

THE EDUCATION OF THE RULER
IN PLUTARCH'S SYMPOSIUM OF THE SEVEN SAGES

1. Plut. Conv. sept. sap. 147a-d*

“Οὐ διὰ ταῦτ’ ἔφη “μόνον” ὁ Νειλόξενος, “ἀλλ’ οὐ φεύγει τὸ φίλος εἶναι καὶ λέγεσθαι βασιλέων καθάπερ ὑμεῖς· ἐπεὶ σοῦ γε καὶ τὰλλα θαυμάζει, καὶ τῆς πυραμίδος τὴν μέτρησιν ὑπερφυῶς ἠγάπησεν (...). ἀλλ’, ὅπερ ἔφην, διεβλήθης μισοβασιλεὺς εἶναι, καὶ τινες ὑβριστικά σου περὶ τυράννων ἀποφάσεις ἀνεφέροντο πρὸς αὐτόν, ὡς ἐρωτηθεὶς ὑπὸ Μολπαγόρου τοῦ Ἴωνος τί παραδοξότατον εἴης ἐωρακῶς, ἀποκρίναιο ‘τύραννον γέροντα,’ καὶ πάλιν ἔν τιτι πτότῳ, περὶ τῶν θηρίων λόγου γενομένου, φαίης κάκιστον εἶναι τῶν μὲν ἀγρίων θηρίων τὸν τύραννον, τῶν δ’ ἡμέρων τὸν κόλακα· τοιαῦτα γάρ, εἰ καὶ πάνυ προσποιούνται διαφέρειν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῶν τυράννων, οὐκ εὐμενῶς ἀκούουσιν.”

“Ἀλλὰ τοῦτο μὲν,” εἶπεν ὁ Θαλῆς, “Πιττακοῦ ἐστίν, εἰρημένον ἐν παιδιᾷ ποτε πρὸς Μυρσίλον· ἐγὼ δὲ θαυμάσιμ’ ἄν,” ἔφην, “οὐ τύραννον ἀλλὰ κυβερνήτην γέροντα θεασάμενος. πρὸς δὲ τὴν μετάθεσιν τὸ τοῦ νεανίσκου πέπονθα τοῦ βαλόντος μὲν ἐπὶ τὴν κύνα πατάξαντος δὲ τὴν μητρουῖαν καὶ εἰπόντος ‘οὐδ’ οὕτω κακῶς.’ διὸ καὶ Σόλωνα σοφώτατον ἠγησάμην οὐ δεξάμενον τυραννεῖν. καὶ Πιττακὸς οὗτος εἰ μοναρχία μὴ προσήλθεν, οὐκ ἂν εἶπεν ὡς ‘χαλεπὸν ἐσθλὸν ἔμμεναι.’ **Περίανδρος δ’ ἔοικεν ὥσπερ ἐν νοσήματι πατρῷ τῇ τυραννίδι κατελημμένος οὐ φαύλως ἐξαναφέρειν, χρώμενος ὁμιλίαις ὑγιειναῖς ἄχρι γε νῦν καὶ συνουσίας ἀνδρῶν νοῦν ἔχόντων ἐπαγόμενος, ἅς δὲ Θρασύβουλος αὐτῷ κολούσεις τῶν ἄκρων οὐμὸς πολίτης ὑψηγείται μὴ προσιέμενος.** γεωργοῦ γὰρ ἀκρίδας καὶ ὄρνιθας ἀντὶ πυρῶν καὶ κριθῶν συγκομίζειν ἐθέλοντος οὐδὲν διαφέρει τύραννος ἀνδραπόδων μᾶλλον ἄρχειν ἢ ἀνδρῶν βουλόμενος· ἐν γὰρ ἀντὶ πολλῶν κακῶν ἀγαθὸν αἰ δυναστεῖαι τὴν τιμὴν ἔχουσι καὶ τὴν δόξαν, ἄνπερ ἀγαθῶν ὡς κρείττονες ἄρχωσι καὶ μεγάλων μείζονες εἶναι δοκῶσι· τὴν δ’ ἀσφάλειαν ἀγαπῶντας ἄνευ τοῦ καλοῦ προβάτων ἔδει πολλῶν καὶ ἵππων καὶ βοῶν ἄρχειν, μὴ ἀνθρώπων.”

“Not for this alone,” said Neiloxenus, “but he does not try to avoid being a friend of kings and being called such, as you do. In your case, for instance, the king finds much to admire in you, and in particular he was immensely pleased with your method of measuring the pyramid (...). **But, as I said, you were falsely accused of being a hater of kings, and certain offensive pronouncements of yours regarding tyrants were reported to him:** that, when you were asked by Molpagoras the Ionian what was the most paradoxical thing you had ever seen, you replied, ‘a tyrant (who lived to be) an old man’, and that on a certain convivial occasion, when there was a discussion about animals, you state that of the wild animals the worst is the tyrant, and of the tame the flatterer. **For, although they pretend that they are altogether different from tyrants, kings do not take kindly to such remarks.”**

“But this statement,” said Thales, “belongs to Pittacus, and it was once made in jest with reference to Myrsilus. But, as for myself,” he continued, “I’d be amazed to see not a tyrant but a pilot that lived to be old. However, so far as concerns transferring this from the one to the other, my feeling is that of the young man who threw a stone at his dog but hit his stepmother and exclaimed, ‘This is not bad at all’. This is the reason why I considered Solon most wise when he refused to be a tyrant. As for that Pittacus, if he had never assumed absolute power, he would not have said that ‘it is hard to be good.’ **But**

* The translations are drawn from Babbitt (1928) with extensive modifications.

Periander, in spite of his being afflicted with tyranny as with an inherited disease, seems to be recovering fairly well by keeping wholesome company—at least up to the present time—and by bringing about conferences with men of sense, and by turning down the cutting of the topmost, which my fellow citizen Thrasylbulus suggests. Indeed, a tyrant who desires to rule slaves rather than men is no different from a farmer who is willing to gather in harvest locusts and birds rather than wheat and barley. For despotic regimes possess one advantage to set against many disadvantages, namely honor and glory, if rulers rule over good men by virtue of being better, and appear to surpass them in greatness. But those who love safety without the good (i.e. the honor and the glory) ought to rule over a lot of sheep, horses, and cattle, not over men.”

2. Plut. Conv. sept. sap. 148d (Thales praises Cleoboulina)

ἀλλὰ καὶ φρόνημα θαυμαστὸν καὶ νοῦς ἔνεστι πολιτικὸς καὶ φιλόανθρωπον ἦθος, καὶ τὸν πατέρα τοῖς πολίταις πρᾶοτερον ἄρχοντα καὶ δημοτικώτερον.

But she possesses admirable sense, a statesman's mind, and a humane disposition, and she makes her father a more mild and agreeable ruler to his citizens.

3. Plut. Conv. sept. sap. 151d-e

ὡς δὲ ταῦτ' εἶπεν ὁ Βίας, ὁ μὲν Νειλόξενος ὑφ' ἡδονῆς ὤρμησε περιβαλεῖν τὸν Βιάντα καὶ φιλεῖν, τῶν δ' ἄλλων ἐπαινεσάντων καὶ ἀποδεξαμένων γελάσας ὁ Χίλων, “ὦ Ναυκρατίτα,” ἔφη, “ξένε, πρὶν ἀπολέσθαι τὴν θάλατταν ἐκποθεῖσαν ἀπάγγελτε πλεύσας Ἀμάσιδι μὴ ζητεῖν ὅπως ἄλμην ἀναλώσει τοσαύτην, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὅπως πότιμον καὶ γλυκεῖαν τοῖς ὑπηκόοις τὴν βασιλείαν παρέξει· περὶ ταῦτα γὰρ δεινότατος Βίας καὶ διδάσκαλος τούτων ἄριστος, ἃ μαθὼν Ἀμασις οὐδὲν ἔτι τοῦ χρυσοῦ δεήσειται ποδανιπτῆρος ἐπὶ τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους, ἀλλὰ θεραπεύσουσι πάντες αὐτὸν καὶ ἀγαπήσουσι χρηστὸν ὄντα, κἂν μυριάκις ἢ νῦν ἀναφανῆ δυσγενέστερος.” “καὶ μήν,” ἔφη ὁ Περίανδρος, “ἄξιόν γε τοιαύτας ἀπαρχὰς τῷ βασιλεῖ συνεισενεγκεῖν ἅπαντας ἄνδρακάς, ὥσπερ ἔφησεν Ὅμηρος· ἐκείνῳ τε γὰρ ἂν γένοιτο πλείονος ἀξία τῆς ἐμπορίας ἢ παρενθήκη, καὶ ἡμῖν ἀντὶ πάντων ὠφέλιμος.”

As soon as Bias had said these words, Neiloxenus hastened to embrace and kiss him out of joy, but, when the others had praised and approved (the answer), Chilon said with a chuckle, “Guest from Naucratis, before the sea is drunk up and disappears, sail back and tell Amasis that he should not be seeking how to consume so much brine, **but rather how to make his kingship potable and sweet to his subjects. For, in these matters Bias is most competent and an excellent teacher of the things which, if imparted to Amasis, he will have no further need of his golden foot-tub to impress the Egyptians, but they will all honor and love him for being good, even if he turns out to be countless times more low-born than at present.**” “Indeed,” said Periander, “it is well worth to contribute to the king an offering of this sort, everyone ‘one by one’, as Homer has put it [=Od.13.14]. For to him this addition would be more valuable than the merchandise, and for us as profitable as anything could be.”

4. Plut. Conv. sept. sap. 152b-d

ὀρθέντων δὲ τούτων ἡξιούμεν ἡμεῖς καὶ αὐτὸν εἰπεῖν τι τὸν Περιάνδρον. ὁ δ' οὐ μάλα φαιδρὸς ἀλλὰ συστήσας τὸ πρόσωπον “ἐγὼ τοίνυν,” ἔφη, “προσαποφαίνομαι τὰς εἰρημένας γνώμας ἀπάσας σχεδὸν ἀφιστάναι τοῦ ἄρχειν τὸν νοῦν ἔχοντα.” καὶ ὁ Αἰσωπος οἷον ἐλεγκτικῶς “ἔδει τοίνυν,” ἔφη, “τοῦτο καθ’ ἑαυτοὺς περαίνειν καὶ μὴ συμβούλους φάσκοντας εἶναι καὶ φίλους κατηγόρους γίνεσθαι τῶν ἀρχόντων.” ἀψάμενος οὖν αὐτοῦ τῆς κεφαλῆς ὁ Σόλων καὶ διαμειδιάσας εἶπεν, “οὐκ ἂν δοκεῖ σοι μετριώτερον ἄρχοντα ποιεῖν καὶ τύραννον ἐπιεικέστερον ὁ πείθων ὡς ἄμεινον εἶη τὸ μὴ ἄρχειν ἢ τὸ ἄρχειν;”

When these utterances had been expressed, we insisted that Periander himself say something too. And he, not very cheerful but with a hard-set face, said, “Well, I add my view that the opinions expressed, taken as a whole, all but prevent any man who has good sense from being a ruler.” **Whereupon Aesop, as though taking us to task, said, “You ought, then, to have carried out this discussion by yourselves and to not have become accusers of rulers, while professing to be their counselors and friends.”** Solon then, laying his hand on his head and smiling, said, “Don’t you think that one makes a ruler more moderate and a tyrant more reasonable if he persuades them that it is better not to rule than to rule?”

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