

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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(eds.)

IMPRESA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANNABLUME

CROSSING STATUS BARRIERS: THE DISRUPTION OF AN IMPERIAL BANQUET BY ANGRY SOLDIERS IN PLUTARCH'S *OTHO*

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Abstract

In his *Life of Otho*, chapter 3, Plutarch describes a dinner that the emperor Otho had with 80 senators, some of whom had brought their ladies with them. The dinner was disturbed by soldiers of the praetorian guard, who felt very uneasy and distrustful against the senators, and thought that they had to save the emperor from a senatorial conspiracy after having seen weapons loaded upon wagons. Violating the exclusivity of the imperial dinner, in other words breaking through an important status barrier, they inverted the positive effect of this great banquet, and thus damaged Otho's reputation among the upper classes beyond repair. In Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho*, which should be read as one *opus*, this dinner story negatively inverts an important means of imperial representation and thus indicates how weak Otho's position really was. It presents as well a clear symptom of the serious deterioration of military discipline that in this year of civil strife (AD 68–69) manifested itself and may be seen as a consequence of bad leadership at the top (by Galba and Otho) and at the second level of authority (by people such as Nymphidius Sabinus, Vinus, Laco, Icelus and Otho's cronies). By choosing an imperial banquet, which should be a place of friendship with high status *amici Caesaris*, a show-case of imperial power and *paideia*, and a mirror of hierarchies within the urban Roman elite, as the scene where the utter escalation of military misbehaviour and the total loss of imperial authority over the military mob came to light, Plutarch accentuates the social and representational importance of such banquets.

In *Otho* 3.3–7 Plutarch tells us that near Rome soldiers of the praetorian guard became suspicious when they noticed that weapons were loaded on wagons (probably to equip soldiers who were to participate in the war against the Vitellians, LdB). Some soldiers attacked the wagons, others killed two centurions who opposed them, as well as Crispinus, the higher officer in charge. Apparently the soldiers thought that a coup against the emperor Otho was at hand, which they wanted to prevent. The whole mob, putting themselves in array and exhorting one another to go to the help of the emperor, marched to Rome. Here, learning that eighty senators were at supper with Otho – some of them with their wives – they rushed to the palace, declaring that now was a good time to take off all the emperor's enemies at one stroke. In the palace there was dire perplexity, which fell upon Otho and his guests, who kept their eyes fixed upon him in speechless terror. But he sent the prefects of the guard with orders to explain matters to the soldiers and appease them, while at the same time he dismissed his guests by another door; and they barely made their escape as the soldiers, forcing their way through the guards into the great hall, asked what was become of the enemies of Caesar. In this crisis, then, Otho stood up on his couch, and after many exhortations, and entreaties, and not without plentiful tears, at last succeeded in sending them away (Plutarch, *Otho* 3.4–7).

Is this just a minor episode in a chaotic year, the year of the four emperors, which was full of usurpations, civil strife, killing and plundering? Why does Plutarch give us this dinner story, in this very short biography of Otho, when he

could have opted for seemingly more important things, such as heroic episodes in battles and sieges, or political upheavals, or other spectacular events? It is well known that Plutarch in his *Alexander* 1.2 explicitly indicates that the description of the *ethos*, the character, of his heroes was his primary goal, and that trivial things sometimes showed this better than battles and sieges would do. However, this episode is more than such a trivial detail. The suspicious behaviour of some praetorians, who saw weapons being loaded on wagons, and the ensuing disruption of Otho's banquet by soldiers of the praetorian guard is also treated with some emphasis and in full detail by Tacitus, and is more briefly mentioned by Suetonius and Cassius Dio¹. So four important authors or their sources considered this disruption of Otho's dinner an important event, important enough to insert it in their account of Otho's reign. This should not come as a surprise to us. Banquets were of great consequence in Roman social life, they gave the rich and powerful opportunities to show off, to trumpet their own standing, as John Donahue puts it (Donahue 2004, 113). The sharing of food with people of lower status, with equals or among large numbers was a constant feature of social and cultural elite life in Rome and other Roman towns (ibid. 116) and attending dinners gave plenty of opportunities to communicate with equals, or with people of higher or lower standing, to men as well as women. As recently published works have shown, to Roman emperors dinners were an important means to share opinions with senators and other important people, and to show their good character. Imperial dinners were show-cases of imperial *gratia* and *paideia*, and unveiled existing hierarchies within the upper layers of society². To give dinners in the right and proper way was one of many means through which emperors could enhance their reputation; it was one of many ritualized standard practices that enabled emperors to show that they were the right persons in the right place, in other words, could legitimize their position. Other such standard practices were sessions of the senate presided by the emperor, *adlocutiones*, *adventus*, or even better, triumphal processions, which showed the emperors' military prowess. Yet other ones were *salutationes*, receiving embassies, distributing *congiaria* or *donativa* and attending the games at Rome. Some of those standard practices, such as *adlocutiones*, *adventus*, and *liberalitates*, were regularly propagated on coins, in inscriptions, or even in sculpture (think of Trajan's arch at Beneventum), but other ones, like imperial dinners, stayed outside this form of imperial representation. The reason must be that the elite audience that was involved could be present personally or could hear about it first hand, and that other people had nothing to do with it. In this respect imperial dinners were an in-crowd form of imperial representation

¹ Tacitus, *Histories* 1.80-82; Suetonius, *Otho* 8.1f.; Cassius Dio 64.9.2. See K. VÖSSING, 2004, p. 347 and E. STEIN-HÖLKEKAMP, 2005, p. 49.

² See J. F. DONAHUE, 2004, pp. 67-72; K. VÖSSING, 2004, pp. 265-539; E. STEIN-HÖLKEKAMP, 2005, pp. 41-55. In general on Roman upper class banquets see J. D'ARMS, 1999; K. M. D. DUNBABIN, 2003; J. F. DONAHUE, 2004, esp. 113 and 116; K. VÖSSING, 2004, pp. 187-264; E. STEIN-HÖLKEKAMP, 2005.

aiming at a very limited group of senators and other important high status people. So in this case there was a status barrier, which precluded any other people. General advertisement of this type of ritualized standard practice would destroy its exclusive character and break the status barrier.

Ritualized standard practices can be transposed to different contexts, or even inverted into their reverses, in a kind of dynamic of rituals. In this way an author can attack and de-legitimize a ruler, by inverting the standard practices through which he usually shows his prowess, effectiveness, liberality and culture into their negative counterparts. Just one example. The author of the *Historia Augusta*, who clearly wished to give an utterly negative image of the emperor Elagabalus, portrays him giving an *adlocutio* to the prostitutes of Rome, instead of to the military (*HA, Vita Heliogabali* 26.3-4). *Adlocutio* was an important ritualized standard practice of emperors going to war³, but instead Elagabalus is portrayed as plunging into every kind of debauchery instead after his oration to the prostitutes. In *Historia Augusta* 26.3-4 we read:

He gathered together in a public building all the harlots from the Circus, the theatre, the Stadium, and all other places of amusement, and from the public baths, and then delivered a speech to them, as one might to soldiers, calling them 'comrades' (*commilitones*, LdB) and discoursing upon various kinds of postures and debaucheries⁴.

A second example is Nero's triumphal procession after his voyage through Greece during which he won many prizes at the great Greek games. The procession was about victories in Greek games, not about successful battles and sieges. Soldiers forming a special guard, the *augustiani*, had to act as a kind of clique, which had to praise Nero's qualities as a performer at the Greek games. Nero may have staged the procession himself, thinking it would enhance his reputation of a cultured and educated ruler, but if this was the case it completely backfired, for this triumphal procession is utterly condemned by the literary sources in which it is described, which must echo upper class feelings in Rome⁵. In *Nero* 25.1 Suetonius tells us:

... but at Rome he (= Nero) rode in the chariot which Augustus had used in his triumphs in days gone by, and wore a purple robe and a Greek cloak adorned with stars of gold, bearing on his head the Olympic crown, and in his right hand the Pythian, while the rest were carried before him with inscriptions telling where he had won them and against what competitors, and giving the

³ A fine example of the propagation of an *adlocutio* in Severan times is depicted on a medallion published by F. GNECCHI, 1912, II, pl. 93,8. See M. CHRISTOL, 1997, p. 10.

⁴ *HA, Vita Elagabali* 26.3-4: *Omnes de circo, de theatro, de stadio, et omnibus locis et balneis meretrices collegit in aedes publicas et apud eas contionem habuit quasi militarem, dicens eas commilitones, disputavitque de generibus schematum et voluptatum*. See on this emperor and his image in ancient and modern literature M. ICKS, "Heliogabalus, a Monster on the Roman Throne. The Literary Construction of a Bad Emperor", in I. SLUITER & R. M. ROSEN (eds.), *KAKOS. Badness and Anti-Values in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden, 2008, forthcoming.

⁵ On Nero's voyage to Greece (AD 67) see Suetonius, *Nero* 22-26 and Cassius Dio 63.8-9.

titles of the songs or the subject of the plays. His car was followed by his claque and by the escort of a triumphal procession, who shouted that they were the attendants of Augustus and the soldiers of his triumphs⁶.

In his *Life of Otho*, chapter 3, Plutarch gives us another example. Otho's high status dinner with 80 senators and their ladies was disturbed by soldiers, who felt very uneasy and distrustful, especially against the senators, and thought that they had to save the emperor from a senatorial conspiracy as soon as they had seen weapons loaded upon wagons. Violating the exclusivity of the imperial dinner, in other words breaking through an important status barrier, they inverted the positive effect of this great banquet, and thus damaged Otho's reputation among the upper classes beyond repair. This is how Plutarch presents the story to us. Giving this story relatively much space within this short *Vita*, he emphasized how little authority Otho had and how weak his position really was. In contrast, in *Histories* 1.82 Tacitus has the soldiery come to its senses and return to discipline after speeches of the praetorian prefects. In 1.83 f. he adds an oration to the praetorians, which is put into Otho's mouth, and in which the existence of the senate is defended in very positive tones. Tacitus' story is more optimistic about the soldiers of the guard than Plutarch's is, and Tacitus sees fit to use this event to insert a laudatory oration on the position of the senate into his report.⁷ He thus gives us a much more positive image of Otho than Plutarch does. So Plutarch must have deliberately painted Otho's authority in very dark colours, in this way inverting an important, exclusive representation of his power into its negative counterpart.

In my view this dinner story is not fictional. In *Otho* 3.3-7 Plutarch gives us a clever rhetorical elaboration of a story that seems to be historical, given the fact that three other literary sources tell it as well, however briefly or elaborately⁸. I think that the account of the disruption of Otho's banquet, which Plutarch must have found in his written sources or may have got from

⁶ Suetonius, *Nero* 25.1: "... *sed et Romam eo curru, quo Augustus olim triumphaverat, et in veste purpurea distinctaque stellis aureis chlamyde coronamque capite gerens Olympicam, dextra manu Pythiam, praeunte pompa ceterarum cum titulis, ubi et quos quo cantionum quoque fabularum argumento vicisset; sequentibus currum ovantium ritu plausoribus, Augustianos militesque se triumphum eius clamantibus.*

⁷ I owe thanks to Christopher Pelling for pointing this out to me during the discussion that followed my lecture at the eighth conference of the International Plutarch Society, Coimbra, Portugal, 24 September 2008.

⁸ A common source of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch might have made up this story, in which case it could be largely fictional. I do not believe this, because the story, especially in the versions given by Tacitus and Plutarch, contains too many specific details and because this source, if it had been historiographical, which it probably had, would have been a contemporary of the events of AD 68-69. He would have had to take into account that many eye-witnesses were still around, who would not easily have accepted a fictional story about emperors and their praetorians that had been inserted into an historical work. [I am not so sure about this!] I owe thanks to Philip Stadter, who brought this up during the discussion that followed my lecture at the eighth conference of the International Plutarch Society, Coimbra, Portugal, 24 September, 2008.

hearsay, suited him well. In the opening lines of his *Galba*, Plutarch gives us the main theme of his *Galba* and *Otho*, which should be read as one narrative⁹. This theme is the escalation of military misconduct in times of diminished or missing leadership. In *Galba* 1 Plutarch observes:

Iphicrates the Athenian used to think that the mercenary soldier might well be fond of wealth and fond of pleasure, in order that his quest for the means to gratify his desires might lead him to fight with greater recklessness; but most people think that a body of soldiers, just like a natural body in full vigour, ought to have no initiative of its own, but should follow that of its commander. Wherefore Paullus Aemilius, as we are told, finding that the army which he had taken over in Macedonia was infected with loquacity and meddlesomeness, as though they were all generals, gave out word that each man was to have his hand ready and his sword sharp, but that he himself would look out for the rest. Moreover, Plato (*Resp.* 376c) sees that a good commander or general can do nothing unless his army is amenable and loyal; and he thinks that the quality of obedience, like the quality characteristic of a king, requires a noble nature and a philosophic training, which, above all things, blends harmoniously the qualities of gentleness and humanity with those of high courage and aggressiveness. Many dire events, and particularly those which befell the Romans after the death of Nero, bear witness to this, and show plainly that an empire has nothing more fearful to show than a military force given over to untrained and unreasoning impulses¹⁰.

The disruption of Otho's banquet not only shows Otho's hopeless position, but is also one of many examples of a deterioration of military discipline as a function of bad leadership at the top (by the emperors Galba and Otho) and at the second level of authority (by people such as Nymphidius Sabinus, Vinus, Laco, Icelus and Otho's cronies). By now soldiers of the guard at Rome thought that they could do anything they liked. In Plutarch's *Galba* the worst kind of leadership is displayed by the emperor himself and by his close assistants, men such as Vinus, Laco, and Icelus. Those second line leaders were rapacious and acted in an arbitrary, selfish, tyrannical way. In practically all literary sources

⁹ On Plutarch's *Galba* and *Otho* being one story see C. B. R. PELLING, 2002, p. 188 (+ 195 n. 68), and p. 383 n. 11.

¹⁰ Plutarch, *Galba* 1: Ὁ μὲν Ἀθηναῖος Ἴφικράτης τὸν μισθοφόρον ἤξιου στρατιώτην καὶ φιλόπλουτον εἶναι καὶ φιλήδονον, ὅπως ταῖς ἐπιθυμίαις χορηγίαν ἐπιζητῶν ἀγωνίζηται παραβολώτερον, οἱ δὲ πλείστοι, καθάπερ ἐρρωμένον σῶμα, τὸ στρατιωτικὸν ἀξιοῦσιν ἰδία μηδέποτε χρώμενον ὀρμῇ συγκινεῖσθαι τῇ τοῦ στρατηγοῦ. διὸ καὶ Παῦλον Αἰμίλιον λέγουσι τὴν ἐν Μακεδονίᾳ δύναμιν παραλαβόντα λαλιάς καὶ περιεργίας, οἷον διαστρατηγοῦσαν, ἀνάπλεων, παρεγγυῆσαι τὴν χεῖρα ποιεῖν ἐτοιμῆν καὶ τὴν μάχαιραν ὀξεῖαν ἕκαστον, αὐτῶ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων μελήσειν. ὁ δὲ Πλάτων οὐδὲν ἔργον ὀρῶν ἄρχοντος ἀγαθοῦ καὶ στρατηγοῦ στρατιᾶς μὴ σωφρονούσης μηδὲ ὁμοπαθοῦσης, ἀλλὰ τὴν πειθαρχικὴν ἀρετὴν ὁμοίως τῇ βασιλικῇ νομίζων φύσεως γενναίας καὶ τροφῆς φιλοσόφου δεῖσθαι, μάλιστα τῶ πρᾶφ καὶ φιλανθρώπῳ τὸ θυμοειδὲς καὶ δραστήριον ἐμμελῶς ἀνακεραυνυμένης, ἄλλα τε πάθη πολλὰ καὶ τὰ Ῥωμαίοις συμπεσόντα μετὰ τὴν Νέρωνος τελευτὴν ἔχει μαρτύρια καὶ παραδείγματα τοῦ μηδὲν εἶναι φοβερώτερον ἀπαιδεύτοις χρωμένης καὶ ἀλόγοις ὀρμαῖς ἐν ἡγεμονίᾳ στρατιωτικῆς δυνάμεως. On this passage see for example R. ASH, 1997.

Galba is reproached with giving them too much latitude, whereas he refused to give the soldiers their due. He never gave them a proper donative, not even at the occasion of the adoption of an heir, Piso, and he tried in an exaggerated way to be an example of old-fashioned *severitas* towards the soldiers, even if they had more or less justified claims to make. Galba decimated, for example, fleet soldiers, and a band of German bodyguards, for no good reasons. Plutarch tells us that the soldiers began to cherish a dire and savage hatred towards Galba, because he was defrauding them and so doing laid down instructions for succeeding emperors. By treating too positively some of Vindex' supporters, and by not explicitly siding with the soldiers of Verginius Rufus, who had put down Vindex' rebellion in Gaul in AD 67, Galba also lost the support of the armies of the Germaniae, which ended up supporting the ensuing usurpation of Vitellius¹¹.

Otho was really no better leader than Galba had been. In *Otho* 3.2-6 Plutarch tells us that Otho was placing his government on a sound basis and took a number of wise decisions, but all available sources show that Otho was not the master of the soldiers and their officers, but their plaything. In *Otho* 5.3 Plutarch speaks of the disorderly and arrogant spirit of the soldiers, their *ataxia* and *thrasutês*. Otho did not behave as a good, strong leader would have done, and did not overcome the disciplinary problem. His best act seems to have been his impressive suicide¹². In this context an elaborate story about the disruption of Otho's banquet by the soldiery fits in well, showing how low military discipline had become and to what depth Otho's authority over the soldiers and their officers had sunk.

In conclusion. In Plutarch's Galba and Otho, which in my opinion should be read as one story, this dinner story negatively inverts an important means of imperial self-representation and so indicates how weak, in Plutarch's opinion, Otho's position really was. It is as well one of many examples of a serious deterioration of military discipline as a function of bad leadership at the top and at the second level of authority. By choosing an imperial banquet, which should be a place of friendship with high status *amici Caesaris*, a show-case of imperial power and *paideia*, and a mirror of hierarchies within the urban Roman elite, as the scene where the extreme escalation of military misbehaviour and the total loss of imperial authority over the military mob came to light, Plutarch highlights the social importance of such banquets.

¹¹ On Galba's reign see Tacitus, *Histories* 1.4-41; Suetonius, *Galba* 11-20; Plutarch, *Galba* 10-28; Cassius Dio 64.1-6. On the decimation of the fleet soldiers see Suetonius, *Galba* 12.2 and Plutarch, *Galba* 15.3-4. Cf. Tacitus, *Histories* 1.6. In the same paragraph, *Galba* 12.2, Suetonius narrates that Galba also disbanded a cohort of Germans, whom the previous Caesars had made their body-guard and had found absolutely faithful in many emergencies. On Galba, Otho, their assistants, and the soldiers see L. DE BLOIS, 2008.

¹² On Otho's reign see Tacitus, *Histories* 1.44-47; 71-90; 2.11-56; Suetonius, *Otho* 7-12; Plutarch, *Otho* 1-18; Cassius Dio 64.7-15. On Otho's suicide see Tacitus, *Histories* 2.48-49; Suetonius, *Otho* 10-11; Plutarch, *Otho* 16-18 and Cassius Dio 64.13-15.

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