Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

José Ribeiro Ferreira, Delfim Leão, Manuel Tröster & Paula Barata Dias (eds)
Dancing with Plutarch

DANCE AND DANCE THEORY IN PLUTARCH’S TABLE TALK

Carlos A. Martins de Jesus
University of Coimbra

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze Plutarch’s discussion of the different kinds of ancient dance and their meaning in the Table Talk. Besides a large section from Book 9 (question 15), all of it concerning the parts of dance and their relation to poetry, we focus on those other moments where different rhythms of dance are discussed. Looking beyond the Plutarchan material, we search for the implications of this subject in terms of philanthropia and moderation, concepts extremely important in all nine books of the Table Talk.

The ancient symposium was a strictly staged social event at which members of the male elite drank, talked and enjoyed themselves, in a variety of ways. As for this last element, the convivial one, the various semiotic sources that have been preserved – mostly literature and painting1 – are clear on the importance given to many other elements besides eating and drinking. Music and poetry, inseparable arts, were a constant presence in ancient banquets, and the same should apply to dance.

As far as literature is concerned, there are many fragments from poems composed to be performed at banquets, at least from the middle of the seventh century BC onwards2. It is in the Odyssey (8.72-95) that we find what is probably the oldest western description of an aristocratic symposium, given by Alcinoos to Odysseus upon the latter’s arrival3. In this passage we are presented with an aoidos singing the very beginnings of the Trojan War, which moves Odysseus to tears. But it is perhaps Herodotus (6.129.6-19) who gives us the first proof that banqueters not only enjoyed the dancer’s art but also danced themselves, inspired by the wine and the artists’ constant encouragement.

1 W. J. Henderson, 2000, p. 6 defines and analyzes three different groups of testimony about the Greek symposium: sympotic poetry, vase-painting and archaeological remains from the banquet rooms themselves.

2 On sympotic lyric, see W. J. Henderson, 1997. E. L. Bowie, 1986, p. 34 views the symposium as a privileged space for elegiac recitation, taking it as the beginning of the festive event itself.

3 Nevertheless, the word used for banquet in this text is δαίς, not συμπόσιον.