Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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A “BARBARIAN” SYMPOSIUM AND THE ABSENCE OF PHILANTHROPIA (ARTAXERXES 15)*

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Abstract
This paper studies a unique symposium scene in the Artaxerxes and aims to understand its narratological significance in the biography. It is a “barbarian” banquet, which in many respects is the complete opposite of its Greek counterpart. Yet familiar features of the symposium are nevertheless discernible in it. During the feast, Mithridates, an inebriated Persian, is tricked into telling a certain truth, which contradicts the official royal version. As a result he is brutally punished by Artaxerxes, in a deed that essentially removes the trait of philanthropia from the monarch. The paper presents how, on the one hand, the wine imbibed at the party can be regarded as revealing the true character of the king, and how, on the other, the symposium is crucial in altering the ethos of Artaxerxes. Like Mithridates at the banquet, the reader is also baffled by the interplay of ethnic stereotypes, and by the thin line between the real and the apparent, artistically presented by Plutarch.

The Greek Symposium, according to Plutarch, should produce Philanthropia and friendly feeling among its participants1. By contrast, in a non-Greek setting found in the biography of Artaxerxes (15.1-7), a “barbarian” symposium, as it were, is portrayed by Plutarch as leading to the effective removal of the trait of Philanthropia from the Persian king. It is the aim of this paper to show the manner in which this reverse outcome is created, and to demonstrate the narratological significance of the Greek symposium in this Life2.

The context is a feast taking place in the aftermath of the battle of Cunaxa (401 BC), which saw the victory of Artaxerxes over his rebellious brother, Cyrus the Younger3. The guests in this dinner are barbarian, including a young Persian named Mithridates, who was responsible, according to one version, for striking Cyrus in the temple with his spear4. He was not the only one who

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2 The banquet is not presented as typically Persian. In the Quaest. conv. Plutarch sometimes discusses special features of the Persian dinner, which do not specifically appear here. E.g., 1.1.613a (Persians drink and dance with their concubines rather than with their wives); 1.4.620c (the ability of Cyrus the Younger to hold his wine; cf. Reg. et imp. apophth. 173e); 2.1.629e-630a (many questions posed at the Persian banquets of Cyrus the Great; cf. X., Cyr. 5.2.18 ); 7.9.714a, d (deliberation on issues of state over wine, a custom no less Greek than Persian; cf. Hdt. 1.133; Str. 15.3.20). A rather different approach to the text of Plutarch and to this scene in particular is presented by Binder, C., Plutarchs Vita des Artaxerxes: Ein historischer Kommentar, Berlin, 2008, 244 (“reine Fiktion”)


4 Art. 11.5: καὶ παρατρέχων νεανίας Πέρσης ὄνομα Μιθριδάτης ἀκοντίῳ βάλλει τὸν