Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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Plutarch’s *Techne Rhetorike* for the Symposium in *Quaestiones Convivales*: The Importance of Speaking Well to Cultivate Friendship

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Abstract

This paper discusses the advice on rhetorical matters that Plutarch gives in the *Quaestiones Convivales* to stress the importance of good conversational skills in establishing fruitful relationships with other people during after-dinner table talk. Reflecting the association between education and the symposiac context under the Roman Empire, Plutarch suggests procedures for choosing and discussing the best themes for conversation, and for interacting in an appropriate manner with the other guests. Rhetoric thus takes up a central position in situations in which friendships may be made or strengthened.

The banquet in Ancient Greece was one of the favourite occasions for the transmission of values and knowledge. The conversations held after the meal, accompanied by wine – the final part of the gathering, known as the symposion – ranged over the most topical themes of the moment and helped their participants to build up links of friendship based on common interests and beliefs. Praise for bravery and youth centred the conversation in the circles of Callinus and Tyrtaeus, while slightly later, Alcaeus and Theognis celebrated the membership of a political faction which trained the young in the traditional values that they will need to perpetuate their status. Plato described another kind of banquet that emerged during the Classical Era, a banquet where the philosophical conversation of the most distinguished citizens helped the guests to understand the world around them. In the Empire, the banquet was retained as a space for encouraging fellowship and the exchange of ideas. However, as befitted the times of the Second Sophistic, the subjects addressed were more trivial: the pepaidenmenoi, cultivated men educated in the system of the egkyklios paideia, showed off their knowledge in erudite debates in which every participant could learn something new regarding the theme under discussions.

Rhetoric was also a fundamental ability for those cultivated men seeking to hold interesting table talks with their friends. After several centuries in which the dedication to laudatory and deliberative rhetoric predominated, in the Empire the importance of forensic rhetoric gradually increased. A rhetor of the Second Sophistic would not only have trained pupils for careers in political councils or the courts where they would make declamations or representations in front of auditoria, but would also have had pupils who did...

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1 F. Pordomingo Pardo, 1999 stresses the literary character of the banquets of the Empire, and E. Suárez de la Torre, 2005, pp. 472–9 places Plutarch’s symposia inside the environment of academic and cultural circles.

2 Plutarch (*QC* IX 14.3, 744d) considers this form of rhetoric to be the first to have developed.