

Bee-Poets and Bee-Philosophers: Plutarch on the Pleasures of Rhetoric<sup>1</sup>

I. Plutarch, *How to Study Poetry* (Mor. 15f)

So let us not root up or destroy the Muses' vine of poetry, but where the mythical and dramatic part grows all robust and luxuriant, through pleasure [ἡδονῆς] unalloyed, which gives it boldness and obstinacy in seeking acclaim, let us take it in hand and prune it and pinch it back. But where with its grace it approaches a true kind of culture, and the sweet allurements of its language is not **fruitless** [ἄκαρπὸν] or vacuous, there let us introduce philosophy and blend it with poetry. For as the mandragora, when it grows beside the vine and imparts its influence to the wine, makes this weigh less heavily on those who drink it, so poetry, by taking up its themes from philosophy and blending them with fable, renders the task of learning **light and agreeable** [ἐλαφρὰν καὶ προσφιλεῖ] for the young. (trans. Babbitt)

II. Plutarch, *On Listening to Lectures* (Mor. 41f)

It is thus necessary to eliminate excess and fluff [τὸ πολὺ καὶ κενὸν] from one's style [τῆς λέξεως] and to seek **the fruit itself** [αὐτὸν... τὸν καρπὸν], copying not the women who make wreaths, but the bees. For these women gather up flowers and sweet-smelling leaves, stringing them together and weaving something sweet, but brief and **fruitless** [ἡδὺ μὲν ἐφήμερον δὲ καὶ ἄκαρπον ἔργον]. Bees, on the other hand, often fly right by meadows of violets and roses and hyacinths, landing instead on thyme, **very harsh and sharp** [τραχύτατον καὶ δριμύτατον]. They settle on this, "concerned with the yellow honey" [Simon. fr. 593], and taking up **something useful** [τι τῶν χρησίμων] they fly back to their own work.

III. Plutarch, *On Listening to Lectures* (Mor. 42c)

ἡδέσθω μὲν οὖν ὑπὸ λόγων ὠφελούμενος ὁ νέος...

Let the young man who **benefits** from discourse **be delighted**...

IV. Plutarch, *How to Study Poetry* (Mor. 32e)

ἡ μὲν οὖν μέλιττα φυσικῶς ἐν τοῖς δριμυτάτοις ἄνθεσι καὶ ταῖς τραχυτάταις ἀκάνθαις ἐξανευρίσκει τὸ λειότατον μέλι καὶ χρηστικώτατον, οἱ δὲ παῖδες, ἂν ὀρθῶς ἐντρέφονται τοῖς ποιήμασιν, καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν φαύλους καὶ ἀτόπους ὑποψίας ἐχόντων ἔλκειν **τι χρήσιμον** ἀμωσγέπως μαθήσονται καὶ ὠφέλιμον.

Now the bee, in accordance with nature's laws, discovers **amid the sharpest flowers and the harshest thorns** the smoothest and most palatable honey; so children, if they be rightly nurtured amid poetry, will in some way or other learn to draw some wholesome and profitable doctrine even from passages that are suspect of what is base and improper. (trans. from Babbitt, adapted)

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<sup>1</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

**V. Aristotle, *History of Animals* (596b15)**

ἡ δὲ μέλιττα μόνον πρὸς οὐδὲν προσίζει σαπρόν, οὐδὲ χρῆται τροφῇ οὐδεμιᾶ ἄλλ' ἢ τῇ γλυκὺν ἐχούσῃ χυμόν· καὶ ὕδωρ δ' ἥδιστον εἰς ἑαυτὰς λαμβάνουσιν ὅπου ἂν ἀναπηδᾷ.

The bee alone comes and sits near nothing rotten, and does not consume any food unless it has a sweet flavor; they also take up for themselves the sweetest water, whenever it springs up.

**VI. Plutarch, *Natural Questions* 36**

et Pindarus: “parvula favorum fabricatrix, quae Rhoecum pupugisti aculeo, domans illius perfidiam.”

And Pindar: “Little crafter of honeycombs, who pricked Rhoecus with your stinger, taming his faithlessness.”

**VII. Plutarch, *Advice to the Bride and Groom* (Mor. 144d)**

ἐπεὶ τοίνυν ταῦτα πάσχουσιν οὐ μυριζομένων τῶν ἀνδρῶν ἀλλὰ συγγιγνομένων ἐτέραις, ἄδικόν ἐστιν ἡδονῆς ἔνεκα μικρᾶς ἐπὶ τοσοῦτο λυπεῖν καὶ συνταράττειν τὰς γυναῖκας καὶ μή, καθάπερ ταῖς μελίτταις (**ὅτι δοκοῦσι δυσχεραίνειν καὶ μάχεσθαι τοῖς μετὰ γυναικῶν γενομένοις**), ἀγνοῦς καὶ καθαρεύοντας ἐτέρων συνουσίας προσιέναι ταῖς γυναιξίν.

Now inasmuch as women are affected in this way, not by their husbands' using perfume, but by their having connection with other women, it is unfair to pain and disturb them so much for the sake of a trivial pleasure, and not to follow with wives the practice observed in approaching bees (**because these insects are thought to be annoyed and combative towards men who have been with women**) – to be pure and clean from all connection with others when they approach their wives. (trans. from Babbitt, adapted)

**VIII. Plutarch, *How to Study Poetry* (Mor. 15f)**

ὅθεν οὐ φευκτέον ἐστὶ τὰ ποιήματα τοῖς φιλοσοφεῖν μέλλουσιν, ἀλλὰ προφιλοσοφητέον τοῖς ποιήμασιν ἐθιζομένους ἐν τῷ τέρποντι τὸ χρήσιμον ζητεῖν καὶ ἀγαπᾶν· εἰ δὲ μή, **διαμάχεσθαι καὶ δυσχεραίνειν**. ἀρχὴ γὰρ αὕτη παιδεύσεως...

Wherefore poetry **should not be avoided** by those who are intending to pursue philosophy, but they should use poetry as an introductory exercise in philosophy, by training themselves habitually to seek the profitable in what gives pleasure, and to find satisfaction therein; and if there be nothing profitable, **to combat such poetry and be displeased with it**. For this is the beginning of education... (trans. from Babbitt, adapted)

### IX. Plato, *Republic* 439e-440a

ἀλλ' ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ποτὲ ἀκούσας τι πιστεύω τοῦτο· ὡς ἄρα Λεόντιος ὁ Ἀγλαΐωνος ἀνιῶν ἐκ Πειραιῶς ὑπὸ τὸ βόρειον τεῖχος ἐκτός, αἰσθόμενος νεκρούς παρὰ τῷ δημίῳ κειμένους, **ἄμα μὲν ἰδεῖν ἐπιθυμοῖ, ἄμα δὲ αὖ δυσγεραίνοι** καὶ ἀποτρέποι ἑαυτόν, καὶ τέως μὲν μάχοιτό τε καὶ παρακαλύπτοιο, κρατούμενος δ' οὖν ὑπὸ τῆς ἐπιθυμίας, διελκύσας τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, προσδραμῶν πρὸς τοὺς νεκρούς, “ἰδοὺ ὑμῖν,” ἔφη, “ὦ κακοδαίμονες, ἐμπλήσθητε τοῦ καλοῦ θεάματος.”

“I once heard something (and I believe it),” I said, “that Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was walking up from Piraeus under the northern part of the outer wall when he noticed corpses lying beside the public executioner. **He both earnestly desired to look upon them and at the same time he was also disgusted** and turned himself away, and for some time he struggled and covered his face, but then, overpowered by his desire, he uncovered his eyes, ran towards the corpses, and shouted, ‘Look for yourselves, you devilish fiends, take your fill of this beautiful spectacle!’”

### X. Plutarch, *On Listening to Lectures* (Mor. 38a-b)

οὐκ ἂν ἀηδῶς δ' οἶμαί σε προακοῦσαι περὶ **τῆς ἀκουστικῆς αἰσθήσεως**, ἣν ὁ Θεόφραστος **παθητικωτάτην** εἶναι φησι **πασῶν**. οὔτε γὰρ ὄρατόν οὐδὲν οὔτε γευστόν οὔθ' ἄπτὸν ἐκστάσεις ἐπιφέρει καὶ ταραχὰς καὶ πτοίας τηλικαύτας ἠλίκα καταλαμβάνουσι τὴν ψυχὴν κτύπων τινῶν καὶ πατάγων καὶ ἤχων τῇ ἀκοῇ προσπεσόντων. **ἔστι δὲ λογικώτερα μᾶλλον ἢ παθητικώτερα**. τῇ μὲν γὰρ κακία πολλὰ χωρία καὶ μέρη τοῦ σώματος παρέχει δι' αὐτῶν ἐνδῦσαν ἄψασθαι τῆς ψυχῆς, **τῇ δ' ἀρετῇ μία λαβὴ τὰ ὦτα τῶν νέων ἐστίν**, ἂν ἦ καθαρὰ καὶ ἄθρυπτα κολακεία καὶ λόγοις ἄθικτα φαύλοις ἀπ' ἀρχῆς φυλάττηται. διὸ καὶ Ξενοκράτης τοῖς παισὶ μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς ἀθληταῖς ἐκέλευε περιάπτειν ἀμφωτίδας, ὡς ἐκείνων μὲν τὰ ὦτα ταῖς πληγαῖς, **τούτων δὲ τοῖς λόγοις τὰ ἦθη διαστρεφόμενων...**

I think you may not find unwelcome some preliminary remarks about **the sense of hearing**, which Theophrastus asserts is **the most emotional of all the senses**. For nothing which can be seen or tasted or touched brings on such distractions, confusions, and excitements, as take possession of the soul when certain crashing, clashing, and roaring noises assail the hearing. **Yet this sense is more rational than emotional**. For while many places and parts of the body make way for vice to enter through them and fasten itself upon the soul, **virtue's only hold upon the young is afforded by the ears**, if they be uncontaminated and kept from the outset unspoiled by flattery and untouched by vile words. For this reason, Xenocrates advised putting ear-protectors on children rather than on athletes, on the ground that the latter have only their ears disfigured by the blows they receive, while **the former have their characters disfigured by the words they hear**. (trans. Babbitt)

## XI. Plutarch, *On Listening to Lectures* (Mor. 38c)

...καὶ βλάβας καὶ ὠφελείας τοῦ λέγειν ἔχοντος μεγίστας... ἐπεὶ ὅτι γε πάσης ἀκροάσεως ἀπειργόμενος ὁ νέος καὶ λόγου μηδενὸς γευόμενος οὐ μόνον ἄκαρπος ὅλως καὶ ἀβλαστῆς διαμένει πρὸς ἀρετὴν, ἀλλὰ καὶ διαστρέφειτ' ἂν πρὸς κακίαν, ὥσπερ ἐκ χώρας ἀκινήτου καὶ ἀργῆς ἄγρια πολλὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀναδιδούς, δῆλόν ἐστι.

...speech contains both injuries and benefits in the largest measure... For surely the fact is plain, that the young man who is debarred from hearing all instruction and gets no **taste of speech** not only remains wholly **unfruitful** and makes no growth towards virtue, but may also be perverted towards vice, and the product of his mind, like that of a fallow and untilled piece of ground, will be a plentiful crop of wild oats. (trans. Babbitt)

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