Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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**PLATO’S SYMPOSIUM AND PLUTARCH’S ALCIBIADES**

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Abstract
This paper examines Plutarch’s exploitation of Plato’s *Symposium* in chs. 4-7 of the *Life of Alcibiades*. It aims to demonstrate that the *Symposium* is much more than a “source” for the *Alcibiades*. Rather the *Alcibiades* invites an intertextual reading with the *Symposium*, and becomes more meaningful when read with the *Symposium* in mind. In particular, knowledge of the *Symposium* reveals how Plutarch has constructed Socrates’ attitude to and relationship with Alcibiades as that of the ideal lover with his beloved.

Plato’s *Symposium* offers perhaps the most vivid, and certainly the most influential, picture of Alcibiades to survive from classical antiquity. It is no surprise, then, that Plutarch should in his *Life of Alcibiades* draw heavily on it, as well as on other Platonic texts such as the *First Alcibiades* and *Republic* Book 6. A full analysis would attempt to trace Plutarch’s use in this *Life* of all the Platonic texts; indeed it is the way the *Alcibiades* uses allusions to multiple Platonic texts, together with material drawn from non-Platonic sources, especially Thucydides and the rhetorical tradition, that makes it so rewarding and so complex. But the aims of this paper are more limited. I shall focus solely on the *Symposium* and shall attempt to show not only the depth of Plutarch’s engagement with that text, especially in chs. 4-7, but also how the *Alcibiades* becomes richer and more meaningful if it is read with the *Symposium* in mind.

The importance of Alcibiades’ relationship with Socrates and of the Platonic texts is made clear right at the start of the *Life*, where, after dealing briefly with Alcibiades’ family, Plutarch makes the surprising claim that Alcibiades’ fame was owed “in no small part” to Socrates’ kindness to him; a little later he cites Plato as a source for the name of Alcibiades’ tutor (1.3). In ch. 3 Plutarch mentions a scandalous story of Alcibiades’ running away from Pericles’ house to one of his lovers (3.1); the kind of precocious sexual behaviour exhibited there might suggest to readers the story of Alcibiades’ failed seduction of Socrates in *Smp*. 218b-219d. At any rate it provides a nice

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2 Cf. C. B. R. Pelling, 2005, p. 125: “In *Alcibiades*, then, pervasive intertextuality with Plato lends depth and resonance to the sort of associations which we saw in Plutarch’s other works, and draws the reader into tracing how rich is the possibility of learning from Socrates’ example – and also how difficult it can be”. Cf. also C. B. R. Pelling, 2008, p. 548.

3 The reference is to *Alc*. 1, 122b.

4 Alcibiades’ reference to Marsyas, the inventor of the flute, in 2.6 may recall his comparison