

Performing Masculinity in Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus*

Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus* takes as one of its central motifs the approbation of martial valor by a viewing audience of non-combatants. The programmatic statement that Pyrrhus of Epirus was the only one of the *Diadochi* who resembled Alexander the Great in battle, whereas others adopted only superficial physical resemblances (*Pyrr.* 8.1-2), begins a sustained and nuanced visual comparison between Pyrrhus and a series of other potential *paradeigmata* of masculinity that structures and conditions Plutarch's narrative of Pyrrhus' reign. The resulting exploration of masculine virtue takes place in numerous geographical, ethnic, and cultural contexts, allowing Plutarch to exploit the tension between contrasting ideologies of manhood in order to fashion a complex and multifarious explanation for Pyrrhus' failures as a leader, in spite of his obvious prowess in several important arenas of kingship.

In this paper I will focus on Pyrrhus' siege of Sparta, and particularly on a remarkable incident involving the Spartan warrior Acrotatus, who achieves glory by slaughtering a hoard of Gallic mercenaries (*Pyrr.* 27.1-31.1). Acrotatus's erotic encounter with Chilonis, wife of a Spartan elder named Cleonymus, is the ostensible reason for Pyrrhus' invasion of Sparta, and the absence of the Spartan king Areus along with most of the Spartan army requires the active participation of women and elderly men in the defense of the city. The unusually direct involvement of Spartans who would ordinarily be non-combatants highlights the extremity of the situation for Sparta (Pomeroy 2002, Napolitano 1987), but their role is limited to preparation for battle, and once the fighting begins they become primarily spectators. Their presence as spectators highlights the visual elements of the battle, as does Plutarch's use of theatrical language to describe the combatants (Braund 1997). Spartan women were particularly well known, both in general and in Plutarch's writings, for their important social role in supervising

and enforcing male virtue, which men regularly performed under the gaze of mothers, wives, and daughters (Figuera 2010, Bradford 1986). Acrotatus' actions on the battlefield, undertaken in view of the whole city, must therefore be understood in the performative context of Spartan gender relations. When he returns from his route, covered in gore, the women find him sexually appealing and the old men encourage him to go immediately to Chilonis and impregnate her, thus both approving of his actions on the battlefield and ratifying the sexual relationship that served as pretext for Pyrrhus' invasion by explicitly uniting Acrotatus' martial prowess with his and Chilonis' ability to create a future generation of Spartan warriors. Spartan masculinity, performed by Acrotatus and approved by the women and elders of Sparta, is formulated within a network of social and familial ties, highlighted by the presence of the non-combatants.

Following Acrotatus' bold actions, Spartan reinforcements arrive from abroad, allowing even more of the defense force to join the audience (*Pyrr.* 29.12), whereupon Pyrrhus doubles his efforts to achieve individual glory. His restless nature, however, is soon distracted by the opportunity to win glory against another rival in Argos, and so he withdraws. On his retreat, his son is overwhelmed and killed by soldiers harassing Pyrrhus' rear, leading the king, in his rage and grief, to perform yet more valorous deeds, slaughtering men as a "sacrifice" (ἐναγισμός) and a set of funeral games celebrated on behalf of his son (λαμπρὸν ἐπιτάφιον ἀγωνισάμενος, *Pyrr.* 31.1). The description echoes Achilles' grief for Patroclus in the *Iliad* and underscores Pyrrhus' interest in individual glory. The presence of women and Spartan elders, watching and regulating male behavior, highlights Pyrrhus' failure to live up to the standard set by Acrotatus. The ideology of Spartan manhood, with its emphasis on social roles contextualized within the family, its concern for the wider community, and its interest in ensuring future generations of warriors to

protect the city, contrasts sharply with Pyrrhus' quest for individual *kleos*, achieved at the expense of his son's life and the future of his own dynasty.

Bibliography

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