

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

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 *Life*².

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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¹ *Quaest. conv.* 1.4.3.621c, 4.Proem. 660ab; *Cons. ad ux.* 610a; *Sept. sap. conv.* 156cd, 158c. Cf. S.-T. TEODORSSON, 1989, p. 102; 1999, pp. 66-9; A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1999, p. 342 n.17.

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”).

³ On this battle see J. KROMAYER, 1924; J. K. ANDERSON, 1974, pp. 106 sqq.; P. A. RAHE, 1980; J. M. BIGWOOD, 1983; G. WYLIE, 1992; R. B. STEVENSON, 1997, pp. 84-93; P. BRIANT, 2002, pp. 627-30.

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

injured the prince in the course of the combat. Another person, a Carian slave from the city of Caunos, is reported to have stabbed Cyrus from behind, in the back of the leg, and the wounds inflicted by the two men brought about the death of the prince⁵. During the dinner, Mithridates relates his part in the event and instantly causes his own downfall, since the facts revealed by him contradict the official royal version. Even though Artaxerxes himself was not involved in the killing of Cyrus, as the king was quickly removed from the battle after incurring an injury (*Art.* 11.2-3) and was not even present at the ensuing clash (*Art.* 11.4-10, 12.2, 13.1), he nevertheless appropriated the glory for it. Before the feast, the king gave Mithridates gifts; but these were allegedly for another deed – namely, presenting the monarch with the blood-stained saddle-cloth of Cyrus, which had fallen from the prince's horse⁶.

Mithridates received the gifts silently and walked away (*Art.* 14.7). Still, at the banquet, he is induced to disclose his feelings by Sparamizes, the chief eunuch of the queen mother, Parysatis, who wishes to avenge the death of her son Cyrus⁷. The ill-advised conduct of Mithridates at the dinner party leads to his brutal execution by Artaxerxes, which is detailed in the next chapter of the biography⁸. This scene is an adaptation of a story recounted in the *Persica* of Ctesias, the Greek physician at the court of the Great King (*FGrH* 688 F 16.67)⁹.

κρόταφον αὐτοῦ παρὰ τὸν ὀφθαλμόν, ἀγνοῶν ὅστις εἶη. Cf. the description of Xenophon (*An.* 1.8.27), who does not name Mithridates but merely claims ἀκοντίζει τις and locates Cyrus' wound below the eye (ὑπὸ τὸν ὀφθαλμόν). It is most probable that Xenophon relied on Ctesias' account. Cf. S. R. BASSETT, 1999, who seems to infer too much from the minor differences between the two authors.

⁵ *Art.* 11.9-10: ἐν δὲ τούτῳ Καύνιοι τινες ἄνθρωποι...τῇ τοῦ βασιλέως στρατιᾷ παρακολουθοῦντες, ἔτυχον συναναμειχθέντες ὡς φίλοις τοῖς περὶ τὸν Κύρον...εἰς οὖν ἐκείνων ἐτόλμησεν ἀγνοῶν ἐξόπισθεν βαλεῖν τὸν Κύρον ἀκοντίῳ. τῆς δὲ περὶ τὴν ἰγνύαν φλεβὸς ἀναρραγεΐσης, πεσὼν ὁ Κύρος ἅμα παίει πρὸς τινι λίθῳ τὸν τετρωμένον κρόταφον, καὶ ἀποθνήσκει. It should be noted that both Mithridates and the Carian struck Cyrus without knowing his identity.

⁶ *Art.* 14.5: οἰόμενος [scil. βασιλεύς] δὲ καὶ βουλόμενος δοκεῖν καὶ λέγειν πάντας ἀνθρώπους, ὡς αὐτὸς ἀπεκτόνοι Κύρον, Μιθριδάτη τε τῷ βαλόντι πρῶτῳ Κύρον ἐξέπεμψε δῶρα καὶ λέγειν ἐκέλευσε τοὺς διδόντας ὡς “τούτοις σε τιμᾶ [ὁ] βασιλεύς, ὅτι τὸν ἐφίππειον Κύρου πῖλον εὐρὼν ἀνήνεγκας”. Cf. 11.6: τὸν δ' ἐφίππειον πῖλον ἀπορρύνετα λαμβάνει τοῦ τὸν Κύρον βαλόντος ἀκόλουθος αἵματος περίπλεω.

⁷ It is possible that the whole banquet was organized by Parysatis in order to trap Mithridates, the queen mother wanting to avenge Cyrus' death by causing the noble Persian to bring harm on himself. The resigned demeanour of Mithridates upon receiving the gifts from the king had not suited her intentions, and she may have plotted to engineer his ruin. Cf. her manipulations in getting rid of other persons in *Art.* 17.1-8, 23.1.

⁸ Mithridates was punished by the torture of the boats (ἀποθανεῖν σκαφευθέντα: 16.2), a method of execution that inflicts a horrendous death. The condemned man is placed between two boats (σκάφαι), one on top of the other, and is force-fed until he incurs severe diarrhea. While his intestinal waste accumulates in the boats, worms and other creatures breed in it and devour his flesh.

⁹ On the *Persica* see F. JACOBY, 1922, pp. 1640-66; R. DREWS, 1973, pp. 103-16. On its shortcomings see J. M. BIGWOOD, 1976, 1978, 1983 (errors, questionable numbers, faulty geography, bias, simplification, confusion, duplication, anachronisms, etc.). See also R. B.

The feast portrayed here is very different from a Greek *symposium*, and one could say that it is its complete opposite¹⁰. To begin with, this is not an all-male gathering¹¹, as some of the participants are eunuchs, a problematic group in Greek imagination¹², and the chief figure is a eunuch belonging to a woman, the queen mother. Nor is this an event of aristocratic and free members, since the eunuchs are slaves. Moreover, the dinner betrays no social equality among the guests, and this fact is reflected in the garments Mithridates chooses to wear to the banquet. These clothes, which were gifted to him before the banquet with the intention of exalting him above the others, are indeed admired by the rest of the company¹³.

The setting too is unlike that of a Greek banquet. Strictly speaking, there is no clear distinction between eating and drinking, as was customary in the Classical *symposium*¹⁴. In addition, drinking seems to take place before the prayer that generally accompanied the libation in the Hellenic ritual, marking the beginning of the banquet¹⁵. No entertainment is mentioned, neither music nor dance. The participants do not sing or recite¹⁶. Though there is no direct reference to drinking wine neat, in the barbarian manner, a word play on the unrestrained (*akrates*), intoxicated Mithridates alludes to the unmixed (*akratos*) wine¹⁷.

STEVENSON, 1997, pp. 3-9; D. LENFANT, 2004, pp. vii-xxiv. Though lost, a short summary of the work was made in the 9th century AD by the patriarch Photius and is included in his *Bibliotheca* (Codex 72). The parallel passage to Plutarch's description is extremely short: ὡς Ἄρτοξέρξης παρέδωκεν αἰτησαμένη Μιτραδάτην Παρυσάτιδι, ἐπι τραπέζης μεγαλαυχήσαντα ἀποκτεῖναι Κύρον, κάκεινη λαβοῦσα πικρῶς ἀνείλε. On the value and reliability of Photius' summary of Ctesias see G. GOOSSENS, 1950, p. 519, J. M. BIGWOOD, 1976, pp. 2-5. The discrepancies between the versions of Plutarch and Photius may point to an adaptation of the original account of Ctesias by the biographer, or, alternatively, reveal that the patriarch's epitome is not accurate. There is no need to suppose that Plutarch used a different source here.

¹⁰ On the actual form of the oriental *symposia* see W. BURKERT, 1991.

¹¹ On the *symposium* as a drinking party intended for males only see O. MURRAY, 1982; 1983, p. 199; 1990, p. 6; M. J. VICKERS, 1984, p. 5. The female flute players, dancing-girls (*Ar., Ach.* 1093, X., *Smp.* 2.1) and *hetairai* attended the *symposium* solely to entertain the men.

¹² Cf. Athen. 10.452c (ἀνὴρ τε κούκ ἀνὴρ). Cf. Pl., *R.* 5.479b-c.

¹³ By contrast, sympotic participants all wore wreaths (cf. Thgn. 1001; *Ar., Ach.* 1091, 1145; *Ec.* 844; Menander, *Pseuderaclides*, Fr. 451.15 Kassel-Austin; Athen. 15.669c), which not only was a ritual act signifying initiation into a new reality (see W. RÖSLER, 1995, p. 108) but probably also highlighted the aspect of equality and commensality. Cf. D. TOLLES, 1943, pp. 28-9.

¹⁴ The host openly exhorts the guests "πίνωμεν ἐν τῷ παρόντι καὶ ἐσθίωμεν". On the distinction between *deipnon* and *symposium* see A. HUG, 1931, pp. 1266-7; O. MURRAY, 1990, p. 6; 1995, p. 225. Cf. G. PAUL, 1991, p. 158 on its gradual erosion in Hellenistic and Roman times.

¹⁵ Cf. Pl., *Smp.* 176a; X., *An.* 6.1.5; *Cyr.* 4.1.6; *Smp.* 2.1; Athen. 4.149c, e; *Ar., Eq.* 105. Cf. F. LISSARRAGUE, 1990, p. 25-6. The sequence here may fit a Sassanian custom, in which a prayer for the gods and the king apparently comes after the banquet. This practice is known from a document published by J. C. TAVADIA, 1935, pp. 11, 19, 89.

¹⁶ Nevertheless, the practice of asking riddles (αἰνίγματα or γρίφοι) is hinted at. For this custom see Athen. 10.448b; Plut. *Sept. sap. conv.* 152f; *Quaest. conv.* 5.proem. 673ab; *Ar. V.* 20, 1308-13; Pl. *Smp.* 215a. Cf. Thgn., 681-2.

¹⁷ An observation made by T. DUFF, 1999, p. 92 n. 76 with regard to the double meaning

The banquet proceeds contrary to the code of behaviour appropriate to a *symposium*. There are instances of *paroinia*, that is, irresponsible and offensive drunkenness, insolent talk, or *hybris*¹⁸. No feelings of ease and joy are felt, no friendship, or *euphrosyne*¹⁹. There is no calm and civilized conversation, nor, for that matter, any evidence of talk flowing freely. Quite the reverse is evident; the other participants are silent upon perceiving Mithridates' calamity (*Art.* 15.7). Their silence is a sort of behaviour depicted by classical authors as inappropriate²⁰. The only discourse presented in the scene – namely that between Mithridates and Sparamizes – concerns war or conflict, topics that early poets²¹ banned as themes unsuitable to a *symposium*. The dialogue is lethal. Note the mention of a knife in the first act (15.2). The very presence of weapons, in the form of the Persian *akinakes*, symbolizes strife in what is supposed to be a peaceful context²². All in all, the atmosphere is one of mistrust, lack of transparency and treachery. Mithridates is seduced into exposing his thoughts and harming himself, and he is isolated, as the rest of the guests let him bring about his own destruction. Though this picture supposedly describes a real party, it seems to present a thought experiment, so to speak, a suggestion of what could happen if the institution of the *symposium* were to fall into the hands of non-Greeks²³.

It is in these barbarian circumstances that the notion of the Greek *symposium* is introduced, enfolded in the words of Sparamizes the eunuch on the question of truth, “ἐπεὶ δέ φασιν Ἕλληνας οἶνον καὶ ἀλήθειαν εἶναι” (15.4).

of ἀκρασία.

¹⁸ On *paroinia* see X., *Smp.* 6.2 with B. HUSS, 1999, pp. 333-4 *ad loc.* and S.-T. TEODORSSON, 1999, p. 63-64. Cf. Hsch. s.v. παροινία (π 968 Schmidt): κραϊπάλαι. ὕβρεις ἀπὸ οἴνου Cf. Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 2.10.2.644a. On avoiding *hybris* at dinner parties by doing “what is right” (τὰ δίκαια) see Xenophanes, B1 West 15-17. Cf. Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 2.1.629e and W. J. SLATER, 1990, pp. 214-5.

¹⁹ On *euphrosyne* in banquets see Anacreon, *Eleg.* Fr. 2 West; Cf. H. ORANJE, 1984, pp. 103-7; W. J. SLATER, 1990, p. 213. For examples of discordant behaviour at *symposia*, disrupting the ideal pleasant atmosphere, see G. PAUL, 1991; F. TITCHENER, 1999, pp. 492-4. Cf. another banquet where things go wrong in Plut. *Alex.* 51.

²⁰ See X., *Smp.* 6.2 and B. HUSS, 1999, pp. 334-5. Cf. Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 3.prooem. 644f.

²¹ See Anacreon, *Eleg.* Fr. 2 West; Xenophanes, B1 West 21-24; cf. Thgn., 763-4. Cf. W. J. SLATER, 1981.

²² See W. J. SLATER, 1990, pp. 215-6. Cf. the humorous allusion to *Il.* 2.381 (νῦν δ' ἔρχεται ἐπὶ δεῖπνον ἵνα ξυνάγωμεν Ἄρηα) in Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 1.1.613c. Cf. Hdt. 5.20 on the concealment of daggers in the Macedonian banquet.

²³ Much more than a garbled adaptation of Hellenic practices, as in *Crass.* 33.1-7 (on which see in this volume J. CHLUB, pp. 185-7), this scene indicates a mismatch of Greek institutions and a non-Greek context. The description fits the image of the Persians in Greek literature as not free, slaves either to the king or to their passions, and suits the portrayal of the Persian court as a scene of decadence, corruption, arbitrary decisions, hypocrisy, betrayal of trust and brutality. In accordance with the prevailing orientalist image of the Eastern Empire, men are depicted as effeminate and women as dominant. Persia is seen as a place which breeds creatures on the fringes of human society, such as eunuchs, and on the other hand blurs the distinction between a human king and divine beings. See H. SANCISI-WEERDENBURG, 1987; W. NIPPEL, 2002, p. 290; D. L. GERA, 2007.

This saying, connecting wine and truth, which is known from other sources²⁴, is, according to some scholars, the very essence of the Greek *symposium*²⁵. It reflects the obligation of the participants to disclose their thoughts openly and completely, as well as encapsulating the symbolic transition to a new state of existence, in which full understanding and communication are present. Yet the employment of this proverb in the present context not only evokes the Hellenic practice of the banquet but also does it in a manner considered to be a Greek way of action, one involving cunning, and an indirect scheming instead of outright savagery²⁶.

The mention of truth entails a play on Persian religion and royal ideology. In the Zoroastrian Avesta, the world is divided between *drug* (the Lie, or disorder) and *aša* (Truth, or cosmic, social and ritual order)²⁷. The *drug* corresponds to the evil spirit (Angra Mainyu) and the *aša* is championed by the good spirit (Ahura Mazda), who will eventually prevail²⁸. Ahura Mazda upholds Truth (*Yasna* 31.8), is a friend of the truthful ones or believers (*ašanan*: cf. *Yasna* 47.5)²⁹ and punishes liars. This belief was familiar to Greek readers - and certainly to Plutarch himself - from the portrayal of the Persians in Greek literature, with its emphasis on telling the truth as a key concept in the education of the young³⁰, and with the depiction of lying and dishonesty as being in Persia the most despicable of evils³¹. In the royal Achaemenid ideology the Lie (*drauga*) is considered a serious offence against the king³²; it is tantamount to rebellion, as "those following the Lie" are regarded as lawbreakers³³. But by persuading

²⁴ Alcaeus, F. 366 Lobel-Page: οἶνος, ᾧ φίλε παῖ λέγεται καὶ ἀλάθεια; Ion of Chios, F 26.12 West; Pl., *Smp.* 217e; Theoc., *Idyll* 29.1; Ath. 2.37f; Zenobius, *Paroem.* 4.5, Diogenianus, *Paroem.* 4.81 (ἐν οἴνω ἀλήθεια); Diogenianus, *Paroem.* 7.28 (οἶνος καὶ ἀλήθεια). Cf. Alcaeus, F. 333 Lobel-Page (οἶνος γὰρ ἀνθρώπων δίπτρον); Thgn. 500; A., *TrGF* F 393; Pl., *Lg.* 649a-650b. Cf. Horace, *Sat.* 1.4.89; *Carm.* 3.21.14-16; cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 14.141. Cf. the treatment of this view in Plu., *Quaest. conv.* 3. Proem. 645a-c and 7.10.715d-f.

²⁵ See W. RÖSLER, 1995; W. J. HENDERSON, 2000, p. 17.

²⁶ See M. DETIENNE & J. P. VERNANT, 1978.

²⁷ On the centrality of this opposition between truth and lie in the Indo-Iranian religious setting prior to the emergence of the Zoroastrian belief see H. LOMMEL, 1930, pp. 40-52; M. STAUSBERG, 2002, pp. 91-5.

²⁸ Cf. *Yasht* 19.92-96; Cf. M. BOYCE, 1975, pp. 200-1, 283; 1982, pp. 120-1. In the *Gathas*, the oldest stratum of the Avesta, *drug* appears more frequently than the evil spirit itself. See M. BOYCE, 1982, p. 123.

²⁹ Cf. XPh. 46-56: The king demands respect for the law Ahura Mazda has established in order to be blessed (*artava*-). Cf. M. BOYCE, 1982, pp. 174-7.

³⁰ Hdt. 1.136 (ἀληθίζεσθαι). Cf. Strabo, 15.3.18 (ἀληθεύειν).

³¹ Hdt. 1.138; cf. 7.102, 7.209. Interestingly, cf. Plu., *De vit. aer. alien.* 829c, who claims that they were the second worst things in Persia.

³² Cf. DB 4.33-5: "Darius the King says: These are the provinces which became rebellious. The Lie made them rebellious, so that these (men) deceived the people"; cf. DB 4.36-39: "Darius the King says: You who shall be king hereafter, protect yourself vigorously from the Lie; the man who shall be a Lie-follower, him do you punish well" (trans. by R. G. KENT, 1953, p. 131). Cf. DB 1. 34, 4.63; cf. DNb.12. The supposed pretenders in the Behistun text are presented as liars. cf. 1.39, 1.78, 3.80. See P. BRIANT, 2002, pp. 126-7, 138.

³³ The Liars are habitually punished in Greek depictions of Persia. See Ctesias, *FGrH* 688 F 9.1 (ὄτι ἐψεύσατο ἀγνοεῖν εἰπὼν ἐρευνώμενον Ἀστυίαν.); cf. Hdt. 3.27.

Mithridates to tell the truth about the incidents that occurred during the battle, the king's own version turns out to be a lie; Artaxerxes becomes a liar, while the truthful Mithridates is made to seem a rebel³⁴. There is also irony in the employment of deceit to bring out the truth³⁵. After all, it is stated clearly that Sparamizes, the eunuch of the queen mother, was not ignorant of the truth (οὐκ ἀγνοῶν τὸ ἀληθές: 15.5) but pretended to be so in order to manipulate Mithridates.

Before the feast Mithridates kept his account of the events to himself. It is the false presentation of a frank and friendly fellowship typical of a *symposium* that leads him to divulge everything. Mithridates seems convinced that in accordance with the Greek sympotic ethical code – apparently introduced by Sparamizes' allusion to the banquet – his vulnerable state will not be abused by any other participant at dinner and that his words will not harm him later³⁶. He is unable to see the plot against him. Just as he missed (τοῦ ... ὀφθαλμοῦ μικρὸν ἤμαρτον: 15.6) Cyrus' eye and struck him elsewhere, he cannot perceive that his words about the prince's destruction in fact harm another person, namely, himself. The ploy is therefore successful. Mithridates is tricked into relating his part in slaying Cyrus, thus proving false the official version, which had Artaxerxes as the sole killer.

But the report of the events is not the only truth revealed by the unfortunate inebriated Persian. The true character of Mithridates is also disclosed through wine, and this is what Sparamizes is trying to uncover. Mithridates shows signs of excessive *philotimia*. Not satisfied with the rewards given him by the king, he also wishes to gain the glory of being Cyrus' killer, a title officially held by Artaxerxes. In fact, Mithridates presents himself as competing with the king, and Plutarch shows this ambition in various ways. Mithridates' arrival at the dinner wearing the clothes and jewellery he received from Artaxerxes³⁷ alludes to a previous scene in the biography, in which Tiribazus wore the king's robe and necklace, although forbidden to do so³⁸. The contrast made by Mithridates between idle talk about the saddle-cloth and his own actual deed³⁹ matches Artaxerxes' distinction between the general liberty to speak

³⁴ On the Orwellian overtones of this passage see B. LINCOLN, 2007, p. 94.

³⁵ Notwithstanding n. 33, Greek authors do not hesitate to point at Persian hypocrisy, and the question of truth is often found to be the subject of ironic descriptions. For instance, according to Herodotus, the Magus' reign as king involves a deceit (3.61-3), and it also takes a lie to overthrow him. Cf. Darius' saying that sometimes the lie is necessary (ἔνθα γάρ τι δεῖ ψεῦδος λέγεσθαι, λεγέσθω: Hdt. 3.72). When Cambyses does tell the truth, the nobles do not believe him (Hdt. 3.66). On deceitfulness versus truthfulness as a *Leitmotiv* in Herodotus' third book see S. BENAARDETE, 1969, pp. 69-98. Cf. also Hdt. 8.142 (ὡς βαρβάροισι ἔστι οὔτε πιστὸν οὔτε ἀληθές οὐδέν).

³⁶ Cf. Thgn, 309-312.

³⁷ Art. 15.1: ἦκεν ἔσθητι καὶ χρυσῷ κεκοσμημένους οἷς ἔλαβε παρὰ βασιλέως.

³⁸ Art. 5.3-4: οὕτως ἐποίησεν εἰπών· “δίδωμι μὲν ὧ Τριβάζε, σοὶ τοῦτον, φορεῖν δ' ἀπαγορεύω.” τοῦ δὲ Τριβάζου μὴ φροντίσαντος ... ἀλλὰ τὸν τε κίνδυνον εὐθὺς ἐκέκινον ἐνδύντος καὶ δέραια χρυσᾶ [καὶ γυναικεῖα] τῶν βασιλικῶν περιθεμένου, πάντες μὲν ἠγανάκτου· οὐ γὰρ ἔξῃν.

³⁹ Art. 15.6: “ὕμεις μὲν ὅ τι βούλεσθε πῖλους λέγετε καὶ φλυάρους· ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν λέγω

as one wishes and the monarch's unique privilege to act⁴⁰. Finally, when the young Persian claims that what he did "on *that day* is worthy of great things"⁴¹, he appears to allude to Tiribazus' words of advice to the king at the scene of the battle to "remember *this day*, for it is unworthy of forgetfulness"⁴². What seems to be insinuated here is a war of versions between that of Artaxerxes and that of Mithridates. The young Persian gives the impression that it was he who saved the crown of Artaxerxes on that fateful day, that his acts were powerful enough to decide the feud over the monarchy, and by implication – that his power surpasses that of the king.

Upon hearing these alarming words, Artaxerxes sends Mithridates to his horrible death. This outcome causes the words of the intoxicated Persian noble to appear as conveying yet another truth, for his claim that he felled "the man" (κατέβαλον τὸν ἄνδρα, *Art.* 15.6), ostensibly referring to Cyrus, also seems to predict the downfall of Mithridates himself⁴³. As in the battle he missed Cyrus' eye yet fatally injured the prince, now his words deliver an unintended and no less deadly blow to himself. It is the king, however, who turns this description into reality, by interpreting this utterance as disobedient and deserving of punishment. With its focus on wine and truth, the Greek *symposium* envisioned the human body as if it were a sort of instrument for processing liquid and transforming it into truthfulness⁴⁴. Analogous to that practice, the body of Mithridates is expected to function as a similar device when he incurs the torture of the boats: into his mouth are poured fluids (milk and honey)⁴⁵ and this punishment is meant to prove Artaxerxes' account as accurate⁴⁶. In fact, through the disintegration and complete destruction of the young Persian's body, the king establishes once and for all his version of the

διαρρήδην ὑπὸ ταύτης ἀνηρήσθαι Κύρον τῆς χειρός."

⁴⁰ *Art.* 5.2: "σοὶ μὲν ἕξεστιν εἰπεῖν ἃ βούλη, ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν".

⁴¹ *Art.* 15.3: "μειζόνων γὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ καλλιόνων βασιλεῖ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην ἄξιον ἐμαυτὸν παρέσχον".

⁴² *Art.* 10.1: "ὦ βασιλεῦ, μέμνησο τῆς ἡμέρας ταύτης· οὐ γὰρ ἀξία λήθης ἐστὶ".

⁴³ On Dionysus giving the gift of prophecy see E., *Ba.* 298-301.

⁴⁴ P. DUBOIS, 1991, pp. 68, 75-91 (and *passim*) shows how, in the Greek mind, truth was conceived of as an inaccessible, buried secret within the body, which had to be brought to the surface, even by coercion. Presumably, one such means was liquids. Plato, *Lg.* 1.648a-c, 649e proposes that wine should be used, rather than some other test (βάσανος), to reveal true facts about the character of a person. Cf. P. DUBOIS, 1991, pp. 108-10. Note that Diogenianus (7.28) explains the phrase οἶνος καὶ ἀλήθεια in a manner which suggests that the Persians substituted tortures (βάσανοι) for wine with the aim of extracting the truth: Εὐάνδρος παρὰ τοῖς Πέρσαις φησὶν οὐ βασάνους ἐξετάζεσθαι, ἀλλὰ μεθυσκομένους. In his *Indica* (FGrH 688 F 45.31) Ctesias describes a liquid obtained from a spring, which acts as wine; when someone drinks it, he ἐξαγγέλλει πάντα ὅσα ἔπραξε. Ctesias adds that the king makes use of it whenever he wishes to find the truth concerning an accusation. One would assume that here again torture is being replaced by a beverage.

⁴⁵ *Art.* 16.4: φαγόντι δὲ πιεῖν μέλι καὶ γάλα συγκεκραμένου ἐγγέουσιν εἰς τὸ στόμα...

⁴⁶ *Art.* 16.2: ἐβούλετο [scil. βασιλεὺς] γὰρ βαρβάρους ἅπαντας πεπεισθαι καὶ Ἑλλήνας, ὡς ἐν ταῖς ἐξελάσει καὶ συμπλοκαῖς δούς καὶ λαβῶν πληγὴν, ἐτρώθη μὲν αὐτός, ἔκτεινε δ' ἐκεῖνον.

events as the ‘true’ one⁴⁷.

This cruelty exhibited by the king is not at all what we would expect from the foregoing narrative. Earlier on (*Art.* 4.4), he is described as one who appears φιλάνθρωπος and mild. Specifically, it is stated that the king seems no less generous and kind as a recipient of favours than when he bestows favours upon others⁴⁸. But here, Artaxerxes emerges as ungrateful to Mithridates, the man who struck down Cyrus and effectively handed him power. Seemingly, by his action the monarch demonstrates that the former description was false⁴⁹. Up to this point in the story, the king had never tortured or sentenced anyone to death. He released Cyrus even though his brother was suspected of having attempted assassination (*Art.* 3.5–6); he ignored Tiribazus’ insolence with respect to the royal robe and its mutinous overtones, in a way that could have only been interpreted as weakness on the king’s part (*Art.* 5.4); towards Euclides, who admonished him publicly, he was temperate (*Art.* 5.2); he was relatively lenient with defectors during the war (*Art.* 14.3–4); even the Carian who, like Mithridates, claimed the glory for Cyrus’ death, was not punished by Artaxerxes himself, but was handed over to Parysatis, the queen mother (*Art.* 14.9–10). The punishment meted out to Mithridates constitutes therefore a turning point in the revelation of the king’s character. We begin to doubt whether the former Greek traits describing the barbarian monarch were accurate, especially regarding the application of the essentially Hellenic quality of φιλάνθρωπία⁵⁰. Artaxerxes is now seen as a brutal, despotic oriental ruler, whose real personality is exposed by his resort to torture.

The narratological significance of the *symposium* is thus immediately seen. It has already been shown that wine proverbially reveals truth, but Plutarch appears to play with the idea of *in uino ueritas*. Here it is not merely Mithridates’ own truth that his drinking reveals, but also Artaxerxes’ truth. It is the wine imbibed by Mithridates that reveals the true nature of the king, the truth of what the king *is*⁵¹.

Yet this is only one way of seeing the importance of the Greek banquet in the *Life* and the role it plays in the characterization of the hero. Another view is possible: our *symposium* may not, after all, lead the way to the truth,

⁴⁷ According to B. LINCOLN, 2007, pp. 87–94, the punishment of Mithridates was in fact a Zoroastrian “judicial ordeal”, involving a careful examination of its outcome and the application of pressure in order to disclose the inner moral nature of the accused. If Mithridates was guilty, he would have to be destroyed in the process, and his physical decay would demonstrate his moral corruption.

⁴⁸ ἐν ἀρχῇ δὲ καὶ πάνυ ζηλοῦν ἔδοξε τὴν Ἀρτοξέρξου τοῦ ὁμωνύμου πραότητα ... ἐν <δὲ> τῷ δέχεσθαι χάριτας οὐχ ἥττον τοῖς διδοῦσιν ἢ τοῖς λαμβάνουσιν ἐν [δὲ] τῷ διδόναι φαινόμενος εὐχάρις καὶ φιλάνθρωπος. Cf. *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 172b.

⁴⁹ This may also be seen in the use of the word ἄνθρωπος (*Art.* 16.7) at the end of the torture portrayal to mark the gap between the previously attributed trait and reality.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Phil.* 8.1; *Flam.* 5.7; *Lys.* 27.7; *Pyrrh.* 1.4. See H. M. MARTIN JR., 1961, pp. 166–8, 174; Cf. R. HIRZEL, 1912, p. 25; J. DE ROMILLY, 1979, pp. 279, 303–4; A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, pp. 239–40.

⁵¹ This notion is an expansion of the idea that wine discloses the true character of the drinker, on which see T. DUFF, 1999, pp. 15 n. 6, 32 n. 56.

but rather deviate from it, creating a new reality altogether. Plutarch seems to take great pains in creating the strong impression that truth is absent from the description of the "barbarian" feast. He does it with the help of an array of literary devices. Sparamizes is explicitly presented as deceiving his fellow drinker (15.5). The act of casting their eyes downward attributed to the guests (εἰς τὴν γῆν ἔκυψαν: 15.7)⁵² echoes a Platonic image concerning the limited vision of people who shy away from true reality⁵³. Even the young Persian's story is only partially true, since, as will be recalled, Cyrus died as a result of injuries inflicted by two men, a Carian as well as Mithridates. Leaving the Carian out of the account is not telling the whole truth. Moreover, in the last two parts of the dialogue between Sparamizes and Mithridates the king himself is omitted: First, he is not mentioned as the recipient of the saddle-cloth⁵⁴; second, he is neglected in the report of the battle (*Art.* 15.6). Contrary to the picture given earlier, in which Artaxerxes did try to aim a blow at his brother before being wounded himself⁵⁵, here mention is made only of the attempt by the commander of the Cadusians, Artagereses, to strike Cyrus (*Art.* 9.3)⁵⁶. The struggle of the brothers and their entourages (*Art.* 11.1-2) is skipped over. These are clear cases where *aletheia* gives way to *lethe*⁵⁷. Noteworthy also is the absence of truthfulness indicated by the imagery of failure to hit the mark, which is prominent in the speech of Mithridates (*Art.* 15.6), since truth signifies correspondence with reality, like a spear hitting the target, not missing it⁵⁸. To the same effect is perhaps the recurring *motif* of utterances that miss a real correspondence in the closing picture of the scene (15.7: λόγους δὲ μείζους ἢ καθ' ἡμᾶς) and in the Mithridates' description of an empty throw (15.6: Ἀρταγέρσης ἠκόνησα κενὸν καὶ μάταιον), where Plutarch is probably alluding to Demosthenes' idiom in the second Olynthiac oration (12) about words being vacuous and vain if unaccompanied by deeds⁵⁹.

⁵² Plutarch employs this expression elsewhere (*Brut.* 27.5: κύφαντας εἰς γῆν ἠσυχίαν ἄγειν; *Ages.* 12.5: κύπτοντας εἰς τὴν γῆν). The context in the *Agesialos* is the Spartans' reaction to the complaints of Pharnabazus on the destruction done by them to his land. In this case, the biographer's intervention in the text can be ascertained by a comparison of this description with its probable source, X., *HG.* 4.1.34. Cf. D. H. SHIPLEY, 1997, pp. 184-5.

⁵³ Pl., *R.* 9.586a: Οἱ ἄρα φρονήσεως καὶ ἀρετῆς ἄπειροι... ὑπερβάντες δὲ τοῦτο πρὸς τὸ ἀληθῶς ἄνω οὔτε ἀνέβλεψαν πώποτε οὔτε ἠνέχθησαν... ἀλλὰ βοσκομάτων δίκην κάτω αἰεὶ βλέποντες καὶ κεκυφότες εἰς γῆν καὶ εἰς τραπέζας βόσκονται χορταζόμενοι καὶ ὀχεύοντες...

⁵⁴ *Art.*, 15.4: τί λαμπρὸν ὦ τᾶν ἡ μέγα, πῖλον εὐρεῖν ἵππου περιρρυνέντα καὶ τοῦτον ἀνενεγκεῖν;

⁵⁵ *Art.*, 11.2: βασιλεὺς δ' ἀφείς τὸ δόρυ Κύρου μὲν οὐκ ἔτυχε, Σατιφέρνην δὲ πιστὸν ἄνδρα Κύρω καὶ γενναῖον ἔβαλε καὶ κατέκτεινε.

⁵⁶ Cf. X., *An.* 1.8.24

⁵⁷ On the ancient understanding of truth as something that is perceived or transmitted without any gaps caused by forgetfulness, neglect or ignorance, that is, complete and with no omissions, see B. SNELL, 1975; T. COLE, 1983.

⁵⁸ Cf. T. COLE, 1983, pp. 13-6 on the meaning of the archaic word νημερτής denoting Truth, as something not failing to strike the target. *Vide supra*, on the correspondence between Mithridates' missing the mark in battle and his failure to grasp the situation at the *symposium*.

⁵⁹ ...ἅπας μὲν λόγος, ἂν ἀπῆ τὰ πράγματα, μάταιόν τι φαίνεται καὶ κενόν... Plutarch also uses this phrase in the *Philop.* 9.7; *Quom. adolesc.* 28b.

What the ‘barbarian’ *symposium* lacks in truthfulness, it gains in passion. Traditionally, the unrepressed barbarian, especially Scythian, consumption of wine was conceived of as the counterpart of the Greek banquet⁶⁰. It was set as a sort of limit, one not to be transgressed by members of the civilized community⁶¹. However, in the reverse world depicted here by Plutarch, it is the Greek way of drinking that is presented both as a model to be followed by the barbarians and as having no restraints. Mithridates is encouraged to abandon his self-control and act “as the Greeks do”. Ironically, while it was usually the Greeks who regarded the barbarians as uninhibited and unconstrained in their demeanour⁶², here it is the other way around: the Hellenes are seen as basically licentious and lacking in restraint.

Passions appear to be uncontrolled when the Greek *symposium* is situated in a barbarian context⁶³. In his retort, Sparamizes questions the greatness involved in bringing a saddle-cloth to the king⁶⁴. He implicitly doubts the merit of a form of restraint, in this case, applicable to a horse but symbolically relevant to the behaviour of Mithridates. The reader will recall at once the Platonic imagery of the soul in the *Phaedrus* as a chariot driven by a team of winged horses (246a)⁶⁵. Now it is the black, unrestrained steed, evidently representing the passionate part of the human soul⁶⁶, that drags down its driver⁶⁷, far away from the plain of Truth and from beholding the true being (248bc)⁶⁸. The soul then sheds its wings and plummets to earth, only to be incarnated in a

⁶⁰ Anacr., Fr. 11b Page = *PMG* 356; Hdt. 6.84; Pl., *Lg.* 1.637e; Arist., *Pr.* 3.7.872a3-9; Athen. 10.427a-c; 11.499f. Cf. F. HARTOG, 1988, pp. 169-70; M. C. MILLER, 1991, p. 68.

⁶¹ This sentiment may provide a clue for the occasional appearances of symposiasts in typically oriental dress, including the *tiara* cap, found painted on vases. Cf. F. LISSARRAGUE, 1990, pp. 11-3, who argues that these images signify the search for otherness experienced in the *symposium*, an escape from social restrictions. For other interpretations, which suggest that the figures represent foreign guests at dinner parties or else wealthy Athenians aping Eastern ways and dress, see K. DE VRIES, 1973, p.39 and M. C. MILLER, 1991, pp. 69-71.

⁶² E. HALL, 1989, pp. 79-84, 101 sqq.; E. ALMAGOR, 2005, pp. 50-2. In Plutarch’s writing, the barbarians are known for their lack of temperance. They engage in acts of savagery and cruelty (A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, pp. 241-2; T. S. SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 27-67), indulge in luxury (A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, pp. 237-8; T. S. SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 107-139), are generally untrustworthy (T. S. SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 203-12) and hold superstitious beliefs (A. G. NIKOLAIDIS, 1986, pp. 234-35; T. S. SCHMIDT, 1999, pp. 224-34), to name but a few their negative traits.

⁶³ Cf. Hdt. 5.18-20. Compared with these depictions, Xenophon’s descriptions in the *Cyropaedia* of the Persian banquets as devoid of drunkenness (cf. C. J. TUPLIN, 1990, p. 26; D. L. GERA, 1993, pp. 150-1) would seem a literary idealization.

⁶⁴ *Vide supra* n. 54.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Ant.* 36.2. Cf. C. B. R. PELLING, 1988, p. 217; T. DUFF, 1999, pp. 78-9, 85. Cf. M. B. TRAPP, 1990 on the popularity of this image in second century AD literature.

⁶⁶ On the exact nature of this correspondence see R. HACKFORTH, 1952, p. 72; C. J. ROWE, *Plato. Phaedrus, with Translation and Commentary*, Warminster, 1986 ad loc. 246b1-3; cf. D. A. WHITE, 1993, pp. 89-93; E. BELFIORE, 2006.

⁶⁷ 247b: βρήθει γὰρ ὁ τῆς κάκης ἵππος μετέχων, ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ῥέπων τε καὶ βαρύνων ᾧ μὴ καλῶς ἦν τεθραμμένος τῶν ἡνιόχων. Other souls strive to follow the gods in seeing the true being, which provides pasturage proper for their noblest part, but none has a full vision of it.

⁶⁸ Cf. Plu., *De def. orac.* 422b.

mortal body and embedded in the cycle of births⁶⁹. While basing his account on Ctesias' description, Plutarch seems to skillfully combine this imagery of passion as an unbridled horse, deviation from truth, and a general movement downward, manifested in the action of the banquet participants, whose eyes are cast earthward⁷⁰.

At the end of the dinner scene, the host, assuming one of the key functions of a *symposiarch*⁷¹, tones down emotions by urging the participants to keep their differences within bounds as they eat and drink, and to prostrate themselves before the king's *daimon*⁷². Here a play of stereotypes is manifest, since it is one thing, a very Greek thing, to be a calming *symposiarch* but quite another to do so by recommending this most non-Greek of actions. This play has a bearing on the character of the monarch. The appeal to this deity seems to fulfill a restrictive role; it is now expected of the king to restrain the passions so recklessly exhibited during the feast⁷³. But instead of curbing passions with a measure of self-control as he has done on previous occasions, Artaxerxes stifles them in another manner.

It would seem that the insertion of the potentially disorderly Greek *symposium* into barbarian circumstances, inherently devoid of the Hellenic rules and codes for self-control - which consist of trust, cooperation and equality - produces a new situation. The king chooses to react with unprecedented cruelty to the misbehaviour of Mithridates and to suppress passion with even greater passion. Since this unbridled conduct is directly linked with the loosening of control begun at the banquet and caused by it, the *symposium* appears not so much as revealing the king's true character but as totally altering it from its previous portrayal.

At this juncture in the narrative, the reader is not sure as to the correct interpretation of the *ethos* of Artaxerxes⁷⁴. One possibility is that his inner

⁶⁹ 248c: ὅταν δὲ ἀδυνατήσασα ἐπισπέσθαι μὴ ἴδῃ, καὶ τινι συντυχίᾳ χρησαμένη λήθῃς τε καὶ κακίας πλησθεῖσα βαρυνθῆ, βαρυνθεῖσα δὲ πτερορρυήσῃ τε καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν πέσῃ...The souls are incarnated in several types of men, ranging from the philosopher to the tyrant, in accordance with the measure of the truth seen by them (248d).

⁷⁰ It is also manifested in the statement of Mithridates κατέβαλον τὸν ἄνδραν (15.6).

⁷¹ See *Quaest. conv.* 1.4, 620a-622b. Cf. S.-T. TEODORSSON, 1999, p. 61.

⁷² A significant question is whether the host is the same person as Sparamizes, as both use the relatively uncommon phrase ὦ τᾶν when addressing Mithridates (15.4, 15.7). Several scholars have already been baffled by this difficulty or have confounded the two. (Cf. F. E. BRENK, 1977, p. 151). W.W. TARN, 1928, p. 209, claims to have formerly equated the two and then changed his opinion after a conversation with A. D. Nock. Did Plutarch mean to confuse his readers? It should be noted that one of the characters aims to restrain passion while the other aspires to give vent to it. Attributing these two conflicting roles to the same figure may point to the two possible routes of action expected of the king with regard to the offence of Mithridates, and even to an innate inconsistency within the *ethos* of Artaxerxes, which is also displayed by the mention of the *daimon* and which constitutes a recurring *motif* in the biography to its very end (culminating in 29.11).

⁷³ I deal with the literary significance of the king's *daimon* in a forthcoming paper.

⁷⁴ Three scholars suggest different portrayals of the king. Orsi (in M. MANFREDINI & ORSI, 1987, pp. xxvii - xxviii) stresses a positive characterization emerging from the biography; D. C. HOOD, 1967, pp. 68-85, on the other hand, emphasizes a negative image. T. S. SCHMIDT, 1999, p.

savagery, so far concealed, has been finally unmasked. Another is that he has degenerated from a mild and *philanthropos* monarch to a cruel and harsh despot⁷⁵. The banquet scene plays an important role in this uncertainty. For wine itself is an ambiguous beverage. Sweet and dangerous, it reveals as much as it distorts, making the real apparent and the apparent real. It discloses the truth as much as it leads to forgetfulness, generates civilized fellowship and *philanthropia* but at the same time may cause the lowest form of brutal behaviour. One would assume that what is needed is moderation, or finding the right measure, which Mithridates and Artaxerxes, being barbarians, are clearly shown to lack. Or is it so? Plutarch does not simply adopt ethnic stereotypes. He plays on them and exploits various familiar ethnic themes to create a complex interplay. The difficulty of interpreting what is happening in this “barbarian” *symposium* reflects how disconcerting it is when familiar features from the Greek banquet combine in a new and disorienting way. Eventually the evasiveness of the categories makes understanding of the situation a complicated matter for the reader, just as it proves to be for Mithridates.

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318-24, in his research into the representation of barbarians in Plutarch’s *Lives*, advances a more attractive and balanced approach by combining both views. He depicts Artaxerxes as better than other barbarians, including the minor characters in this biography, though he argues that his portrait reveals more negative traits. Perhaps the development of the presentation of Artaxerxes’ character should also be considered in the evaluation of his personality; notice, then, should be taken of the story-line of this *Life*.

⁷⁵ Plutarch was long seen as ascribing a static *ethos* to his heroes, thus making ostensible dramatic changes, such as cruelty, to be understood as the revelation of true character traits, which were concealed for various reasons (cf. Philip’s case in *Aratus*, 49.1, another non-parallel *Life*). Nevertheless, this approach has been challenged by scholars who believe that Plutarch espoused a belief in the possibility of an altered character. See F. E. BRENK, 1977, pp. 176-81; S. SWAIN, 1989. Cf. *De sera*, 559bc. According to this modified view, Plutarch holds that a person confronted with great changes in circumstances, or vitiated by undeserved calamities, may lose his internal balance between the rational and irrational. Compare the notable case of Sertorius (*Sert.* 25.6). See D. A. RUSSELL, 1966, p. 146; B. BUCHER-ISLER, 1972, pp. 79-80, for the opinion that Plutarch believes in the constant nature (*physis*) of a hero, i.e., his inborn qualities, as opposed to his changeable character. Cf. *De tranq. an.*, 475d-476a. Yet cf. C. GILL, 2006, pp. 412-21, who advances the possibility of a collapse of character in Plutarch’s *Lives*, consistent with the biographer’s Platonic-Aristotelian view (cf. C. GILL, 1983 for an earlier formulation of this idea, based on a conceptual contrast between ‘character’ and ‘personality’, on which cf. C. B. R. PELLING, 2002, pp. 283-329).

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