unclear. Only when we get to οἱ, 'they [m]', does it emerge that Plutarch is once again talking about men.
- *as to how they could make the best / bring ... to perfection*: grammatically, ὅπως, 'how', must be connected with ἀπεργάσαιντο, 'bring to perfection', to make a purpose clause. However, its position next to the superlative ἀριστον, 'best', for a moment takes the reader to the standard Greek idiom with ὥς or ὅπως and a superlative, 'as ____ as possible'.



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