

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

RIDDLING AT TABLE *TRIVIAL AINIGMATA VS. PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMATA*

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Abstract

In his work *On Proverbs*, Clearchus writes that “the solution of riddles (*griphoi*) is not alien to philosophy, and the ancients used to make a display of their knowledge by means of them. For in propounding riddles in their drinking-bouts they were not like the people of today who ask one another, what is the most delightful form of sexual commerce, or what fish has the best flavour”. Symposiastic riddles were in fact a very popular sub-literary genre, as is witnessed by some epigrams of the *Greek Anthology* (book 14th) and by the Latin *Aenigmata Symposii* or *Symphosii*, but in order to find the ‘philosophical riddles’ mentioned by Clearchus we must turn to literary banquets. The topics dealt with in Plato’s and Xenophon’s *Symposia* (the praise of the god of Love; the definition of the most beautiful thing in the world) are in fact philosophical questions (what is love? What is the most beautiful thing in the world?).

This paper deals with Plutarch’s position regarding the riddles (*griphoi* and *aenigmata*) banqueters were asked to solve in real symposia and the questions (*problemata*) banqueters were addressed in literary symposia; particular attention is devoted to two of Plutarch’s works, the *Questiones convivales* and the *Convivium septem sapientium*.

In the first book of his work *On Proverbs*, the Peripatetic philosopher Clearchus of Soli writes the following lines: “The solution of riddles (γρίφοι) is not alien to philosophy, and the ancients used to make a display of their knowledge by means of them. For in propounding riddles in their drinking-bouts they were not like the people of today who ask one another, what is the most delightful form of sexual commerce, or what fish has the best flavour or is at the height of excellence at that season, or what fish is to be eaten chiefly after the rising of Arcturus or of the Pleiades or of the Dog-star”¹.

We owe this quotation to Athenaeus, the Egyptian erudite who, in his most famous work, the *Deipnosophistai*, makes the wise protagonists of his long dinner quote a good number of the typical symposiastic conundrums Clearchus seemed to regard with disdain². These riddles were a sub-literary genre that happened to be very popular in real banquets, as is witnessed by many Greek and Latin authors, starting with Aristophanes, continuing with some fifty epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, and reaching late antiquity with the hundred Latin *aenigmata* written by the mysterious *Symphosius* or *Symposius*³.

Plato did not like this kind of riddle either: in the fifth book of his *Republic*, while hinting at the famous riddle of the eunuch (the ‘man who is not a man’)

¹ Clearchus, fr. 63 Wehrli.

² Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, 10.457 CD. All Athenaeus’ passages are quoted according to GULICK’s translation, 1930.

³ Aristophanes, *Wasps* 20 sqq.; *Greek Anthology*, book XIV. The last edition of Symphosius’ riddles is BERGAMIN, 2005. On riddles in classical literatures, see FRIEDRICH, 1860; ÖHLERT, 1886, 1912²; SCHULTZ, 1909, 1912²; SCHULTZ, 1914. On the fifty-three riddles quoted in the fourteenth book of the *Greek Anthology*, see F. BUFFIÈRE, 1970.

and the bat (the ‘bird that is not a bird’), he defines this typical ‘drinking-bout riddle’ an ἀίνιγμα τῶν παίδων (a ‘childish riddle’)⁴.

Not all these riddles were so stupid as Clearchus and Plato seem to say, though. This might be true of some funny and gross quizzes, such as those attested by the poets of the Middle comedy Eubulus and Diphilus – although their solutions (πρωκτός and πέος respectively) fitted in with the loose atmosphere that marked some quite inebriated symposia⁵. But other questions were more serious. For instance, the riddle of the cupping-glass (“I saw a man gluing bronze upon another man with fire so closely as to make them of one blood”), quoted by Athenaeus and Plutarch, who attributed it to Cleobulina, was considered by Aristotle an example of both a clever riddle (ἀίνιγμα) and a good metaphor (μεταφορά): in his *Rhetoric*, the philosopher states that “metaphor is a kind of enigma, so that it is clear that the transference – the etymological meaning of the word μεταφορά – is clever”⁶.

But which were the riddles whose solution was, according to Clearchus, “not alien to philosophy”? In the second part of Athenaeus’ quotation, the philosopher says that “the ancients preferred such problems as these: answering the first guest who recited an epic or iambic line, each one in turn capped it with the next verse; or, if one recited the gist of a passage, another answered with one from some other poet to show that he had spoken to the same effect; further, each in turn would recite an iambic verse”. And, later on, “similarly to what has been described, they would tell the name of each leader against Troy, or of each leader among the Trojans, or tell the name of a city in Asia – all beginning with a given letter; then the next man and all the rest would take turns in telling the name of a city in Europe, whether Greek or barbarian, as prescribed. Thus their very play, being not unreflective, became a revelation of the friendly terms with culture on which each guest stood; and as a reward for success they set up a crown and bestowed applause, by which, more than anything else, mutual friendship is rendered sweet”⁷.

Since Clearchus’ quotation ends here, we are uncertain as to the philosophical nature of such pastimes: it’s hard to tell whether this play with words and letters had the gravity real philosophy should have.

Therefore I must put for a second time the question I have just asked: which were the philosophical riddles praised by Clearchus? In order to answer this question, we must turn to other banquets – not real, but literary banquets.

⁴ Plato, *Republic* 479 BC. A fuller version of this riddle is quoted by Athenaeus (10.452 C) and attributed to Panarces; Athenaeus has drawn it from Clearchus’ work (fr. 94 Wehrli). The most complete version of the riddle can be read in *Schol. ad Plat. Resp.* 479 C (p. 235 Chase Greene).

⁵ Eubulus, fr. 106 Kassel-Austin (with the interesting remarks of R.L. HUNTER, 1983), and Diphilus, fr. 49 Kassel-Austin. These riddles are quoted by Athenaeus as well (10.449 EF; 451 BC).

⁶ ‘Cleobulina’ fr. 1 West; Athenaeus 10 452 B; Plutarch, *Convivium septem sapientium* 154B; Aristoteles, *Rh.* 1405a37 and *Po.* 1458a29; Demetrius, *De elocutione* 102. A slightly different version of the same riddle can be read in the *Greek Anthology* (XIV 54).

⁷ Athenaeus 10 457 EF.

Let us start with the most celebrated one, Plato's *Symposium*. If we consider the main topic dealt with in this work, namely, the seven speeches in praise (ἔγκωμια) of the god of Love uttered by Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates and Alcibiades, what else are these seven speeches other than different answers to the philosophical question "what is love?". The philosophical dimension of this πρόβλημα is strengthened by the philosophical earnestness of the answers – and, if we may doubt whether all the answers were really earnest, we must admit that Socrates' surely was.

The same considerations can be made about the other Socratic symposium: in their different (and sometimes amusing) definitions of what is the personal feature they are most proud of, the banqueters of Xenophon's *Symposium* do answer a kind of philosophical question ("what is the most beautiful quality of a man?"); the fact that some answers are provocative and ridiculous (for instance, Socrates asserts he is proud of his being a pander) does not wipe out the philosophical side of the overall discussion.

Other interesting information can be gained from the two symposiastic works of Plutarch, the Συμποσιακῶν προβλημάτων βιβλία θ' (*Quaestionum convivialium libri novem*) and the τῶν ἑπτὰ σοφῶν συμπόσιον (*Septem sapientium convivium*), where we find many useful remarks about this subject.

The Συμποσιακῶν προβλημάτων βιβλία as a whole are a crystal-clear indication of Plutarch's opinion concerning this topic. Its very generic title has led modern translators to choose a more precise expression and to underline the conversational side of the work ('table-talk', 'propos de table', 'conversazioni a tavola', and so on). But the Latin translation (*quaestiones*) is more akin to the Greek word used by Plutarch to define the subject of each 'talk' (πρόβλημα). Plutarch mentions it right at the very introduction of his work, when he states that "each of the nine books contains δέκα προβλήματα" ('ten questions')⁸. But what does πρόβλημα precisely mean? Its most common English translation, *problem*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is glossed as "a thing thrown or put forward; hence, a question propounded for solution"⁹; in Greek literature as well, πρόβλημα is a 'question' that covers a broad range of meanings, since it can be a mere synonym of 'riddle' but can also mean something deeper such as a real philosophical problem¹⁰. In Clearchus' definition, the word πρόβλημα appears twice: "A riddle (γρίφος) is a problem put in jest (πρόβλημα παιστικόν), requiring, by searching the mind, the answer to the problem (τὸ προβληθέν) to be given for a prize or forfeit"¹¹. In the introduction to the sixth book of the *Quaestiones convivales*, while he says to his friend Sossius Senecio that one of the valuable privileges guaranteed by

⁸ *Quaestiones convivales* 612 E.

⁹ OED, vol. VIII, p. 1403.

¹⁰ The OED makes a similar distinction: *problem* is either "a difficult or puzzling question proposed for solution; a riddle; an enigmatic statement", or "a question proposed for academic discussion or scholastic disputation", or "a doubtful or difficult question; a matter of inquiry, discussion, or thought; a question that exercises the mind".

¹¹ Athenaeus 10 448 C (= Clearchus, fr. 86 Wehrli).

Plato to the guests of his *Symposium* was that of recalling afterwards what had been said over the drinks, Plutarch uses the expression προβλημάτων δὲ καὶ λογῶν φιλοσόφων ὑποθέσεις for indicating “the topics of philosophical inquiry and discussion”¹².

Many of the *Quaestiones convivales* are in fact significant philosophical topics that could be (and possibly really were) discussed by learned people during a symposium: this is for instance the case of the first of the ‘table-talks’ (“Whether philosophy is a fitting topic for conversation at a drinking-party”), where Plutarch states that the only questions that should be posed and answered during a literary banquet must be – if I may borrow the Clearchean expression – “not alien to philosophy”¹³.

But, in spite of the fact that in this work (his longest one) he hardly mentions a single symposiastic riddle (apart from the quotation of a line that was part of a very popular αἰνίγμα)¹⁴, Plutarch did not spurn that kind of προβλήματα. In the introduction to the fifth book, he says to Sossius that “after dinner even common, unliterary people allow their thoughts to wander to other pleasures, as far away as possible from the concerns of the body”: when their belly is full, they “take up conundrums and riddles (αἰνίγματα καὶ γρίφους), or the Names and Numbers game”¹⁵.

This attitude can be better seen in the other Plutarchean symposium, the *Septem sapientium convivium*. The nine questions put by Amasis to the Ethiopian Pharaoh and discussed by the seven wise men are real philosophical questions (as a matter of fact, they are called προβλήματα). They are the following: “What is the oldest thing? What is the most beautiful? What is the greatest? What is the wisest? What is the most common? What is the most helpful and the most harmful? What is the strongest and the easiest?”¹⁶.

¹² *Quaestiones convivales* 686 C (English translation by H. B. HOFFLEIT, 1969).

¹³ If one skims through the index of the *Quaestiones convivales*, he will find other philosophical questions (or questions about philosophy), such as question three in book two (“Whether the hen or the egg came first”, a question that is much more philosophical than it appears) or questions seven and eight in book eight (two προβλήματα about Pythagorean precepts).

¹⁴ *Quaestiones convivales* 660 D, that is the second line of a riddle quoted in full by Athenaeus 10 457 B. On the peculiarities of Plutarch’s quotation, see M. S. CAPONIGRO, 1984, pp. 293–296; on the riddle, see also E. FABBRO, 2003.

¹⁵ *Quaestiones convivales* 673AB. In his note in the Loeb edition, after having said the “the letters of the alphabet were regularly used as numerals (*alpha* being 1, *beta* 2, etc.)”, HOFFLEIT, 1969, writes that “in a game called *isopsepha* the sum of the values of the letters of a name was equated with the sum comprised in another name” and refers to the many examples in verse that can be found in the sixth book of the *Greek Anthology* (321 sqq.). D. L. PAGE, 1981, p. 504, in the section dedicated to the *isopsepha* epigrams of Leonidas of Alexandria, writes that “there is a curious example in a Bithynian epitaph of the second century A.D., Peek 1324: the deceased invites the reader to guess his name, giving clues including the sum of the nine letters”. Galen’s father, the mathematician and architect Aelius Nico, was very keen on such riddles (see H. DILLER, 1936).

¹⁶ *Convivium septem sapientium* 152 F. Because of the significance of the topics, the answers given by the Ethiopian king are discussed at length by the banqueters in the following chapters of the dialogue. On these riddles, see I. M. KONSTANTAKOS, 2004 and 2005.

But in this symposium it is also possible to find less philosophical riddles. Cleobulus, one of the seven *sophoi*, who was famous for his conundrums, goes to the dinner offered by Periander together with his daughter Eumetis, better known by the surname 'Cleobulina' and not unequal to her father in the cleverness of her riddles. Two of the most celebrated Cleobulina's riddles are explicitly quoted in the dialogue. In the fifth chapter, Aesop mentions the riddle of the Phrygian flute ("Full on my ear with a horn-bearing shin did a dead donkey smite me"); here the verb used to indicate the creation of this riddle is αἰνίττομαι (connected with the noun αἰνίγμα)¹⁷. In the tenth chapter, the same Aesop mentions the riddle of the cupping-glass; here the action of propounding the riddle is indicated through the verb προβάλλειν (connected with the noun πρόβλημα)¹⁸.

The mention of this conundrum (and of conundrums in general) is caused by the intervention of the master of the house after the discussion of the king's riddles: Periander recalls the famous game of riddles between Homer and Hesiod held at Chalcis during the funeral of Amphidamas¹⁹. At this point, one of the banqueters, the physician Cleodorus, asks a question that, in a certain sense, summarizes the topic of this paper: "What difference is there between things like this (that is, riddles like those asked by Homer and Hesiod) and Cleobulina's riddles? Perhaps it is not unbecoming for her to amuse herself and to weave these as other girls weave girdles and hair-nets, and to propound them to women, but the idea that men of sense should take them at all seriously is ridiculous"²⁰.

In other words, Cleodorus seems to deny the possibility of a distinction between trivial αἰνίγματα and philosophical προβλήματα. Cleobulina blushes and does not answer the question; Aesop takes her part and asks the physician if it is not even more ridiculous not to be able to solve riddles such as the one of the cupping-glass (a riddle which, as Aesop points out, ought to be very easy for a doctor like Cleodorus who owed his reputation as a good physician to the use of cupping-glass as a form of treatment).

Between these two extreme positions, Plutarch prefers to take a much more balanced stand. Such a position is expressed at best by the words uttered by Thales, one of the seven *sapientes*, at the beginning of the dialogue: when Neiloxenus of Naucratis pays Cleobulina a compliment for the popularity of her riddles in Egypt and praises her for the cleverness and the skill shown in them, Thales says that she uses those conundrums "like dice, as a means of occasional amusement. (...) But she is also possessed of wonderful sense, a statesman's mind, and an amiable character, and she has influence with her father so that his government of the citizens has become milder and more popular"²¹.

¹⁷ *Convivium septem sapientium* 150 EF; 'Cleobulina' fr. 3 West (English translation by BABBITT, 1928).

¹⁸ *Convivium septem sapientium* 154 B.

¹⁹ This famous game is the subject of the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod*.

²⁰ *Convivium septem sapientium* 154 AB (BABBITT's translation).

²¹ *Convivium septem sapientium* 148 DE (BABBITT's translation).

These words acknowledge that the ability to construct trivial riddles good enough to make people enjoy themselves during a banquet is as important as the capacity to solve more difficult questions that involve significant spheres such as literature, politics, science and, last but not least, philosophy.

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