

The Education of the Ruler in Plutarch's *Symposium of the Seven Sages*

Plutarch's *Symposium of the Seven Sages* is a work of historical fiction that centers around a sympotic gathering hosted by Periander, the tyrant of Corinth, and attended by a rich cast of characters, including the Seven Sages, Aesop, and an emissary of Amasis the Pharaoh. In this work, just as in the *Table Talk*, Plutarch uses sympotic conversation to expose his readers to exemplary behaviors and philosophical instruction (Xenophontos 2016). I argue, however, that, while being didactic in this broader sense, the *Symposium* also serves a more specialized didactic agenda, one that pertains to the education of the ruler. As I suggest in this paper, the dialogue can be read as a demonstration of Plutarch's ideas concerning the ideal relationship between philosophers and rulers.

While the *Lives* offer several paradigms of leadership, it is in his non-biographical works that Plutarch lays out more systematically his thoughts about the education of those in power. As a synthesis of Plutarch's views on this topic makes abundantly clear (Roskam 2002), Plutarch firmly believed that successful leadership depends on the advice and mentorship of philosophers. Plutarch assumes the role of the instructor himself in his *Precepts of Statecraft*, in which he discusses how a statesman should manage his people, his affairs, and, above all, his soul. In another work, the author dwells extensively on the benefits that rulers and, more importantly, their subjects reap from a philosopher's political engagement (*That a Philosopher Ought to Converse Especially with Men of Power*).

I suggest that, through the fiction of his *Symposium*, Plutarch explores further the benefits of a close collaboration between rulers and philosophers. His Periander exemplifies precisely the power of philosophy to produce moderate rulers. Unlike his Herodotean counterpart, Plutarch's

Periander has rejected the cruel advice of Thrasyboulus (Hdt. 5.92ζ) and has opted to develop his leadership under the guidance of the Sages instead (Plut. *Symp.* 147c). While the pronouncements of the Sages regarding the management of the state (Plut. *Symp.* 152a-b; cf. 154c-f) differ from the concrete advice that Plutarch gives in his *Precepts of Statecraft*, there is no question throughout the dialogue that these wise mentors are crucial for keeping in check Periander's propensity towards tyrannical excess and cruelty (cf. the case of Cleoboulus, Plut. *Symp.* 148c-d).

While asserting the ability of philosophers to have a positive influence upon those who hold power, the dialogue also underlines how important it is that rulers acknowledge this ability and engage with the philosophers with the right kind of mindset. Periander seeks the political wisdom of the Sages (Plut. *Symp.* 151e) and engages intellectually with their utterances even when he is not entirely comfortable with them (Plut. *Symp.* 152b, cf. 154d-f). The *Symposium* invites the reader to contrast Periander to his father Cypselus, who did not seek good advisors, and to Thrasyboulus, who, being a tyrant himself, could only have had a corrupting effect as a mentor. More importantly, the reader is invited to compare Periander with Amasis, a ruler who recognizes the intellectual capacity of the Sages but refrains from using them as sources for political wisdom (Plut. *Symp.* 146e-147d, 151d-e). The dialogue thus draws attention not only to the great advantages of collaborations between rulers and philosophers, but also to the fragility of such relationships; in the *Symposium*, sages are willing to become mentors, but rulers may not always be able to appreciate their wisdom or prepared to hear something they do not fully agree with.

To sum up: in this paper, I offer a reading of the *Symposium of the Seven Sages* that illustrates how the dialogue reflects Plutarch's ideas about the *paideia* of the ruler.

Bibliography

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