

Bee-Poets and Bee-Philosophers: Plutarch on the Pleasures of Rhetoric

This paper argues that Plutarch's two complementary treatises, *How to Study Poetry* (*De aud. poet.*) and *On Listening to Lectures* (*De aud.*), present a method of education that recovers a positive role for the pleasures of both poetry and rhetoric in philosophy. Building on Hunter and Russell (2011)'s claim that *How to Study Poetry* is a direct response to Plato's challenge that the champions of poetry defend its place in philosophy (*Rep.* 10.607d-e; cf. Zadorojniy 2002), I posit that *De aud.* represents a similar response to Plato's critique of oratory (*Gorg.* 463a-465e; *Phaedr.* 260d-261a). Plutarch uses familiar imagery of the bee-poet to craft an image of the hardworking bee-philosopher, who harnesses the pleasures of rhetoric to express philosophical truths. Plutarch's reconciliation of the "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy, which can be expanded to include the conflict between rhetoric and philosophy, is representative of a general movement in Middle Platonism to promote the harmonious combination of oratory and wisdom.

Each treatise represents a different stage of the young man's philosophical education, detailing the proper progression from poetry to rhetoric. Written for young children and their fathers, *How to Study Poetry* develops the first step of Plutarch's philosophical education, in which poetry serves to ease students into the study of philosophy (Xenophontos 2016). As in Plato's allegory of the cave, in which non-philosophers must gradually be led into the full light of the sun of philosophy (*Rep.* 514a-518b), poetry is a tool to introduce young students to the pleasure of philosophy. Poetry "softens" the glare of full philosophical truth with the "reflection" of philosophy through pleasant verse (*De aud. poet.* 36e; Lather 2017).

Addressed to a slightly older audience, *On Listening to Lectures* develops the second step of Plutarch's philosophical education, in which the student is able to appreciate philosophy unmediated by myth or other aesthetic frills (*De aud.* 37f-38d). *On Listening to Lectures* trains the advanced student to differentiate between true and false rhetoric (*lexeis*), the philosopher versus the sophist. Like poetry, which can be good or bad depending on the skill of the listener, rhetoric can be either beneficial or deceptive depending on the skill of the speaker (cp. Pl. *Phaedr.* 263c, 272a-b). Plutarch distinguishes between the sweet but ultimately empty rhetoric of the sophist, and the rhetoric of the philosopher, which is instructive as well as enjoyable (*De aud.* 41f). The sophist's rhetoric is like a floral garland, "pretty but ephemeral." Conversely, the philosopher's rhetoric is like the industrious bee, which passes over sweeter flowers and chooses instead to make honey from "very harsh and sharp thyme."

Plutarch's use of apian imagery in this passage engages directly with Plato's critique of poetic sweetness in the *Republic*. The image of the bee-poet was common in antiquity: Pindar describes his poetry as "sweeter than a bee's honeycomb" (fr. 152); Dio Chrysostom claims that bees spread honey on the mouth of Sophocles (*Or.* 37.17); and Lucretius compares himself to a bee feeding on the golden words of Epicurus (*DRN* 3.10-13; Clay 2003). While Plato revalues this image of the bee-poet into a negative picture of sweetness as a corrupting poison (*Rep.* 559d-e; Liebert 2017), Plutarch in turn restores its positive potential. Plutarch translates the bee-poet into a bee-philosopher, who possesses the knowledge and skill to avoid the easier sweets of empty rhetoric and seek more difficult, and thus more rewarding, pleasures. The thyme plant is not as obviously sweet as other flowers, but the labor of the bee turns this harsh plant into the most delicious honey (Plin. *NH* 11.38). Plutarch does not claim that rhetorical style has an equal value to philosophical doctrine (*De aud.* 42c), but his educational program still allows for a

positive role for the pleasure of rhetoric in philosophy, marking a significant update on Plato's original position.

Bibliography

- Clay, Diskin. 2003. "Lucretius' Honeyed Muse: The History and Meaning of a Simile." In *Le Jardin Romain Épicurisme et Poésie à Rome: Mélanges Offerts à Mayotte Bollack*, edited by Annick Monet, 183–96. Villeneuve-d'Asq: Université Charles-de-Gaulle – Lille III.
- Hunter, Richard, and Donald Russell, eds. 2011. *Plutarch: How to Study Poetry (De Audiendis Poetis)*. Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lather, Amy. 2017. "Taking Pleasure Seriously: Plutarch on the Benefits of Poetry and Philosophy." *Classical World* 110 (3): 323–49.
- Liebert, Rana Saadi. 2017. *Tragic Pleasure from Homer to Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xenophontos, Sophia. 2016. *Ethical Education in Plutarch*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Zadorojniy, Alexei. 2002. "Safe Drugs for the Good Boys: Platonism and Pedagogy in Plutarch's De Audiendis Poetis." In *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch, Greek Intellectuals, and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan (98-117 A.D.)*, edited by Philip A. Stadter and Luc Van der Stockt, 297–314. Leuven: Leuven University Press.