

Plutarch on the Rise and Fall of Alexander
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Scholars have long argued that Plutarch presents Alexander's behavior as deteriorating towards the end of his life (e.g. Hamilton 1969, Mossman *JHS* 1988, Whitmarsh *CQ* 2002). One aspect of this deterioration is a change in the way that Alexander exercised his power as king and general. In this paper, I will focus on two episodes of symposiastic violence, the wedding party of Philip and Cleopatra (9), and the "Cleitus affair" (50-51), and I will argue that Plutarch has used them to mark important transitions in Alexander's acquisition and use of power.

In both of these episodes, drunkenness combines with anger to provoke harsh words and then rash actions. At the wedding party, Philip rushes at his son with a sword after the boy trades insults with the bride's uncle, but due to his intoxication and rage, he falls to the ground and is ridiculed by Alexander. In the Cleitus affair, Alexander argues with his friend at a drinking party and then succeeds in killing him, but he immediately regrets his action.

Philip's attempt on Alexander's life appears to foreshadow the murder of Cleitus, with Alexander stepping into the role of Philip but, as usual, outdoing his father. Equally important, each incident brings about a change in how power is wielded or in who wields it. The wedding brawl leads immediately to Philip's reconfirmation of Alexander's position in the family and then to his ascension to the throne. Following the murder of Cleitus, Anaxarchus assuages Alexander's grief by convincing him that he is above the law, causing him to become vain and lawless. From there, Alexander proceeds into India, where he loses control of his army.

Plutarch's point, I will argue, is that when Philip and Alexander lose control of their emotions, they begin to forfeit their grip on power as well. In order to reinforce his message, Plutarch devotes many of the chapters that precede the wedding party to demonstrating that Alexander is superior to Philip, and so better fit to be king, precisely because he is more rational and more self-controlled. Thus Philip publicly demonstrates his inferiority when he flies into a rage and attacks Alexander. Likewise, Alexander demonstrates his loss of rational self-control when he murders his friend Cleitus, but rather than give way to a better leader, as Philip did after his drunken mistake, Alexander gives way to a lesser version of himself.