

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

LEADING THE PARTY, LEADING THE CITY THE SYMPOSIARCH AS *POLITIKOS*

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Abstract

Plutarch's outline of the aims and duties of the symposiarch at *Quaest. Conv.* 1.4 (620A-622B) and the conversations he reports offer many similarities to the political program of his *Precepts for Politicians*, notably his focus on concord and the obstacles to it. This paper explores the implications of these parallels for Plutarch's thinking on the polis and on leadership. The symposium as a community of friends is a kind of idealized polis, but nevertheless the host and symposiarch must be alert at all times to the potential for divisiveness and ill-feeling. Wine may reveal both good and bad qualities in the members of the party, which will need to be guided and harmonized by the leader. Even seating or the distribution of food at the dinner preceding may be a cause of ill-will, and the most innocent-seeming topics inflame the spirits of the participants. In the *Precepts*, Plutarch outlines the goals of political activity, the means a leader should use, and the obstacles he will encounter. The chief goal is civic concord; the chief obstacle rivalry among the city's elite, prompted by ambition, competitiveness, and greed. The potential for discord at the symposium mimics in a restricted situation the potential discord of the polis. In both cases the leader must use great skill in facilitating an atmosphere of good will and harmony.

The *Symposiaca*, Plutarch's longest non-biographical work, is also the most puzzling. The difficulty lies in discovering unity and purpose in the ninety-five reported conversations from many different dinner parties, distributed among nine books¹. This paper will trace one important theme which runs through the work and helps unify it: the nature of the civil society which this work describes, the leadership which it requires, and the parallels with the needs of political leadership in Plutarch's day.

The political context of this work is an empire still remembering the revolts and civil wars of the first century. At the local level, cities ruled by an elite backed by Rome frequently suffered from aristocratic rivalry, which destabilized their economies and not infrequently led to factional fighting and violent Roman intervention.

Within this world of political conflict, Plutarch sought by his essays and biographies to encourage self-knowledge and virtue in his contemporaries, especially those who were responsible for the governance of cities, provinces, and the empire itself. His two great biographical projects, the *Lives of the Caesars* and the *Parallel Lives*, examine political leadership through narrative studies of the emperors and of outstanding Greek and Roman statesmen. His *Rules for*

¹ Nine of the conversations, with fragments of three others, (4.6b-10 and 9.6b-12a) have been lost. I have found especially helpful F. FRAZIER, 1996; S.-T. TEODORSSON, 1989-96 and A. CAIAZZA, 2001. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 'Plato and Platonism' conference, University of South Carolina, Columbia SC (March 20-22, 2008). I am grateful for the comments of Melissa Lane to that version of this paper, and to the respondent Mark Beck and others present then, as well as to the anonymous reader of this paper for generous advice.

Politicians sets out practical advice for conducting oneself as an effective leader in a Greek city under Roman rule. There Plutarch advises his young addressee to seek concord for his city and avoid the ambition, competitiveness, and greed - *philotimia*, *philonikia*, *philokerdia* - which have cost his city and its political class so much grief.

The *Symposiaca*

The *Symposiaca* are dedicated to Sosius Senecio, the same extremely distinguished member of Trajan's court to whom were dedicated the *Parallel Lives*, and they share a central purpose with the *Lives*, to make moral discourse concrete through narrative. The *Symposiaca* create a narrative model of community and interpersonal relationships within the limited compass of the symposium.

The central theme of the *Symposiaca* is *to philopoion*, 'friend-making' (612D)². In the words of Plutarch's friend Theon, the aim of a symposium is "through pleasure to produce or heighten friendship among the participants" (621C). But friend-making is not automatic.

In the very first conversation of the *Symposiaca*, Sosius Senecio raises the question: how is it possible at a drinking party to avoid wrangling and self-display (*tous erizontas kai sophistiōntas*)? Plutarch's *Symposiaca* respond to this question, modeling good drinking parties, in implicit opposition to the degenerate variety often documented in our sources³. Senatorial and imperial dinner parties often served to assert the power and wealth of those who gave them. Plutarch rejects this attitude. Instead he focuses on the strategies which may be used by the host, the symposiarch, and the guests to foster friendship. I will treat these strategies under three heads: the guests at the party, the role of the symposiarch or host, and the topics proposed for discussion. At the end I will consider parallels with political life.

The guests at the party

Ideally, the guests should know the host and each other, so that they can be comfortable together. When they do not, there is a risk of misunderstandings. For this reason, a particular difficulty arises when one guest invites other guests, the so-called shadows (*Symposiaca* 7.6). On the plus side, this practice

² Plutarch's work deliberately operates at a lower plane than Plato's *Symposium*. It diminishes the erotic charge which energizes Plato's masterpiece, discussing eros in only a few of the conversations (the major treatments are in *Quaest. Conv.* 1.5, 2.1, and 7.8, with other references in 5.7, 7.7, and 9.14). On Plato's blending of banquet practice with philosophical argument, see D. BABUT, 1994.

³ I have treated this topic more fully in "Drinking, *Table Talk*, and Plutarch's Contemporaries", in J. G. MONTES CALA ET AL. (eds.), 1999. For recent discussions of Greek dining, see P. SCHMITT-PANTEL 1992, and for symposia in particular see SLATER 1991 and the bibliography cited there; for Roman banquets, see the special number of *AJP* 124, 3 (2003) on Roman dining; K. VÖSSING, 2004 and E. STEIN-HÖLKESKAMP, 2005.

allowed friends to introduce new members into the group, or to have a favorite companion present, as we nowadays regularly will include a spouse, partner, or companion in a dinner or party invitation. Plutarch recommends that when possible a guest should invite those who are already friends of the host, or share common interests with him, whether in philosophy, literature, or politics. (In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates himself had invited such a friend to Agathon's party.) But such was often not the case. In Plutarch's day the desirable friendly atmosphere could be compromised when a Roman governor, senator, or other imperial or civic official had been invited to a dinner party. The political world, with all its stresses, intruded into the social. Besides the tension caused by the presence of one person more powerful and wealthier than the other guests, the great man would expect to bring some of his friends or staff, and the host had no choice in the matter. Such a party became a quite different occasion from a simple meeting of friends (708B), and the risks of offense, ill-temper, or hostility were correspondingly higher.

The symposiarch

In Plato's *Symposium*, the drunken Alcibiades burst into the party and appointed himself symposiarch, that is, the man chosen by the group to regulate the drinking of the party. He immediately ordered that all drink heavily, as he had already (213E). For Plutarch such behavior is unsuitable and contrary to the goal of the symposium. He is more influenced by Plato's *Laws*, in which the symposium is a site of moral education, where the young may learn to resist the temptation of pleasure under the watchful eye of a wise ruler (*archon*) who will see that the drinking is orderly and follows rules. Thus the properly regulated symposium will encourage not just amusement (*paidia*), but also temperance (*to sôphronein*), under the supervision of a sober, older leader (*Laws* 2.673e, cf. 1.639c-641c, 649d-650b, 2.671 c-d).

The qualities of Plutarch's ideal symposiarch, less severe than Plato's, and not expressly moralistic, are set out in one of the early conversations (*Quaest. Conv.* 1.4). He must be neither reluctant to drink nor given to drunkenness, but rather *symptikotatos*, "especially symposiastic". The unusual superlative, Plutarch explicitly states, was suggested by Plato's discussion of the guardians in the *Republic*, where he asserts that the commanders (*archontes*) of the guardians should be *phylakikôtatoi*, 'especially protective' of the city (*R.* 412C). Thus Plutarch insists that we compare the role of his ideal symposiarch with that of the guardians in Plato's ideal state. The symposiarch should have a relation of *philia* with those in his care, as the Platonic guardian must love, *philei*, the city and do what is best for it (*R.* 412 D-E). Plutarch goes on to make the parallel of symposiarch and ruler yet more precise with an anecdote of Pericles, found also in *Rules for Politicians* (813 E, cf. *Apophth. Reg.* 186 C). Pericles used to say to himself, as he assumed his duties as general, "Remember, Pericles, that you rule free men, you rule Greeks, you rule Athenians". The symposiarch, Plutarch explains, should remember that "he rules friends", and

thus should do what is best for them, and neither allow them to become rowdy nor deprive them of their pleasure. As the symposiarch himself should seek a mean in his drinking, so also in his governance of others he should observe a mean between dull sobriety and drunken carousing.

Unlike Plato's Alcibiades, the symposiarch should be sensitive to the physical and psychological state of the guests, exactly to avoid drunkenness (*Quaest. Conv.* 1.4, 620E-621A). The symposiarch must, in Plutarch's words,

know what change drinking produces in each person, into what emotional state he is liable to fall, and how he carries strong drink. . . . Like a musician adjusting a lyre, he should give one a little more (wine) and another a little less, to bring their dispositions (*physeis*) into evenness and concord (*sympbonia*) from their original diversity⁴.

If the symposiarch does not know the guests as intimately as this fine tuning requires, he should at least use general criteria: old men and gloomy ones get drunk more quickly than the young and the cheerful, for example. This knowledge permits the symposiarch to regulate the harmony and good behavior of the party. He will foster the blend of seriousness and play, *spoudê* and *geloion*, necessary for a good party. This blend will reflect that of a good wine, which warms the austere and charms the more lively. The party guests are the citizens of his little city, and he should govern them like Plato's guardians, not for his profit, but thinking of the best for them, always aiming at a harmonious concord. This is the ideal.

Topics that avoid hostility and violence

However, as someone observes early in the *Symposiaca*, parties are often shipwrecked by mockery and insults, and engender hostility and anger, unless they are guided rightly (621C-622B). I will touch on some general points regarding this guidance that emerge from the conversations Plutarch records.

Those who have lived through rancorous political campaigns will appreciate the total avoidance of contemporary politics in the *Symposiaca*. Such conversations did occur at parties, of course: one concerning items coming before the Athenian assembly is fleetingly mentioned at the beginning of a chapter before a new subject is introduced⁵. Plutarch considers a proper selection of topics for discussion essential, but politics is not one of them. Topics must fit the occasion, the *kairos*, as he illustrates in the very first discussion (1.1,

⁴ This requirement recalls Plato's insistence that the orator know different types of souls and the arguments proper to each (*Phaedrus* 271a-272b). Compare also Plato's discussion in the *Laws* of the proper ages for wine, noting that Dionysus had given wine as "a helpful medicine for the austerity of old age" (2.666b).

⁵ *Quaest. Conv.* 7.9, 714A. Just before, at the end of 7.8 (713F), Plutarch had noted that musical performances could divert a conversation moving toward political controversy. Theon's strictures against turning the party into a democratic assembly or sophist's school (621B) indicate Plutarch's aversion to such subjects. Cf. S.-T. THEODORSSON, 1995, pp. 433-7.

613A-C) and often throughout the work. Stories from history or everyday life are especially suitable (614A), for they allow a more relaxed presentation, and provide examples of admirable behavior, without requiring a rigorous philosophical demonstration. If philosophical topics are raised, Plutarch remarks, gentle persuasion works more effectively than ironbound proof (614 CD). Bringing up a topic suitable to a given guest requires skill, thought, and respect for the person addressed. In the first conversation of the second book, Plutarch gives examples of well-chosen questions which permitted a guest both to entertain the company and win admiration by discussing subjects he knows and loves. For instance, travelers are glad to be questioned about the distant places they have visited, or statesmen about missions they have served on or posts they have held (630A-631C).

Guests regularly entertained themselves by setting requirements or challenges to one another, or teasing them for habits or predilections. Plutarch warns (621D-622B, cf. 631C-F) that too often these carry a degree of maliciousness or mockery which is not playful but hybriatic. Ideally a challenge should give someone a chance to show his talent, not ridicule his incapacity. The object of the symposium is kindness and friendship (*philophrosyne*), not self-assertion or scorn.

The entire ninth book of the *Symposiaca*, some fifteen chapters, is devoted to a single party given by Plutarch's teacher Ammonius in Athens for the teachers at a school for young men, to which Plutarch and other friends were invited as well. Very soon the underlying tensions between the teachers of different disciplines, and between those whose pupils had done well or poorly, made itself apparent, and it is all that Ammonius and his friends can do to dispel the contentious atmosphere. In this case Plutarch focuses on Ammonius' adroit redirection of the conversation through addressing questions to different people and suggesting topics for discussion. Once, when a discussion broke down into a competitive wrangle of claims and counterclaims, Ammonius invited a guest to sing some poetry. As with Alcinous' similar request in the *Odyssey*, the singing introduced a pause and permitted the talk to resume on a different subject (736E, cf. *Od.* 8.250-55). Later, Ammonius required that professors of the same discipline may not question each other, but only someone in a different area, thus avoiding boring or contentious 'shop-talk' (737DE). He reinforced this by urging Plutarch to respond to a question on grammar (738A). Other guests also tried to help, not allowing a professor who had fared badly in the competitions to sit grumpily, for instance, but teasing a good-humored response from him (739E, 741A). The symposium is brought into harmony not only by controlling the flow of wine, but by channeling the conversation into suitable topics. The 'tuning' of the society depends on 'tuning' of the discourse.

Fittingly, the ninth book, and the *Symposiaca*, ends with two speeches on the role of the Muses. In the first (746B-747A), Plutarch asserts that both the desire for pleasure and the desire for the good, cited by Plato as the two principles of action (cf. *Phaedrus* 237D), require the divine guidance of the Muses. These goddesses can direct human desires to their proper fulfillment

in a noble pleasure, free from anything disorderly, debauched or violent. This speech expresses the ideal of the symposium, and of civil society. In the second speech (747B-748D), Ammonius explains how the art of dance is able to delight the divine in men. The dancer's body creates a kind of silent poetry, a discourse leading men to noble pleasure⁶. In these final conversations, as throughout the *Symposiaca*, the presence of the Muses, representatives of harmony, limit, and refined pleasure, protect conviviality and drinking from degenerating into insults, violence, and debauchery.

Politics

Plutarch's desire for peace and harmony at a symposium is parallel to his view of the ideal society founded on concord. The guests at a symposium may be compared to the citizens of a city or state: both are the raw material from which a civilized society is constructed⁷. Each group shares, at least ideally, a common aim, the happiness of the whole, and accepts that they all individually have a role in reaching that goal. Moreover, they recognize a ruler or leader, either imposed on them or chosen by them, who has the responsibility of fostering the unity of the assemblage and enabling its movement toward the common goal. Ideally, they will all be friends or friendly to each other, but in fact there will usually be differences of rank, wealth, temperament, and personal objectives which tend to divide them.

The quality of self-control so basic to Plutarch's symposiarch was necessary to a leader as well. In addition, the political leader, like the symposiarch, must understand men's natures and recognize their differences, either individually or according to general classes. In his *Rules for Politicians*, Plutarch explains how the politician must know his fellow citizens and adjust his behavior to their qualities. The politician who wishes to alter the *ethos* of the citizen body must move slowly, first accommodating himself to the people's pre-existing character, then gradually modifying it (799B), as the symposiarch does when adjusting the doses of wine. The politician should not assimilate himself to the popular character, as flatterers do, but "understand it and employ for each kind that by which it can be won over" (800A). Once he has become influential and trusted, then the politician can try to lead the character of the citizens toward a better state, one of harmony and concord, and bring them into tune as a musician does his lyre (cf. e.g. 809E). The statesman needs the same knowledge of character, individually and in classes, as the symposiarch.

In a city as in a symposium, small matters may lead to major disruptions in a city. In his *Rules for Politicians*, Plutarch observes that:

⁶ The speech reflects back to earlier in the book, when some of the students had performed a dance for the guests. The dance is given a higher role than just entertainment by Ammonius.

⁷ The parallel is affirmed early in the *Symposiaca* through the anecdote of Aemilius Paullus, who asserted that the same man could organize both fearsome armies and delightful dinner parties, since both required good order (*eutaxia*, *Quaest. conv.* 1.2, 615 E-F, cf. *Aem.* 28.9, *Apophth. reg.* 198B, already in Polyb. 30.14, Livy 45.32.11).

Violent civil conflict is not always kindled by disputes on public matters, but frequently private differences prompted by personal offences affect public life and throw the whole state into disorder (*Praec. rei publ. ger.* 825A).

The same sort of small offences which can disrupt a drinking party can disrupt a state as well. A poorly guided party will lead to anger and enmity, as a poorly ruled city degenerates into civil war and tyranny.

Like the leader of a symposium, a political leader must consider carefully what topics are suitable for which people, and the proper moment to introduce them. In speeches as at parties, stories are usually better than logical argument to persuade an audience. As serious philosophical discussion may be out of place at a convivial party, moral rigidity in a politician may not fit the times, and as with Cato of Utica, be like fruit ripening out of season, attractive but useless (*Phoc.* 3.2). Overall, a sense of limit and harmony is necessary to achieve the consensus needed in a civil society.

The tension between theoretical ideal and political practice means that neither a party nor a polis is ever in a stable state: each needs constant care by both its leaders and the individuals which comprise it to maintain the concord and harmony essential to its function, under the protection of the Muses⁸.

The *Symposiaca* describe gatherings that at first reading seem commonplace and tame, far removed from the brilliance of Plato's imagined drinking party. Nevertheless, these unremarkable dinner parties speak to the ethical underpinnings of society. Contemporary political life, in Plutarch's view, required the self-examination and principles of action of his own brand of moral and political philosophy, with its emphasis on self-improvement, conscious control of the passions, and goodwill and concord among friends and in states. The *Symposiaca*, in the concern of a good-natured and sensitive leader to respect the individuality and dignity of each participant and in the goodwill and harmony of their conversations, express an ideal of humanity and friendship which we can still admire and recognize as the basis of human society⁹.

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⁸ The necessity of constant care by a leader to maintain a city or state is a frequent theme in Plato, e.g. in the shepherd analogy of *Republic* 1 and the ancient tale in the *Statesman*. Cf. the analysis by M. S. LANE, 1998.

⁹ In a vignette, Plutarch presents King Cleomenes III of Sparta as just such an ideal ruler in his simplicity and graciousness at table, where he won friends by conversation, not gifts (*Cleom.* 13.4-9).

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