Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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Educating the young ... over wine? Plutarch, Calvenus Taurus, and Favorinus as convivial teachers

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Abstract

Already in the Archaic period, the symposion was often connected with educational purposes. Plato elaborated his own alternative (esp. in the first two books of the *Laws*), which in turn influenced later authors. This contribution deals with three such thinkers: Plutarch, Calvenus Taurus, and Favorinus of Arles. All three realised that the context of the symposion yielded interesting opportunities for the education of younger students. I propose to examine their evaluation of their students, their attitude (and, in Plutarch’s case, self-characterisation) as a teacher, and their didactic approach. The evidence shows that Plutarch and Taurus basically pursue the same philosophical purposes in their education during dinner, by promoting independent and critical thinking, whereas Favorinus’ teaching activities are more in line with the brilliant self-display of the so-called ‘Second Sophistic’.

οἶνος, ὦ φίλε παῖ, καὶ ἀλάθεα
Alcaeus, fr. 366

1. Wine and education: a strange alliance?

For most people, the Greek symposion probably does not call forth associations with respectable education on a high level. One rather thinks of bacchic dancing and mimes, *skolia*, relaxed conversation, laughter and friendship, expensive flute-girls who may also have been *hetairai*, clowns, acrobats, and jugglers, and in the first place much wine and drunkenness. Several of these elements were part and parcel of the symposion from the very beginning, and once introduced, most of them remained popular until late antiquity. This is not only confirmed in Old Comedy but also in many passages from later symposium literature.

This, however, is only one side of the picture. Very early in the Greek tradition, the banquet was also connected with educational purposes and could be used as a tool for affirming and rehearsing elite values. In both Crete and Sparta, young boys were in the Archaic period allowed to attend the common meals of their fathers and to listen to their discussions of political and military affairs. The *Corpus Theognideum* illustrates the same tendency of teaching young boys like Cyrnus in the (pederastic?) context of a symposion, and from Plato on, the educative aspect of the symposion

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2 See in general E. Pellizer, 1990, and (on the typical character of the ἄκλητος) B. Fehr, 1990.