

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

TRAGEDY AND PHILANTHROPIA IN THE *LIVES OF DEMOSTHENES AND CICERO*

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Abstract

The concept of *philanthropia* is often associated with that of compassion and characterizes, ideally, the relations between the powerful and those who are found to be in a situation of fragility and impotence. The intention of this study is to show how, in the *Lives of Demosthenes and Cicero*, this notion of *philanthropia* takes on a tragic tone, one which is reinforced by the allusions to Sophocles's *Antigone*, a play which seems to serve as an ethical frame of reference for the evaluation of the protagonists' *ethos* in crucial moments of their lives.

In using the term φιλόανθρωπος to characterize the act that cost Prometheus terrible divine punishment, Aeschylus, or whoever composed the drama *Prometheus Bound*, defined the essence of the concept of φιλανθρωπία as a disinterested feeling of friendship, or love of men, born of the compassion for man's situation of abandonment and weakness¹. Prometheus's act, since it is also a gesture of rebellion against the gods, valorizes the human race, not only because it impedes its destruction by Zeus and makes the light of civilization possible, but principally because his altruism and compassion confer a certain dignity upon mortals. Coming from a divinity whose stature is different from that of the gods of Olympus, *philanthropia* is not, in its mythical origin, a divine sentiment that humans are obliged to imitate, or it would not invite punishment. But still it seems, on the human plane, to be a fundamental condition for the transformation of chaos into order, barbarity into civilization. This conception of *philanthropia* as a mark of civilization is one of the meanings of the word and its cognates in Plutarch, as we know. It is not, however, the only one, though it would seem to me that this is one of the fundamental semantic vectors for the comprehension of this concept². One other sense which the word takes on in Plutarch and which is truly central in his moral and political thinking could be translated as "kindness", "generosity" or even "clemency". In this sense it has to do with the relationship between governors and the governed, with the attitudes towards defeated enemies and towards those who are found to be in a situation of fragility and powerlessness. In this particular sense, the concept of *philanthropia* already had a long history in the Greek poetic tradition, even though the use of the word before the Hellenistic period was rare. This is a history that perhaps begins with the *Homeric Poems*, but whose

¹ Cf. *Pr.* 240 sqq.

² On the various meanings the word recovers in Plutarch, see H. M. MARTIN JR., 1961; S.-T. TEODORSSON, 2007; J. R. FERREIRA, 2008. Another word which is central in Plutarch's thought and sometimes has a similar meaning is *praotes*. Cf. H. M. MARTIN JR., 1960 and J. DE ROMILLY, 1979.

truly fertile period of exploration and development occurs in the tragedy of the 5th century B.C.

Indeed, if it is in *Prometheus Bound* that the word, in its adjectival form appears, as far as we know, for the first time, there is no doubt that Sophoclean tragedy presents us with a variety of characters whose attitudes and actions can be translated as *philanthropia*, a feeling of understanding and kindness to others. This feeling is ultimately based on the recognition of that which in them carries the mark of the human condition and allows for a vision of the other as close and similar. This *philanthropia*, this humanity, always associated with the capacity for compassion, defines characters such as Theseus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Neoptolemus in *Philoctetes*, Deianira in *The Trachiniae*, Ulysses in *Ajax*, or, on the negative side, Creon of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*.

The evocation of Greek tragedy in relation to this subject in Plutarch does not derive from a simple association of ideas. Of course, we know that the biographer knew the history of the tragedy well. This assumption rests upon the various allusions and citations of passages, characters and playwrights from Greek tragedy that we find in his oeuvre, as well as from the tragic tone in the narration of some of the *Lives*³. This fact that, in the first instance, attests to the importance of literary education in the Hellenistic *paideia*, is also symptomatic of the prominence that the theatre still possessed in the cultural life of the 1st century AD. And if the moralist Plutarch, influenced by Plato, does not acknowledge the educative role of tragedy and poetry in general without reservations, the truth is that, parting company with the philosopher, he does not reject the potential pedagogic quality of the emotions provoked by dramatic works⁴. From this we can affirm that not only philosophy, but also tragic poetry feed his ethical and moral convictions⁵.

In the case of the *Lives* of Demosthenes and of Cicero, in addition to presenting episodes that reflect the closeness between the art of oratory and

³ Cf. P. de LACY, 1952. In spite of maintaining, in my view with some exaggeration, that Plutarch reveals in his writings a reproving attitude toward tragedy, this author affirms that “in the *Demetrius* the allusions to drama are so persistent that the whole structure of the biography appears to be conceived in terms of tragedy.” Also J. M. MOSSMAN, 1988, speaks of a “tragic atmosphere” in *Life of Alexander* and supports the notion that Plutarch “uses tragic coloring to delineate the darker side of Alexander’s character.” See as well P. SERRA, 2002.

⁴ The frequency with which the author employs the terms “tragic”, “dramatic” and “theatrical” in a negative way, in order to censor acts and attitudes of men, does not imply, contrary to what Philip de Lacy thinks, a “condemnation of tragedy”. It seems rather that these expressions would have already taken on common forms for the translation of the hypocrisy of certain human acts, and do not reveal any kind of aesthetic or moral value judgment in relation to tragedy as a form of poetic expression. Indeed, we are dealing with classifications that we still use in the same semantic context without this indicating any kind of condemnation of the theatre.

⁵ Cf. P. CARRARA (2008). Not even in relation to the education of the young does Plutarch reject the pedagogic value of poetry, as we know. In the treatise known as *De audiendis poetis* (1a) the author declares that it is neither possible (δυνατόν) nor advantageous (ὠφέλιμον) to keep the young from reading the poets. Rather he seeks to orient them with this type of reading, defending (37b) the role of poetry as an introduction (προπαιδευθεῖς) to philosophy. On this treatise see J. L. BRANDÃO, 2001.

that of theatre⁶, the author also compares the world of theatre with life itself⁷. And the way in which he narrates the sequence of some important events emphasizes a tragic sense, which cannot be disassociated from the tragedy of the 5th century BC. There is one play in particular which stands out, functioning as a kind of frame of ethical reference for evaluating the behavior of the orators in central moments of their lives and, more generally, as a consideration of the moral order that the author engages in with respect to the attitudes of the powerful vis-à-vis the weaker. I am referring to *Antigone* by Sophocles, cited in the narration of the circumstances surrounding the death of Demosthenes, and in the *Synkrisis*, with respect to Cicero's performance as a statesman⁸. Keeping in mind the respective political and governmental responsibilities that both orators had, in different degrees, during their lifetimes, the connection to a play whose central conflict turns upon questions related to the exercise of power, the application of the law and the possible conflicts between human and divine laws seems natural. Indeed, it is not by chance that nearly all of the occurrences of the word *philanthropia* and its cognates in these *Lives* refer precisely to the field of power and to how whoever exercises it treats his subjects⁹. The fact is that *philanthropia* represents an act of will and of freedom, on the part of a person of superior social and political status who, for this reason, finds himself in an advantageous position in relation to others. Likewise, it is for this reason that *philanthropia* seems to be the human act *par excellence*, since only the reason and the compassion of man are capable of dominating that which by nature is still of an animal order: oppression, rage and the desire for vengeance.

I will begin with an example that clearly illustrates the point, taken from the *Life* of Demosthenes; without referring directly to the play, it nevertheless allows us to establish a correlation between *philanthropia*, power and how best to deal with a dead enemy. It is the passage when Plutarch criticizes the unworthy reaction of the Athenians and of the orator himself to the death of Philip of Macedon. He says the following (22. 2-4):

εὐθὺς οὖν ἔθυον εὐαγγέλια καὶ στεφανοῦν ἐψηφίσαντο Πausανίαν, καὶ προήλθεν ὁ Δημοσθένης ἔχων λαμπρὸν ἱμάτιον ἑστεφανωμένος, ἐβδόμη ἡμέραν τῆς θυγατρὸς αὐτοῦ τεθνηκυίας, ὡς Αἰσχίνης φησί, λοιδορῶν ἐπὶ τούτῳ καὶ κατηγορῶν αὐτοῦ μισοτεκνίαν (...) ἐγὼ δ' ὡς μὲν ἐπὶ θανάτῳ βασιλέως, ἡμέρως οὕτω καὶ φιλανθρώπως ἐν οἷς ευτύχησε χρησαμένου πταίσασιν αὐτοῖς, στεφανηφορεῖν καλῶς εἶχε καὶ θύειν, οὐκ ἂν εἴποιμι· πρὸς γὰρ τῷ νεμεσητῷ καὶ ἀγεννές, ζῶντα μὲν τιμᾶν καὶ ποιεῖσθαι πολίτην, πεσόntος δ' ὑπ' ἑτέρου μὴ φέρειν τὴν χαρὰν μετρίως, ἀλλ' ἐπισκικρᾶν τῷ νεκρῷ καὶ παιωνίζειν, ὥσπερ αὐτοῦς ἀνδραγαθήσαντας.

⁶ Cf. *Demosthenes* 7; *Cicero* 5.

⁷ Cf. *Demosthenes* 22. 5.

⁸ This same play is cited in the *Life of Phocion* (1.5), though it is in order to reject the idea contained in the verses cited.

⁹ The same thing happens for the same reason in the *Lives* of Alexander and Caesar.

At once, then, the Athenians proceeded to make thank-offerings for glad tidings and voted a crown for Pausanias. And Demosthenes came forth in public dressed in a splendid robe and wearing a garland on his head, although his daughter had died only six days before, as Aeschines says, who rails at him for this and denounces him as an unnatural father. (...) For my own part, I cannot say that it was honourable in the Athenians to crown themselves with garlands and offer sacrifices to the gods on the death of a king who, in the midst of his successes, had treated them so mildly and humanely in their reverses; for besides provoking the indignation of the gods, it was also an ignoble thing to honour him while he was alive and make him a citizen of Athens, but when he had fallen by another's hand to set no bounds to their joy, nay, to leap, as it were, upon the dead, and sing paeans of victory, as if they themselves had wrought a deed of valour.¹⁰

In Plutarch's view, Philip had the refinement and the nobility to deal with the defeated with humanity (φιλανθρώπως), while, on the contrary, the Athenians did not react in the same way once they had learned of his death. Yet, since death is the inexorable destiny of all men, it is *the* moment which most calls for a sentiment of moderation and of respect, exposing to divine νέμεσις those who neglect it. This lesson was already to be found in Homer¹¹, but the problem is, as we know, central in Sophocles's *Antigone*.

Let us move on to the references to the tragedy. The first one is found in the *Life* of Demosthenes, inserted into the description of the circumstances of his death. The whole episode is narrated in a way that accentuates the dramatic and even theatrical side of the last moments of his life. Indeed, the orator is presented to us as the protagonist of a miniature play whose secondary characters are completely erased before the force of the principal. Only he has the right to speak in direct discourse, while the author controls, through narration, the cues of the other participants. This little drama even contains irony – typical of Sophoclean tragedy – which is apparent whether in the words of the protagonist, or, mainly, in the reaction of the Macedonian soldiers who, in their ignorance and impiety, laugh at what they consider to be the fear and the cowardliness of their enemy. Let us look at the episode.

In order to avoid the cruelty of the Macedonian Antipater and a humiliating death at the hands of his opponents, Demosthenes had taken refuge as a suppliant in the Temple of Poseidon on Calauria. A leader of the Macedonian soldiers, by the name of Archias, known as φυγαδοθήρας (28. 3) and of whom it was said that he had been an actor of tragedies and teacher of the famous actor Polus, was sent by Antipater to capture him. He tried to persuade the orator to leave the temple, addressing him with affability (φιλάνθρωπα) and promising reconciliation with Antipater. Plutarch tells us that Demosthenes,

¹⁰ English translations are adapted from the Loeb edition of Plutarch's *Lives*.

¹¹ In the *Odyssey* (22. 412) Odysseus censures Eurycleia when she wants to let loose a shout of exaltation at the death of the suitors, saying: οὐχ ὅσηι κταμένοισιν ἐπ' ἀνδράσιν εὐχετάσθαι.

on the night before, had had a dream in which he had competed for a prize against Archias in a theatrical performance¹². The result had not favored the orator because, in spite of captivating the audience, he was beaten due to the poverty of the props and the quality of the set. And because of this he rejects the promises of reconciliation with the Macedonian general with these words (29. 3):

ὦ Ἀρχία, οὐθ' ὑποκρινόμενός με πώποτ' ἔπεισας, οὔτε νῦν πείσεις ἐπαγγελλόμενος.

“O Archias, you did never convince me by your acting, nor will you now convince me by your promises.”

Demosthenes unmasks the *philanthropia* exhibited by his pursuer because it befits neither the situation nor the character of the personage: the truth is that, on the one hand, the moment demanded real feeling, as apposed to contrived feeling, and, on the other, the mask of *philanthropia* did not match the cruel *ethos* of Archias¹³. When Archias, however, reverts to his true character and begins to threaten him, Demosthenes then decides to take up the theatrical game. Now it is he himself who takes on the role of the actor: making it seem that he is writing a letter to his friends, he instead actually swallows the poison that he had hidden in the calamus and remains sitting, his head covered, exactly like a character out of an Aeschylian tragedy. The scene stands out through the detail given by the narration of the movements of Demosthenes, and the way they are described is strengthened by the use of the aorist tense, which emphasizes the sequence of actions (29.4). Seeing him like this, the soldiers call him weak and cowardly, and Archias tries to persuade him once again, to which Demosthenes, already feeling the effects of the poison responds, looking at him (ἀποβλέψας)¹⁴:

οὐκ ἂν φθάνοις ἤδη τὸν ἐκ τῆς τραγωδίας ὑποκρινόμενος Κρέοντα καὶ τὸ σῶμα τουτὶ ρίπτων ἄταφον.

“You cannot be too soon now,” he said, “in playing the part of Creon in the tragedy and casting this body out without burial.”

If previously it was hypocrisy that he had denounced, now it is the sacrilegious character of Archias’s attitude that the orator prefers to underline, evoking the figure of Creon who, in *Antigone*, prohibits the burial of Polynices

¹² The dream is also a recurrent motif in some tragedies which, as in this scene, influences the actions of the *dramatis personae*. About the dreams in Plutarch, see F. E. BRENK, 1975.

¹³ The situation recalls the episode in *Oedipus at Colonus* in which Creon hides his intention to take Oedipus against his will to Thebes by using words of apparent friendship and compassion. Like Oedipus, the blind man whose *logoi* possess the capacity to see everything, Demosthenes, trained in the art of words, easily picks apart such falsity.

¹⁴ The scene is full of dramatic clues like this one.

and condemns the young daughter of Oedipus for disobeying his decree. With this example Demosthenes censures Archias and, by extension, Antipater and the whole Macedonian cause, for having chosen, in the theatre of life, to play the role of Creon, the powerful character, insensible to another's suffering and incapable of dealing in a dignified manner with a fellow human being, even when he is dead, all of which adds up to an act of offence to the gods themselves. In a certain way, is also the figure of Antigone that arises here, adding to the tragedy of the moment. In fact, Demosthenes demonstrates the same capacity for self-determination and a sense of courage equal to the tragic heroine, by escaping, through his own devices, the humiliation of a dishonorable and cruel death. This attitude will be praised by the biographer in the *synkrisis* with which the telling of these *Parallel Lives* concludes.

The tragic framing of this episode seems, then, to have been inspired by what Plutarch knew about the reaction of Demosthenes himself. Knowing Archias's theatrical heritage, from that he takes the ironical opportunity to accuse him of hypocrisy and inhumanity – the exact antithesis of *philanthropia*. But there is no doubt that Plutarch, taking advantage of the parallelism with the Sophoclean play suggested by the orator, develops and exploits it, creating a scenic context of great dramatic force.

The other episode that I refer to above occurs in the *synkrisis* as a way for Plutarch to recall the action of Cicero as a statesman and the way in which he exercised power. This is what he says (52. 2–3):

ὁ δὲ δοκεῖ μάλιστα καὶ λέγεται τρόπον ἀνδρὸς ἐπιδεικνύναι καὶ βασανίζειν, ἔξουσία καὶ ἀρχὴ πᾶν πάθος κινουῦσα καὶ πᾶσαν ἀποκαλύπτουσα κακίαν, Δημοσθένει μὲν οὐχ ὑπῆρξεν ... Κικέρων δὲ ταμίας εἰς Σικελίαν καὶ ἀνθύπατος εἰς Κιλικίαν καὶ Καππαδοκίαν ἀποσταλείς, ... πολλὴν μὲν ἐπίδειξιν ὑπεροψίας χρημάτων ἐποιήσατο, πολλὴν δὲ φιλάνθρωπίας καὶ χρηστότητος.

But what is thought and said most of all to reveal and test the character of a man, namely power and authority, which rouses every passion and uncovers every baseness, this Demosthenes did not have ... whereas Cicero was sent out as quaestor to Sicily, and as pro-consul to Cilicia and Cappadocia ... and gave many proofs of his contempt for wealth, and many of his humanity and goodness.

This is not, of course, a direct reference to the Sophoclean play. Rather we should note that it was a traditional thought attributed variously to some of the Seven Sages¹⁵. We may argue that it was perhaps this proverbial wisdom that Plutarch had in mind, as the verbal forms *δοκεῖ* and *λέγεται* seem to indicate. But the idea that only the exercise of power completely reveals the character of a man is not echoed simply as a short maxim but developed into an extension

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius (1. 77), for example, attributes the maxim *power shows a man* (ἀρχὴ ἄνδρα δείξει) to Pittacus.

that recalls *Antigone* 175-177. From the reader's point of view and given the previous reference to the tragedy, this is a logical association. In that play the thought is expressed by Creon, a situation that constitutes one of the ironies of the tragedy, since that is the opinion voiced through the character himself to whom that idea justly applies¹⁶. But, taken up at the end of the narration, these words show us the kind of morality that can be extracted from the *Lives* of Demosthenes and of Cicero as they touch upon the practice of politics: the action of governing requires an exemplariness of character which is reflected in the absence of greed, in honesty and in *philanthropia*. Indeed, it is in his capacity to treat the other, the weaker one, with compassion and benevolence that the *ethos* of a powerful man truly manifest itself, or rather, that his humanity emerges freeing itself in this way from the bestiality that would animalize him. Bestiality is precisely the attitude that the biographer denounces in another passage, when he refers to the agreement between Octavius Augustus, Mark Antony and Lepidus that resulted in the death of Cicero. Plutarch's words (46.6) are well aimed and remind us of certain of Thucydides's words with respect to the excesses committed during the Peloponnesian War:

Οὕτως ἐξέπεσον ὑπὸ θυμοῦ καὶ λύσσης τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων λογισμῶν, μᾶλλον δ' ἀπέδειξαν ὡς οὐδὲν ἀνθρώπου θηρίον ἐστὶν ἀγριώτερον ἐξουσίαν πάθει προσλαβόντος.

So far did anger and fury lead them to renounce their human sentiments, or rather, they showed that no wild beast is more savage than man when his passion is supplemented by power.

Philanthropia is, then, the complete antithesis of this: it is a rational attitude that dominates unbridled and selfish passion, the ideal attitude of one who governs, whose power does not manifest itself in the humiliation of the weak, but in benevolence and clemency which are the signs of the nobility of the soul.

But *philanthropia* is also a sense of compassion and of *sympatheia* based on the recognition of a common destiny that affects all men. That is perhaps why, at the end of the *synkrisis*, Plutarch appeals to the reader's humanity by taking up the description of the death of Cicero in summary form. In fact, this is hardly a dignified moment for evaluating the *ethos* of the orator. If in certain traces of his personality, namely those which have to do with the love of wealth, Cicero showed himself to be nobler than Demosthenes, his end contrasts decisively with the dignity that Demosthenes showed before inevitable death. Plutarch summarizes in brief but significant and no less dramatic brush strokes the sequence of events that led to the assassination of Cicero in a context whose tragic tone derives less from the grandeur of the personage than from the weakness of his character, as he ends of suffering

¹⁶ Plutarch knows well this characteristic of Sophocles tragic style, to which he refers in *De audiendis poetis* 27f.

a dishonorable death after various attempts at escape. This image of an old man who desperately tries to escape death, without the courage to accept and confront it is the image of the sum of human misery for which, as in tragedy, Plutarch proposes the best possible response – that of compassion (οἰκτίσαι), which is, in the end, the basis of *philanthropia*.

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