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Ismenodora at the Gymnasium: *IG VII 1777* and Plutarch's *Erotikos*

At first sight, *IG VII 1777*, an inscription found near Thespiiai in Boiotia and dating to the second half of the first century CE., is a list of the names of "those in the upper gymnasium," memorialized by three local *archontes* for an unspecified reason. The first name on the list, and clearly in a position distinct from the rest, is that of M. Ismenodora. *IG VII 1777*'s only female name recalls Plutarch's wealthy Thespian widow, Ismenodora, in the *Erotikos* (*Mor.* 748E-771E), who fell in love with a young, local *ephebe* whom she allegedly kidnapped and married. The appearance of an Ismenodora from Thespiiai both in the all-male context of the gymnasium in *IG VII 1777* and in Plutarch's dialogue, dating to the same period, is fascinating and puzzling. Previous considerations have failed to provide an explanation for M. Ismenodora's place on the inscription or evidence that would make a clear connection between the two names. This paper will examine the historicity of Plutarch's heroine and directly relate her to M. Ismenodora of *IG VII 1777*.

IG VII 1777 was first published by Koumanoudes in 1882, who suggested that the inscription might indicate a list of epebes, benefactors, or members of the gymnasium. Since the inscription includes a female, we can safely reject the suggestion of an epebic inscription, while the language of the stone and the inclusion of both Greek and Roman names of varying socio-economic status strongly suggest that this is not a list of benefactors. What is, then, a solitary woman doing in the company of men associated with a gymnasium that enlists people from all levels in the community?

M. Ismenodora's situation in an all-male context is not unique in the epigraphical record of the period: a certain Tate from Herakleia Salbake, a gymnasiarch, the daughter of a gymnasiarch, and a *stephanephoros* in the second half of the first century CE was "the first of the women" to be admitted to "the sacred *geraioi*". Furthermore, Menodora from the Pamphylian city of Sillyon in the second century CE was allowed to be a female *dekaprotos*, a financial *munus* previously held only by men. She was probably the only surviving member of her family capable of carrying on the family tradition and liable for taking on civic burdens not only of this office, but of several others as well. M. Ismenodora of *IG VII 1777* might very well be the only surviving member of her family and, thus, her position in an all-male context on the inscription might be explained by comparison to the other cases.

Plutarch's Ismenodora is a wealthy widow from a noble line, and it becomes evident from the dialogue that she has no remaining family at Thespiiai. She lives in her own house near the *palaestra* where the *ephebe* spends his time. It is her friends who help her during the kidnapping, while parents and relatives are absent from the argument that ensues and the subsequent wedding ceremony. Bearing in mind the dating of the evidence, and Plutarch's information about the Thespian widow and the information one can extrapolate from *IG VII 1777*, M. Ismenodora is indeed Plutarch's heroine.