

Sayings of Spartan Women

*Plutarch, who wrote a series of biographies and essays ca. 100 CE, covered a number of subjects related to cultural expectations in the book Moralia. In one section he collected sayings attributed to the matrons of Sparta—mostly anecdotes of anonymous Spartan mothers happy that their sons had died a brave death in battle, or furious that they had not.*¹

ARGILEONIS

Argileonis, the mother of Brasidas, when her son had met his death, and some of the citizens of Amphipolis arrived at Sparta and came to her, asked if her son had met his death honourably and in a manner worthy of Sparta. And when they proceeded to tell of his greatness, and declared that he was the best of all the Spartans in such enterprises, she said, “Sirs, my son was a gude and honourable mon, but Sparta has mony a mon better than him.”

GORGOS²

- 1 Gorgo, daughter of king Cleomenes, when Aristagoras of Miletus was urging her father to enter upon the war against the Persian king in behalf of the Ionians, promising a vast sum of money, and, in answer to Cleomenes’ objections, making the amount larger and larger, said, “Father, the miserable foreigner will be your ruin if you don’t get him out of the house pretty soon!”
- 2 Once when her father told her to give some grain to a man by way of remuneration, and added, “It is because he showed me how to make the wine taste good,” she said, “Then, father, there will be more wine drunk, and the drinkers will become more intemperate and depraved.”
- 3 When she had watched Aristagoras having his shoes put on and laced by one of the servants, she said, “Father, the foreigner hasn’t any hands!”
- 4 When a foreigner made advances in a mild and leisurely way, she pushed him aside, saying, “Get away from here, you who cannot play a woman’s part either!”
- 5 Being asked by a woman from Attica, “Why is it that you Spartan women are the only women that lord it over your men,” she said, “Because we are the only women that are mothers of men.”
- 6 As she was encouraging her husband Leonidas, when he was about to set out for Thermopylae, to show himself worthy of Sparta, she asked what she should do; and he said, “Marry a good man, and bear good children.”

GYRTIAS

- 1 Gyrtias, when on a time Acrotatus, her grandson, in a fight with other boys received many blows, and was brought home for dead, and the family and friends were all wailing, said, “Will you not stop your noise? He has shown from what blood he was sprung.” And she said that people who were good for anything should not scream, but should try to find some remedy.
- 2 When a messenger came from Crete bringing the news of the death of Acrotatus, she said, “When he had come to the enemy, was he not bound either to be slain by them or to slay them? It is more pleasing to hear that he died in a manner worthy of myself, his country, and his ancestors than if he had lived for all time a coward.”

¹ Source: Plutarch, and Frank Cole Babbitt. 1931. *Moralia*, vol. 3. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

² Gorgo later became the wife of Leonidas.

DAMATRIA

Damatia heard that her son had been a coward and unworthy of her, and when he arrived, she made away with him. This is the epigram referring to her:

Sinner against our laws, Damatrius, slain by his mother,
Was of the Spartan youth; she was of Sparta too.

OTHER SPARTAN WOMEN TO FAME UNKNOWN

- 1 Another Spartan woman made away with her son, who had deserted his post, on the ground that he was unworthy of his country, saying, "Not mine the scion." This is the epigram referring to her:
Off to your fate through the darkness, vile scion, who makes such a hatred,
So the Eurotas flow not e'en for the timorous deer.
Worthless whelp that you are, vile remnant, be off now to Hades;
Off! for never I bore Sparta's unworthy son.
- 2 Another, hearing that her son had fallen on the field of battle, said:
"Let the poor cowards be mourned, but, with never a tear do I bury
You, my son, who are mine, yea, and are Sparta's as well."
- 3 Another, hearing that her son had been saved and had run away from the enemy, wrote to him, "Ill report is spread about ye; aither clear yersel' of this or stop yer living."
- 4 Another, when her sons had run away from battle and come to her, said, "Where have you come now in your cowardly flight, vile varlets? Do you intend to slink in here whence you came forth?" And with these words she pulled up her garment and showed them.
- 5 One woman, observing her son coming towards her, inquired, "How fares our country?" And when he said, "All have perished," she took up a tile and, hurling it at him, killed him, saying, "And so they sent you to bear the bad news to us!"
- 6 As a man was narrating to his mother the noble death of his brother, she said, "Isn't it a shame, then, to have missed his company on such a journey?"
- 7 One woman sent forth her sons, five in number, to war, and, standing in the outskirts of the city, she awaited anxiously the outcome of the battle. And when someone arrived and, in answer to her inquiry, reported that all her sons had met death, she said, "I did not inquire about that, you vile varlet, but how fares our country?" And when he declared that it was victorious, "Then," she said, "I accept gladly also the death of my sons."
- 8 Another was burying her son, when a commonplace old woman came up to her and said, "Ah the bad luck of it, you puir woman." "No, by Heaven," said she, "but good luck; for I bore him that he might die for Sparta, Dand this is the very thing that has come to pass for me."
- 9 When a woman from Ionia showed vast pride in a bit of her own weaving, which was very valuable, a Spartan woman pointed to her four sons, who were most well-behaved, and said, "Such should be the employments of the good and honourable woman, and it is over these that she should be elated and boastful."
- 10 Another, hearing about her son that he was conducting himself badly in a foreign land, wrote to him, "Ill report is spread about ye; pit this from ye or else stop yer living."
- 11 Of somewhat similar character is this: Chian exiles came to Sparta, and accused Paedaretus of many misdeeds; Ewhereupon his mother Teleutia sent for them and, after listening to their complaints, feeling that her son was in the wrong, sent him this letter: "Mither to Paedaretus. Aither dae better, or stay where ye are, and gie up hope o' gaen back safe to Sparta."
- 12 Another, when her son was being tried for some offence, said to him, "My child, either rid yourself of the charges, or rid yourself of life."

- 13 Another, as she accompanied a lame son on his way to the field of battle, said, "At every step, my child, remember your valour."
- 14 Another, when her son came back to her from field of battle wounded in the foot, and in great pain, said, "If you remember your valour, my child, you will feel no pain, and be quite cheerful."
- 15 A Spartan, wounded in battle and unable to walk, was crawling on all fours. He was mortified at being so ridiculous; but his mother said to him, "How much better to be joyful over your bravery than to be mortified at silly laughter."
- 16 Another, as she handed her son his shield, exhorted him, saying, "[Return] either with this or upon this."³
- 17 Another, as her son was going forth to war, said, as she gave the shield into his hands, "This shield your father kept always safe for you; do you, therefore, keep it safe, or cease to live."
- 18 Another, in answer to her son who said that the sword which he carried was short, said, "Add a step to it."
- 19 Another, hearing that her son had been slain fighting bravely in the line of battle, said, "Yes, he was mine." But learning in regard to her other son that he had played the coward and saved his life, she said, "No, he was not mine."
- 20 Another, hearing that her son had been killed in battle on the spot where he had been placed, said, "Lay him away, and let his brother take his place."
- 21 Another, engaged in conducting a solemn public procession, heard that her son was victorious on the field of battle, but that he was dying from the many wounds he had received. She did not remove the garland from her head, but with a proud air said to the women near her, "How much more noble, my friends, to be victorious on the field of battle and meet death, than to win at the Olympic games and live!"
- 22 As a man was relating to his sister the noble death of her son, she said, "As glad as I am for him, I am sorry for you that you were left behind when you might have gone in such brave company."
- 23 A man sent to a Spartan woman to ask if she were inclined to look with favour upon seduction; she replied, "When I was a child I learned to obey my father, and made that my practice. Then when I became a married woman, my husband took that place. So if the man's proposal is honourable, let him lay the matter before my husband first."
- 24 A poor girl, being asked what dowry she brought to the man who married her, said, "The family virtue."
- 25 A Spartan woman, being asked if she had made advances to her husband, said, "No, but my husband has made them to me."
- 26 A girl had secret relations with a man, and, after bringing on an abortion, she bore up so bravely, not uttering a single sound, that her delivery took place without the knowledge of her father and others who were near. For the confronting of her indecorum with decorum gained the victory over the poignant distress of her pains.
- 27 A Spartan woman who was being sold as a slave, when asked what she knew how to do, said, "To be faithful."
- 28 Another, taken captive, and asked a similar question, said, "To manage a house well."
- 29 Another, asked by a man if she would be good if he bought her, said, "Yes, and if you do not buy me."
- 30 Another who was being sold as a slave, when the crier inquired of her what she knew how to do, said, "To be free." And when the purchaser ordered her to do something not fitting for a free woman, she said, "You will be sorry that your meanness has cost you such a possession," and committed suicide."

³ Ancient writers were not agreed whether the second half meant to fall upon the shield (dead or wounded) or to be brought home dead upon it. The first part refers to the practice of cowards (from other cities) who cast away their shields when fleeing battle so as not to be slowed down by the shield's weight.