

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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HISTORICAL FICTION, BRACHYLOGY, AND PLUTARCH'S *BANQUET OF THE SEVEN SAGES*

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the ways in which the weaknesses and strengths of Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Sages* are tied to Plutarch's attempt to recreate the world of the sixth century BCE in fictional form. The awkwardness of the first half of the dialogue stems from the incommensurability between the symposiastic genre of the *Banquet* and the Sages' role as 'performers of wisdom' and their noted brevity of speech, or *brachylogia*. It is only when Plutarch stops trying to historicize in the second half of the dialogue (and shifts his focus away from the Sages altogether) that it becomes more readable, literary, and Plutarchan. This disparity reflects a broader tension between archaic *brachylogia*, and the less definitive, ambivalent, and voluble style of discourse Plutarch favored, and I suggest that the *Banquet* stages its own internal dialogue between alternative modes of representing the past.

Introduction

The *Banquet of the Seven Sages* is something of an anomaly in Plutarch's works. As its title suggests, the work belongs to the genre of literary symposia, linked to the seminal texts of Plato and Xenophon as well as Plutarch's own *Table Talk* and other Imperial examples such as Lucian's parodic *Symposium*, or the *Lapiths* and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*¹. But the *Banquet* can also be classed more broadly as a dialogue, a form particularly favored by Plutarch, and within this category it stands out as one of only two "historical" dialogues in the Plutarchan corpus; the other is *On Socrates' Daimonion*². Both combine a narrative of a well-known event from the distant past—in one, the legendary dinner of the Sages at the home of Periander, tyrant of Corinth, and in the other, the liberation of Thebes in 379—with the sort of philosophical discussion familiar from Plutarch's other dialogues.

While several of Plutarch's biographies, most notably *Solon* and *Pelopidas*, cover analogous time periods, the composition of a fictional dialogue set at a particular place and moment in historical time presents somewhat different challenges relating to literary and dramatic composition. It seems that the early sixth-century BCE milieu of the *Banquet*, less well-documented and perhaps more alien in worldview to Plutarch than the Plato-inflected fourth-century setting of *On Socrates' Daimonion*, was the more difficult period to recreate

¹ On the symposiastic genre in Plutarch, see M. VETTA, 2000, and L. ROMERI, 2002, for Imperial literary symposia in general.

² One could arguably include *Gryllus*, a dialogue between Odysseus and one of Circe's man-animals, but its heroic setting places it somewhat apart from the historical dialogues. On Plutarchan dialogue, see R. HIRZEL, 1895, pp. 124-237, I. GALLO, 1998, L. VAN DER STOCKT, 2000, and R. LAMBERTON, 2001, pp. 146-87. Some of the dialogues of Heraclides Ponticus were similarly set in the distant past; cf. R. HIRZEL, 1895, p. 138.