Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

José Ribeiro Ferreira, Delfim Leão, Manuel Tröster & Paula Barata Dias (eds)
“In learned conversation”. Plutarch’s symposiac literature and the elusive authorial voice

Frederick E. Brenk
Pontifical Biblical Institute of Rome

Abstract

The Symposiacs offer a good entry point for understanding Plutarch’s dialogues. Plato’s, such as the Symposion, are often used as a model to interpret Plutarch’s without consideration of the changed circumstances in the Imperial period. Also, toward the end of Plato’s life, his dialogues became treatises in which the interlocutors are hardly important. Plutarch used no single character throughout his dialogues. Like Cicero he wanted to present the opinions of the philosophical schools, and often his own position is difficult to discern. The role and importance of various persons in the spirited intellectual discussions of the Symposiacs offer a clue to his intentions in the dialogues. At the same time, unlike his dialogues, his own persona appears frequently and with a surprising assertiveness. In some Symposiacs, especially the Ninth Book, as in The E at Delphoi and the Erotikos, he appears as fairly young, possibly a distancing technique. The Symposiacs in any case offered an opportunity to present his views in various shapes and sizes.

Μισέω μνάμονα συμπόταν
I hate a fellow drinker with a good memory.
(opening of the Symposiacs)

This citation from an unknown poet, used to open the Symposiacs, pretty well destroys our approach to the theme of the symposion if not of philanthropia. Perhaps we should not try to remember what occurs in a drinking party. However, with a good memory for Plutarch’s Symposiacs (Quaestiones convivales), one can possibly come closer into the circle of his friends and get a better understanding of the authorial voice not only in the Symposiacs but also in his major dialogues. Perhaps none of the personae who appear in Plutarch’s dialogues, not even the persona Plutarch, completely represents his thought. For example, in the Erotikos, by presenting himself as a newlywed, many years before, he is able to convey to his readers a certain distance between himself and the persona. Throughout his writings Plutarch indicates that he is searching for the true voice of Plato among his different speakers and dialogues. Undoubtedly Plutarch’s readers, too, were searching

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1 Symposiacs 612C; D. A. Campbell, 1993, p. 405, Anonymous, no. 1002. He lists three other authors who cite it, including Lucian, Symposion 3, and notes an allusion to the saying in Martial, 1.27.7. See the indispensable commentary of S.-T. Teodorsson, 1989-1996, I., pp. 31-2.
2 Actually at 6.1 (686D) Plutarch gives just the opposite advice, the necessity of remembering the discussions, something which justifies his own writing of the Symposiacs.