Symposion and Philanthropia
in Plutarch

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CENA APUD CATONES: IDEOLOGY AND SYMPTIC BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

In this paper I will analyze the ideological ramifications of the sympotic behavior of Cato Censorious and Cato Minor as exhibited in their respective Lives. In particular their treatment of slaves or other participants at the symposia will be discussed. I will demonstrate that Plutarch is at pains to contrast their behavior negatively with that of Socrates who figures in all four Lives of the two pairs as an extraneous foil. Ultimately I will examine the primary target of Plutarch's literary attack; Cicero's highly idealized portraits of both of these Roman exemplars. I will show that Plutarch is pursuing an ideological agenda that seeks to negatively evaluate two great symbols of Roman virtue against the truly philosophical Socratic paradigm.

Our earliest sources of information in the history of Greek literature and culture characterize the symposium as a place of relaxation for the elite members of society. Dining, drinking, sexual activity, all of this and more took place with regularity. It was also a social function in which an individual’s “civilized behavior patterns” or lack thereof could be scrutinized behind “a pretence of entertainment”¹. From the gross transgressions of Penelope’s suitors to Alcibiades’ encomium to his would-be-erastes Socrates, the attention to social norms or their violation could be represented in great works of literature that depict such scenes. Socrates, for Plato, as well as for Plutarch, was the exemplar, the canon, whose public behavior mirrored his philosophic principles. As Plutarch writes: “He was first to show that life at all times and in all parts, in all experiences and activities, universally admits philosophy” (An seni ger. r. p. 796D)². This paper will explore Plutarch’s use of the Socratic paradigm in several biographies that touch on sympotic behavior³.

The Lives of Aristides, Cato the Elder, Phocion, and Cato the Younger all contain explicit and implicit references to the Athenian. The figure of Socrates functions as an extraneous foil in all of these Lives⁴. In the Life of Aristides, Socrates is mentioned comparatively early on in the section discussing Aristides alleged poverty (Arist. 1.9)⁵. The linkage of Socrates with Aristides appears to be a natural one for Plutarch elsewhere. Aristides is mentioned in the same breath with Socrates as an example of moderation in the De cohibenda ira (458C-D), both of whom exemplify the qualities of “mildness (πραότητος) and forgiveness (συγγνώμης), and moderation in passion (μετριοπαθείας)”.

¹ T. Whitmarsh, 2005, p. 32.
² Translation by H. N. Fowler, Plutarch’s Moralia X, LCL.
⁴ I treat this topic in greater detail in a forthcoming article, “Contrasting Catos: The Socratic Paradigm in Plutarch’s Lives”.
⁵ See also the reference to the book by Demetrius of Phalerum entitled Socrates in the proem (Arist. 1.2).