

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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“VINOUS BABBLING”
THE SYMPOSIUM IN PLUTARCH’S *TABLE TALK* VII, 9 – VIII,
PROEM (714A – 717A) AND MAXIMUS OF TYRE’S *ORATION* XXII

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Abstract

In his *Table-Talk* (VII, 714A – VIII, 717A), Plutarch introduces a theme which also occurs in Maximus of Tyre’s *Oration* XXII ‘*On proper entertainment*’, viz. the Persian habit to discuss important subjects over wine. Both authors consider this matter in the context of a wider moral-philosophical reflection on the appropriate way of dealing with deliberation, drinking and drunkenness, but each of them comes to a different appreciation, which seems quite indicative for their position throughout their wider oeuvre: whereas Plutarch seems to attribute high value to the custom of the symposium and even uses it as an inspiring setting for his *Table Talk*, Maximus often associates it with flattery and immoderate drunkenness, which entails a real threat for the virtuous man. By comparing these two authors’ opinion on the symposium, this paper enlarges the understanding of the Plutarchan symposium within its Greek and Roman context, and highlights the philosophically and socially distinctive position of both authors *vis-à-vis* their contemporary audience.

0. The status of the symposium in Plutarch’s *Table Talk* and elsewhere in his oeuvre still provokes fruitful scholarly discussion. Was the Plutarchan symposium the description of an actual social ritual in the élite society of his day or merely a literary fiction?¹ To what extent should his banquets be read as a normative example? How is the philosophical tradition interwoven with Plutarch’s view on symposia? How much independence did he allow himself (or did his public allow him) in his dialogue with this authorized tradition?

Of course, Plutarch’s *Table Talk* and his other works are but one source for a reconstruction of the actual ritual of the symposium in the Roman Empire, and they might contain some rather misleading information, for it cannot be taken for granted that Plutarch aimed at presenting an objective image of a drinking party in his day. A confrontation with other authors might help to gain a better understanding of the symposium in and outside Plutarch’s *milieu*. This paper will compare the connotations of the word ‘symposium’ in Plutarch’s oeuvre and in that of Maximus of Tyre², a philosophical orator of the second

¹ See e.g. J. MARTIN, 1931, pp. 177 sqq. (Plutarch’s συμποσιακά as a fictional literary framework); J. C. RELIHAN, 1992, p. 232: “Plutarch blurs the line between artificially constructed symposia and actual drinking parties not only by referring to the symposia of Xenophon and Plato as if they actually happened, but by literary rendering actual entertainments”; M. VETTA, 2000, passim, esp. p. 225 (Plutarch’s symposium as a mainly antiquarian summary of philosophical and symposiastic themes) and F. PORDOMINGO PARDO, 1999 (the historicity of some symposiastic aspects in Plutarch’s *Table Talk*).

² Since a more stylistic comparison between Plutarch and Maximus has already been made by P. VOLPE CACCIATORE, 2000, I will focus on a thematic comparison and only analyse Plutarch’s and Maximus’ rhetorical strategies if they underline a thematic point of view.

century AD, who probably delivered his speeches in Rome as an introduction to philosophy for young students³. Maximus did not write as extensively on symposia as Plutarch did, but that does not mean that his description of the symposium does not present an authentic testimony on drinking parties in the Imperial era. On the contrary, since Maximus seemed to have less interest in the philosophical, elevated value of the drinking parties (cf. *infra*), the symposia described in his texts might be closer to the actual drinking parties of his contemporaries.

1. In the fourth paragraph of his twenty-second *Oration 'On Proper Entertainment'*, Maximus expresses his disgust at the symposiastic behaviour of the Aenianes, whose banquets are characterized by a burlesque form of role-playing, including even simulated fighting scenes. Maximus, commenting that this is a highly unconvivial spectacle, far prefers the Persian symposium, where important subjects are usually discussed over a moderate amount of wine, as described in Herodotus' *Histories*⁴. The main reason for Maximus' approval is the fact that the Persians had a "rule restraining drunkenness", which "simultaneously roused their virtues", because it withheld the participants from "inflaming [their contentiousness] beyond what was needed" (22, 4, e; translation: M. B. Trapp). That Maximus is opposed to heavy drinking and drunkenness during the discussion of important matters also appears from the comparison between drunkards and sober demagogues in the Athenian assembly, who have an unrestrained (and, to Maximus, pernicious) license of speech. Here is another major element to be encountered in Maximus' appreciation of the symposium, his rejection of free speech which is provoked by a certain amount of wine. These two aspects, the abhorrence of unrestrained drinking and the rejection of *parrhesia*, are of major importance for the understanding of Maximus' position in contrast to Plutarch's.

Plutarch, for his part, introduces the topic of the Persian symposium in a different context. In his *Table Talk*, Glaucias, one of the dinner guests, tries to prove that discussing important matters over wine was no less a Persian than a Greek custom (VII, 9; 714A-C). This conclusion provokes the question

³ See G. L. KONIARIS, 1982, pp. 113-114 and M. B. TRAPP, 1997, pp. xx-xxii.

⁴ Hdt. I, 133.3. It is very likely that Maximus also had some passages (esp. 2.2.1-2.3.1 and 8.8.10) of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* in mind while referring to this custom (just as Plutarch probably did). It is in fact noteworthy in this context that the most outstanding feature of the *Cyropaedia*'s parties is their unusual sobriety (see D. L. GERA, 1993, pp. 132-91, esp. p. 150). This, however, does not mean that Maximus is not advancing his own opinion about symposia in this passage as well as in other parts of his work, since the same can be said about Maximus as D. L. GERA, 1993, p. 154 suggests about Xenophon: "... the omissions and restrictions of the *Cyropaedia*'s symposia, as well as their uniformity in tone, must have been deliberately planned by Xenophon, for he was acquainted with very different types of symposia, both actual and literary." Just like Xenophon, Maximus knew a large corpus of practices and canonical texts from which he could pick the most appropriate ones to bring his own point of view home. Besides, he explicitly affirms his own approval of the Persian practice, without any literal reference to a traditional authority. Therefore, I think, it can hardly be doubted that Maximus is communicating his own opinion on symposia to his audience here.

whether it was a good custom to discuss such matters at a drinking-party (VII, 10; 714D-716C). In answer to that, a brother of Plutarch's, although warning against possible excesses at table, utters a positive appreciation of typical symposiastic activities. He leans particularly on the argument that the drinking of wine at a party elicits free speech, and, combined with that, truthful discussions among the participants (715F)⁵. In the Proem to Book VIII of his *Table Talk* (716D-717A), Plutarch continues to reflect on this subject, arguing that especially philosophical⁶ topics should be dealt with over wine, for otherwise a party ends in an unstructured stream of 'vinous babbling'. Using the Persian example as a starting point then, and placing philosophical discussion at the centre of the symposium, Plutarch creates a normative example of a proper drinking-party, which he situates in the context of the Greco-Roman symposium.

This first comparison has already brought to light an important difference between the two philosophers. Maximus, on the one hand, makes no particular effort to promote the symposium, and minimizes its privileged position in moral and philosophical instruction. To his mind, the symposium can be a justified institution only if the core elements which are characteristic for a symposiastic party – the abundant food tables, the heavy drinking, cheap entertainment, etcetera – are banned or restrained. Since there is no rule limiting the use of alcohol in the Greco-Roman world, Maximus chooses his example in Persia without, however, wanting to extend this example to real prescriptions for Greek and Roman symposiasts. One may well wonder whether Maximus does not consider the symposia of his time rather redundant happenings which provide no additive educational contribution for his students in philosophy. Plutarch, on the other hand, does not only point at the possible excesses which occur at symposia, but also actualizes the Persian custom described by Herodotus to his own contemporary drinking groups which he introduces as exemplary for other convivial companies.

2. When I now relate these opinions on Greek symposia to the more general views of the two authors, a remarkable consistency in both opinions and agendas comes to the surface. Maximus tends to associate symposia with flattery⁷, wrong decision-making⁸, silly enjoyment of pleasure⁹, misplaced

⁵ On *parrhesia* in the context of the (Greek) symposia, see W. RÖSLER, 1995, esp. pp. 108-9.

⁶ As S.-T. TEODORSSON, 1995 and 1999, p. 68 convincingly suggests, the political aspect in Plutarch's *Table Talk* as well as in other symposiastic works seems quite absent in favour of the philosophical discussion. Also the passages under consideration here "sono piuttosto temi conviviali, 'simpotici'" (1995, p. 343).

⁷ Max., *Or.*, 14, 7, f on the flatterers of a certain Callias, who was ridiculed by Eupolis at the theatre.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 7, d offers a comparison between the accusers of Socrates and drunken symposiasts.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25, 6, a.

luxury¹⁰, and unacceptable behaviour¹¹. The only place where he considers the symposium as a possibly virtuous institution is the aforementioned passage where he talks about the Persian custom. In any other case, he implicitly advises his students against attending convivial activities, which entail a real threat for the virtuous man. This latter aspect appears clearly in this simile between the symposium and the stimuli of the senses:

Ὡσπερ οὖν ἐν συμποσίῳ μεστῶ κνίσης πολλῆς, καὶ οἴνου χεομένου, καὶ αὐλῶν ἤξου, καὶ συρίγγων, καὶ ψαλμάτων, καὶ θυμιαμάτων, τανδρὸς ἂν εἴη καρτεροῦ συναγείραντος καὶ συστείλαντος καὶ τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἀποστρέφοντος, νηφάλιον καὶ κόσμιον¹²: οὕτως ἀμέλει καὶ ἐν τῇ τῶν αἰσθήσεων πολυφωνίᾳ χαλεπὸν εὐρεῖν νήφοντα νοῦν, καὶ δυνάμενον προσβλέπειν τοῖς αὐτοῦ θεάμασιν. (Max., *Or.* 11. 7g)

Therefore, just as at a symposium, as rich savours fill the air, and the wine is poured, and flutes and pipes and lyres play, and incense burns, it would take a strong-willed man to stay sober and disciplined – a man capable of taking a grip on himself and chastening himself and diverting his own proper objects. (Transl. M.B. Trapp)

In this passage, the virtuous man receives no moral instruction to deal with a symposium. He must simply be armed against its vices by his own mental strength, and it is his own responsibility to stay sober in the face of all these malicious seductions. As the potential optative clause suggests, the appearance of a virtuous man at a drinking-party is just a fictitious illustrative supposition. This utterance implicitly advises the students who truly want to become wise and virtuous to stay away from, rather than to indulge in, such gatherings as the symposia. Maximus' own position on the symposiastic environment is further illustrated by the following passage:

Καὶ τις ἤδη ἰατρὸς εὐμήχανος ἀνεκέρασεν βραχεῖαν ἡδονὴν τῷ ἀλγεινῷ τῆς ἰάσεως· ποριστῆς δὲ ἡδονῆς, καὶ παντοίας ἡδονῆς, οὔτε ὁ Ἄσκληπιός, οὔτε οἱ Ἄσκληπιάδαι, ἀλλ' ὀψοποιῶν τὸ ἔργον. (...) Ἀλλὰ τοὺς μὲν ὀψοποιούς τούτους τοῖς συμποσίοις ἐῷμεν, καὶ γαστρὸς καὶ ἀκοῆς ὑπηρέτας πονηρούς· ἡμῖν δὲ δεῖ λόγου ὀρθοῦ καὶ διανεστηκότος. (Max., *Or.*, 25. 5h–6a)

Many a resourceful doctor has before now tempered the bitterness of his cure with a small admixture of something sweeter; but neither Asclepius nor the Asclepiadae are indiscriminate purveyors of pleasure – that is the work of caterers. (...) *Let us leave these contenders to their symposia*, like the miserable servants of belly and ear that they are. *What we need* is a style of utterance that stands straight and tall. (Transl. M.B. Trapp)

¹⁰ Max., *Or.* 30, 3, e on king †Aeetes†.

¹¹ Ibid., 39, 4, a on Alcibiades.

¹² This passage is indeed a *locus desperatus*, but the general content seems clear.

Through his use of the μέν-δέ-construction, Maximus opposes himself and his pupils to cooks who provide 'idle' food at the symposia (this combined with the negative 'idle' connotation of ὀψοποιία in Plato's *Gorgias*¹³). By this statement, Maximus leaves no doubt that his educational program must be organized away from the burlesque symposia, where mere care for the stomach prevails over philosophical discussion and knowledge.

The same admonitory statements occur in Plutarch's oeuvre as well, but with a different undertone. Like Maximus, Plutarch also warns about moral vices at symposia like (pseudo-philosophical) talkativeness¹⁴, but he does not aim as much at keeping people away from these parties as he tries to show the right conduct that must be displayed when one enters a convivial gathering. Plutarch's attitude is characterized by a tension between a realistic, sometimes excessive image of convivial parties and a highly normative portrayal which fits his own agenda. Even if most of the people at a party behave badly, the virtuous man does not need to stay away from it. He must rather face this gathering in a morally elevated way:

Οἷον ἐν συμποσίῳ φίλου κιθαρωδὸς αἶδει κακῶς ἢ πολλοῦ κωμωδὸς ἔωνημένος ἐπιτρίβει Μένανδρον, οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ κροτοῦσι καὶ θαυμάζουσιν· οὐδὲν οἶμαι χαλεπὸν οὐδὲ δύσκολον ἀκούειν σιωπῆ καὶ μὴ παρὰ τὸ φαινόμενον ἀνελευθέρως ἐπαίνειν. (Plu., *De vit. pud.* 531B-C)

Thus at a friend's banquet a citharode sings badly or a comic actor got for a great price murders Menander, and the crowd applauds and admires. Here I think it no hard or grievous matter to listen in silence and refrain from insincere and unmanly applause. (Transl. The Loeb Classical Library)

The very fact that Plutarch prescribes what one should or should not do at a drinking-party illustrates that he does not consider the symposium as a morally indifferent and hedonistic gathering where anything goes, but as an institution where one can train one's moral and mental strength. In Plutarch's view, the occurrence of vicious persons at a drinking-party does not exclude guidelines for the right symposiastic conduct, as is the case in Maximus' oeuvre. Besides the portrayal of some excesses, which indicates that Plutarch is not blind to the dangers which the attendance of a symposium might imply, the positive value of the symposiastic institution is often highlighted as well, not only evidently in Plutarch's so-called symposiastic works (the *Table Talk* and the *Dinner of the Seven Sages*), but also in the rest of his oeuvre. Ample illustrations can be found of Plutarch's benevolent appreciation of the symposium, which is distinguished alternately by its appropriateness¹⁵, its philosophical and poetical value¹⁶, and its capability to illustrate a man's modesty¹⁷. Plutarch thus confirms a virtuous

¹³ Pl., *Grg.*, 462 sqq.; 521d-522a for ὀψοποιία as a form of κολακεία. Cf. M. B. TRAPP, 1997, p. 211 n. 17.

¹⁴ Plu., *De prof. in virt.*, 80A; *De gar.*, 502F; 514C.

¹⁵ IDEM, *Lyc.*, 25, 2; *Aem.*, 28, 5; *Reg. et imp. apophth.*, 198B.

¹⁶ IDEM, *De ad. et am.*, 68B; *De Pyth. or.*, 405F; *Non posse*, 1095C-E.

¹⁷ IDEM, *Dion.*, 13, 2; *De cup. div.*, 527B; *De coh. ira*, 461D.

man's ability to surmount the vicious kind of behaviour at drinking-parties, and makes the symposium a fruitful place where one can give evidence of one's exemplary character and enjoy moral and philosophical instruction.

3. After this brief survey of the connotations of the symposium in Maximus' and Plutarch's works, I return to the passage in the *Table Talk* in which Plutarch discusses the appropriate way of dealing with deliberation, drinking, and drunkenness at a symposium. In his introduction to the eighth Book, he makes the following statement:

Τὴν γοῦν μέθην οἱ λοιδοροῦντες φιλόσοφοι λήρησιν πάροιον ἀποκαλοῦσιν· τὸ δὲ ληρεῖν οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ἀλλ' ἢ λόγῳ κενῶ χρησθαι καὶ φλυαροῦν· λαλιᾶς δ' ἀτάκτου καὶ φλυαρίας εἰς ἄκρατον ἐμπεσοῦσης ὕβρις καὶ παροινία τέλος ἀμουστότατον καὶ ἀχαριστότατον. (Plu., *Quaest. conv.*, 716F)

At any rate, those philosophers who wish to give indulgence in wine a bad name define it as “vinous babbling,” and babbling means, precisely, engaging in empty and frivolous conversation. The outcome of undisciplined chatter and frivolity, when it reaches the extreme of intemperance, is violence and drunken behaviour – an outcome wholly inconsistent with culture and refinement. (Transl. The Loeb Classical Library)

One of this type of mentioned philosophers who adopt a radically hostile position towards the symposium seems to be Maximus of Tyre. Since, according to Maximus, the outcome of such a gathering is nothing but immoral behaviour, a true philosopher should ban the attendance of symposia from his life, following only the so-called non-excessive and philosophical way to real knowledge and understanding. Plutarch, however, chooses another approach:

... λόγῳ τε δεῖ χρησθαι παρὰ πότον θεωρίαν τινὰ καὶ μοῦσαν ἔχοντι καὶ λόγου τοιούτου τῇ μέθῃ παρόντος ἀποκρύπτεται τὸ ἄγριον καὶ μανικόν, ὑπὸ τῶν Μουσῶν εὐμενῶς κατεχόμενον. (Plu., *Quaest. conv.*, 717A)

... when drinking we ought to engage in conversation that has something speculative, some instruction in it, and that when conversation like this accompanies indulgence in wine the wild and manic element is hidden away, benevolently restrained by the Muses. (Transl. The Loeb Classical Library)

As is indicated in the passage, Plutarch, using a generally imperative tone (cf. δεῖ χρησθαι), focuses not on symposiastic vices here, but on the normative and exemplary function which a symposium should fulfil.

4. Besides the philosophical aspirations of these two authors, there is also the question of the social embedding of their discourses. How should Maximus' and Plutarch's appreciation of the symposium be understood against

the social background of the Imperial era? Drinking, after all, is in many societies primarily a social practice¹⁸.

Celebrating parties and consuming alcohol can be a means for consolidating social power, as was the case in the aristocratic origin of the Greek symposium¹⁹, but they can also constitute a value scale on their own, which does not necessarily correspond to the 'natural' hierarchy in society²⁰. It was, in other words, of major importance for the upper class not to let their drinking habits undermine their distinctive position *vis-à-vis* the lower classes²¹. Therefore, apart from their philosophical concerns, both Plutarch's and Maximus' texts can be read as a societal response to this potential threat to the élite dominance over other social groups.

Ingenkamp has proposed the interesting hypothesis that Plutarch's attitude towards drinking and getting drunk was heavily influenced by the social practice of his élite society²². To my mind, Plutarch must indeed have felt the pressure of his contemporary audience, who might have enjoyed rather abundant symposia, but he reacted against this tendency by morally elevating the institution of the symposium through an explicitly normative discourse. A socio-anthropological reading of Plutarch's texts would reveal that, by introducing philosophy as the main aspect of his symposia, the Chaeronian made sure that his élite public would still distinguish itself from the mob, even while celebrating drinking parties. The Tyrian, for his part, considered it safer for the élites to avoid the abundant symposia – unless, of course, the abundance was restrained, as was the case among the Persians –, for these symposia might not only corrupt the moral virtues of his listeners, but also blur their social distinction as élites towards 'inferior' people.

5. Does Plutarch's *Table Talk* then offer a realistic portrait of the symposium, or is it merely a literary utopia? Some passages in Plutarch and the comparison with Maximus' *Oration*s in any case show that, for Greek and Roman people, there was no evident link between symposiastic activities and morally high-standard behaviour²³. If Plutarch's image of the symposium in his *Table Talk* as

¹⁸ M. DOUGLAS, 1987, p. 4.

¹⁹ For the 'ritual' function of the symposium and its role in the creation of a social order, see O. MURRAY, 1990, pp. 3 sqq.; cf. A. M. SCARCELLA, 1999, pp. 7-13.

²⁰ See O. MURRAY, 1995, pp. 4 sqq. Cf. M. DOUGLAS, 1987, p. 8: "Drinks also act as markers of personal identity and of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion." Here she is referring to a study of G. MARS, 1987, which defiles the social power of drinking for working men on the docks in Newfoundland, Canada, where a man's transition from outsider to insider depends more heavily on his drinking habits and 'skills' than on his commitment to and talent for his job.

²¹ On the importance for a member of the élite to distinguish himself from the ordinary people on various (cultural) levels, see P. BOURDIEU, 1979. On the idea of equality among the participants in a *convivium* in the Early Empire, see J. D'ARMS, 1990, esp. p. 313 for Plutarch's *Table Talk*. One should however bear in mind that the drinking companions at the Plutarchan symposium are already members of the social élite, which obviously influences our interpretation of the argument in favour of *ἰσότης* among the participants.

²² H. G. INGENKAMP, 1999.

²³ This conclusion corresponds well with A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1999, pp. 342-3: "Perhaps, all

well as in other works does in fact correspond to real customs among the Greeks, it was, I think, at the very most a rare and idealizing interpretation by small groups of cultivated men, who were inspired by the great tradition of symposia as described by canonical philosophers, in the first place Plato and Xenophon²⁴.

To conclude then, it seems fair to state that Maximus and Plutarch both serve their own philosophical and social agendas. Both testify to the possible dangers interwoven with the symposia, but each of them comes to a different appreciation. Whereas Maximus turns his back on these so-called pernicious kinds of gatherings, Plutarch, on the other hand, by situating philosophical discussion at the very heart of the symposium, wants to revalue this institution and make it an outstanding place where the virtuous man can give evidence of his qualities and enjoy an elevated status.

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would agree with Plutarch that every self-respecting and orderly man should avoid getting drunk. Yet, judging once more from the extant literary symposia, from Plato and Xenophon to Athenaeus and Lucian, to say nothing about sympotic representations in art, few people in antiquity, I think, would attend a banquet in order to seek instructions or moral edification".

²⁴ See M. VETTA, 2000, p. 223: "La scuola filosofica ha un proprio modello di simposio, differente da quello del resto degli uomini, non edonistico ma creativo." One should, however, not underestimate the time-gap between Plutarch's time and that of Plato. On the relation between Plutarch's symposium and the tradition, A. M. SCARCELLA, 1999, p. 127 argues that "il simposio plutarcheo ha le sue regole, ma sono diverse da quelle che valevano nell'età classica: esse rispecchiano il cambiamento delle convinzioni e delle coscienze, ora più aperte e tolleranti, ora più intransigenti ed austere."

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