Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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THE PLACE OF PLUTARCH IN THE LITERARY GENRE OF SYMPOSIUM

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Abstract

Plato’s idea to have a dialogue on serious philosophy taking place at a drinking-party is actually astonishing, considering the traditionally rather “unphilosophic” entourage of these feasts. His Symposium covers a vast scope extending from the most subtle philosophic reasoning of Socrates to the final deranged, unrestrained drinking-bout. In spite of this vulgar ending, however, the work is basically a philosophic dialogue. That this work happened to form the starting-point of a new literary genre, the symposion, may have been largely due to Xenophon. Many more contemporary and somewhat later writers produced works of the kind, but all are lost. Since the third century B.C. the Cynic Menippean sympotic genre became prevalent instead of the philosophic Socratic one, which, as far as we know, is totally absent until Plutarch revived it with his Sept. sap. conv. In addition he created a new subgenre of sympotic writing, the Quaestiones convivales. He probably wrote his convivial works in opposition to the Menippean kind. His evident ethical and educational purpose is singular in the genre of symposion; he received no followers.

The banquet, constituted of the two sections, δείπνον and συμπόσιον/πότος, was an essential part of ancient Greek culture. It can be traced back as far as Homer, and during the Archaic period the sympotic customs were established in a regular, almost ritualized form, the aristocratic συμπόσιον. This was an institution for the upper classes, and it had its place in the courts of kings and tyrants and in the ἀνδρῶνες of citizens in prominent position. The symposion was an integrated part of life of the political and military clubs, the aristocratic ἑταιρεῖαι. These circles of educated and well-to-do people was a natural environment for song, music, dance and recitation, which inspired poets to the lavish productions of the archaic lyric and choral poetry, not least the so-called scolia, and painters got abundant motives for vase paintings. Artists of different profession, such as musicians, dancers, actors, acrobats and merry-makers, were often engaged by the host, but the guests themselves also took on large parts of the entertainment. The well-known competitive spirit of the Greek society found a natural arena in the symposion. There were competitions in song and music, or in solving riddles and other problems. A demand was laid on the symposiasts that each in turn should sing a song accompanying himself with the lyre. For such performances a formal musical education was presupposed. In the Archaic age all participants at symposia had acquired the necessary competence. But towards the end of the sixth century the great changes in the political state of things in Athens also brought about changes in the character of the symposion. The conventional educational system was modified, new groups of citizens advanced to power, and after the Persian wars the living standards of the population rose. The institution of the symposion received a more luxurious, and also more private and varied

1 Il. 1. 595-604; 9.197-224.