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PLUTARCH AND THE NAMING OF GREEK WOMEN

Recently David Schaps¹ has devoted an interesting discussion to the fact that the Greek orators studiously avoided mentioning the names of women. The only exception they made was for "women of shady reputation, women connected with the speaker's opponent and dead women." The avoidance was part of the general "muting" of women in Athenian society, as John Gould³ has now demonstrated in a seminal article on the position of Athenian women, and this reluctance to mention the name of any living respectable woman continued to exist at least until 260 B.C., as can be shown from Xenophon, Plato and comedy.⁴

Even though, then, it was permitted to mention the names of dead women, we may well wonder whether this in practice would have happened very often. If women's names were not mentioned when they were alive—who would remember them when they were dead? The avoidance of the names must have often amounted to a *damnatio metitoriae*, as can be well illustrated by some passages in Plutarch's Lives. Concerning Solon's mother Plutarch⁵ knows only that according to Heraclides Ponticus (F 147 Wehrli²) she was a cousin of the mother of Pisistratus. In the case of Demosthenes, Plutarch (*Dem.* 4.2) wonders whether his maternal grandmother was a barbarian, as Aeschines (3.171) asserted, but he is unable to adduce any evidence to solve the problem, even though she may well have been Athenian.⁶ In fact, in his biography of Alcibiades (*Alc.* 1.2) he notes with apparent exasperation that whereas even the name of Alcibiades' nurse is

¹ D. Schaps, *The Woman Least Mentioned: Etiquette and Women's Names*, CQ 27 (1977) 323–30.

² Schaps. 328.

³ J. Gould, *Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens*, JHS 100 (1980), 38–59. 45.

⁴ A. H. Sommerstein, *The Naming of Women in Greek and Roman Comedy*, Quaderni di Storia 11 (1980) 393–409.

⁵ Plut. *Sol.* 1.3. cf. M. Manfredini/L. Piccirilli, *Plutarco: La Vita di Solon* (Milano 1977) 112.

⁶ Cf. J. K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families* (Oxford 1971) 121f.

known, he cannot name the mothers of Demosthenes,⁷ Nicias, Lamachus, Phormio, Thrasybulus and Theramenes.

The great, if not quite successful, length to which Plutarch went to recover the names is demonstrated by the case of a woman whose name Xenophon did not mention. As an illustration of Agesilaus' modest way of life, Xenophon (Ages 8.7) tells us that the king's daughter did not go to Amyclae for the Hyacinthia festival in an elaborately adorned *kannathron*—a carriage in the shape of griffins or stag-goats—but in a (presumably simple) public vehicle. The passage attracted much attention in antiquity because of the fantastic character of the carriage and Polemon devoted a whole treatise to it.⁸ Plutarch (Ages 19.6, tr. B. Perrin, Loeb) *expressis verbis* notes that Xenophon neglected to record the name of the girl and continues: "and Dicaearchus (F 65 Wehrli²) expressed great indignation that neither her name nor that of the mother of Epaminondas was known to us; but we have found in the Lacedaemonian records that the wife of Agesilaus was named Cleora. and his daughters Eupolia and Proauga."⁹

Although Plutarch was successful in the case of Agesilaus' wife and daughters, his failure to recover the names of the other women clearly demonstrates that the Athenian custom of avoiding naming living respectable women had rendered even the names of the mothers of their most important statesmen into oblivion.

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⁷ Her name was Cleobulc: [Plut.] *Mor.* 844A.

⁸ Cf. Ath. 4.138E = Polemon fr. 86 Pörrer: *EM* 489, 5 ff.; Schol. II.XXIV.190: Eust. II. 1344.44.

⁹ For Plutarch's research in Sparta, cf. L. Piccirilli, in *Φιλίας Χάριν. Miscellanea di studi classici in onore di Eugenio Manni V* (Rome 1980) 1762f.