EDUCATION AND PUBLIC SPEECH:
PLUTARCH ON AESTHETICS AND ETHICS

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0. ‘EDUCATION’ AND ‘SPEECH’

For the sake of convenience, I first circumscribe the notions of ‘education’ and ‘speech’ that are, as the title of this contribution indicates, at the heart of the present investigation. The circumscriptions are merely meant as operational tools for the present investigation; they do not intend to give a status quaestionis of the research in the fields concerned.

Education of (young) people is regarded as a process of socialisation: it introduces youngsters into a given society by confronting them with its various cultural components, codes and manifestations. The confrontation invites young people to accustom, so as to become efficient, if not excellent members of the society: ‘gentlemen’. This implies that the ‘confrontation’, organized by society and operated through teachers, is not noncomittal: it allures young people into the ‘prejudices’ of the society into which they are introduced, or, to use the term of Gadamer, into its own ‘Vorurteile’. Gadamer’s term ‘Vorurteil’ intends to be ‘neutral’; in my opinion, it can, mutatis mutandis, be used to point to those productive points of view at which a society has arrived at a certain stage of its evolution; those points of view are productive in that they, despite their limitations, create the very opportunity to embroider on and enrich the cultural tradition of society.

In Plutarch’s days, the upcoming cultural movement of the Second Sophistic promotes education and self-definition through (nostalgic) confrontation with Classical Greece; through writings and speeches that, by their schoolish and repeated reference to the past give away their uniform origin of a scholastic-rhetorical training, it confronts public opinion with contemporarory problems. This movement responds to a need of

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a cultural elite, that feasts on the speeches of the great sophists. Thus an ideal type of
gentleman emerges: the one who masters the art of public speech, who has the intellectual
capacity and verbal skills necessary for enchanting public opinion. Inevitably, and as
was the case with the First Sophistic, tensions with a more philosophic ideal would
arise. Plutarch’s works testify to this tension in his contemporary culture. In this paper,
I will explore an aspect of Plutarch’s view of the true gentleman, nl. the question how,
according to Plutarch, education of young people should mould them into a certain type
of listener and public speaker.

1. The Ideal of the Public Speech

How, then, should a gentleman speak in public? Plutarch offers some explicit
advice concerning the ‘political speech’ of the statesman, counsellor and ruler – that is:
the gentleman in high stations – in Praecepta gerendae reipublicae §6-9. The advice
about the πολιτικός λόγος (as opposed to e.g. the forensic speech: 803A) deals with
questions such as the preparation of the speeches, the use and importance of derision
and ridicule, the physical condition of the speaker. Here and there, there are technical
terms like ‘rejoinders and replies’ (ἀμείψεις καὶ ... ἀπαντήσεις: 803C) or ‘to speak
with contradictory alternatives’ (διαρετικῶς: 802F). In short, Plutarch’s advice echoes
the treatment of some theoretical-rhetorical questions that were discussed in Hellenistic
times and can be found more extensively in e.g. Cicero’s De Oratore, Dionysius of
Halicarnassus’s De Oratoribus veteribus and Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria. But in
general, Plutarch’s advice, just as that of Cicero and Quintilian, is not of a (merely)
technical-rhetorical scope and nature. In fact, Plutarch will not offer specific technical
advice, since, in his view, the speech of the statesman shouldn’t catch the ear by its
‘bellettrie’ or technical perfection:

“The speech of the statesman, ... , must not be juvenile an theatrical (νεαρός
καὶ θεατρικός), as if he were making a speech for show and weaving a
garland (στεφανηπλοκούμενος: see also infra) of delicate and flowery words
(εξ ἀπαλῶν καὶ ἀνθηρῶν ὄνομάτων); on the other hand it must not, as
Pythias said of the speech of Demosthenes, smell of the lamp and elaborate
literary labour (σοφιστικῆς περιεργίας), with sharp arguments and with
periods precisely measured by rule and compass” (802EF).

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3 On Plutarch and the Second Sophistic and especially on σοφιστής, see R. Jeuckens, Plutarch
von Chaeronea und die Rhetorik, Strassburg, 1908, pp. 47-54.
4 All translations are taken from The Loeb Classical Library.
Even this negative advice is cloaked in non-technical terms and it almost escapes the reader’s notice that Plutarch warns against the excesses of Asianism on the one hand and of Atticism on the other hand.

The positive advice is a plea for a more “philosophical” rhetoric:

“His speech must be full of unaffected character (ἡθος ἀπλάστου), true high-mindedness (φρονήματος ἄληθινοῦ), a father’s frankness, foresight, and thoughtful concern for others. His speech must also have, in addition to the nobility of purpose, a charm that pleases and a winning persuasiveness; it must possess grace arising from stately diction (σημιῶν ὄνομάτων) and appropriate and persuasive thoughts. And political oratory, ... , admits maxims, historical and mythical tales, and metaphors, by means of which those who employ them sparingly and at the proper moment move their audiences exceedingly” (802F-803A).

“And in general loftiness and grandeur (ὁ ... ὅγκος καὶ τὸ μέγεθος) are more fitting for the political speech” (803B).

“But the man who is so moved by the events which take place and the opportunities which offer themselves that he springs to his feet is the one who most thrills the crowd, attracts it, and carries it with him” (804A).

Plutarch’s ideal is that of a speaker who displays moral character, a capability of producing adequate and preferably elevated thoughts, an openness to genuine emotion, the competence of choosing the right words and of creating metaphors. All these requirements are among the five sources of sublimity indicated by Longinus (De sublimitate, §8). The analogy between Plutarch and Longinus is twofold here: they are not interested in a merely technical rhetoric (Longinus’ treatment of ‘the sublime’ aims at correcting the merely technical approach of Caecilius), and they are both strongly preoccupied with the intellectual and emotional development of the orator. As such they both testify to “an attitude that is quite common in the imperial period, and seems to have appealed especially to Romans”.

2. LANGUAGE AND THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE: PLUTARCH’S OBSERVATIONS

Let us now turn to some of Plutarch’s observations concerning the education of young people through language and speech. How should this education mould them into the kind of speaker Plutarch admires in Praecepta gerendae reipublicae?

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I. We start with the essay Plutarch wrote for pupils of the secondary school. Three passages from *De audiendis poetis* are to be quoted here.

a) The whole purpose of *De audiendis poetis* is to help young people to gain some profit from reading poetry, i.e. to develop their capability of making sound moral judgements and thus to improve their moral character. Young people are in need of such help, for

> “Just as amid the luxuriant foliage and branches of vine the fruit (ὀ κορπός) is often hidden and unnoticed from being in the shadow, so also amid the poetic diction and the tales that hang clustered around, much that is helpful and profitable escapes a young man” (28DE).

The young man should not be carried away by the diction or the tales: “er muss das beachten und auswerten, was die Moraliät zu bilden vermag”.

b) Especially interesting is § 11, where Plutarch makes an extensive analogy between the various kinds of readers of poetry and “what happens in pasturage”, nl. the different instincts and tastes of animals. Some of those approaches are qualified as “Spielerei” (παιγνία), whereas the legitimate consumption has education (παιδεία) as its target.

The following diagram summarizes Plutarch’s long period:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pasturage: animals and their goals:</th>
<th>Poetry: readers and their goals:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ΠΑΙΓΝΙΑ</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bee: flower</td>
<td>Φιλόμυθος: “flowers of the story” (novel and unusual points)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goat: tender shoot</td>
<td>Φιλόλογος: “beauty of the diction and the arrangement of the words” (faultless and elegant forms of expression)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swine: root</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑ</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other animals: seed, fruit</td>
<td>Φιλότιμος κοί φιλόκαλος: “useful for character” (utterances that look toward ... the moral virtues)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, although it is comforting that no class of readers is actually compared to swines, it is surprising to notice that the bee, who is usually a very decent and serious animal in Plutarch, seems to behave rather frivolously: it occupies itself with the

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flower and forgets about the honey! It looks not for the desirable fruit (τὸν καρπόν: 30C), but busies itself with amusement (παιγνίον)! Some things are confused here, in nature and maybe in Plutarch’s mind as well!

c) Things are set straight again a little further:

“Now the bee, in accordance with nature’s law, discovers amid the most pungent flowers and the roughest 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 ...” (§ 12, 32EF).

This is a relief: nature’s laws are obeyed again, and our φιλότιμος καὶ φιλόκαλος of our second passage can safely be paralleled to this bee. But there remains a problem: what exactly are those “pungent flowers and the roughest thorns”? Are we to think of some bad smelling roses?

Anyway, it is clear that the education of children should focus from the start on the improvement of moral character. Confrontation with poetry should make a sharp distinction between ‘bellettrie’ and content and give priority to the assessment of the morality of that content.

II. De audiendo

But the answer to our questions concerning the frivolous bee and the bad smelling flowers must come from other writings of Plutarch. We turn to De audiendo first. This essay was originally, as Plutarch says himself (37C), a lecture addressing somewhat older students than those who were the target in De audiendis poetis. After secondary school, we are in College now. In his commentary9, Hillyard suspects that the essay as we have it does not differ very much from the original lecture; his guess is that “Plutarch lectured from notes rather than from a script”.

a) Chapter 8 of De audiendo, just like chapter 10 of De audiendis poetis, begins with the image of “the fruit”:

“One ought therefore to strip off the superfluity and inanity from the style, and to seek after the fruit (τὸν καρπὸν) itself, imitating not women who make garlands (στεφανηπλόκους; cf. supra!) but the bees. For those women, culling flower-clusters and sweet-centred leaves, intertwine and plait them, and produce something which is pleasant enough, but short-lived and fruitless (άκαρπον); whereas the bees in their flight frequently pass through meadows

of violets, roses, and hyacinths, and come to rest upon the exceeding rough and pungent thyme, and on this they settle close, *making the yellow honey their care*” (41EF).

The last line is a quote from Simonides (fr. 88P), and it is very tempting at this moment to suspect that Plutarch had this same line in mind in § 12 of *De audiendis poetis* as well: there he spoke of the bee seeking honey. But in order to confirm this hypothesis, we need more evidence that links the bee to fruit (i.e. usefulness), or to types of readers or listeners.

b) And indeed, *De audiendo* as well offers some analogies between types of listeners to lectures and ... animals!

Right after the advice to listeners to behave like bees, i.e. to be ‘artistic and pure’ (*φιλότεχνος και καθαρός*)
10 Plutarch mentions a class of listeners who are like unproductive drones: they care for “flowery and daintily language and theatrical and spectacular subject matter” (*τὰ μὲν ἄνθηρα καὶ τρυφερὰ τῶν ὄνομάτων καὶ τῶν πραγμάτων τὰ δραματικὰ καὶ πανηγυρικά*: 41F-42A).

It is only much later in the essay, nl. in §18, that Plutarch completes the zoo of listeners. A listener should not “give trouble to a speaker by repeatedly asking questions about the same things, like unfledged nestlings (*απτήνες νέοσσοι*) always agape toward the mouth of another, and desirous of receiving everything ready and prepared” (48A); these guys do not digest themselves, i.e. they do not integrate philosophical lessons into their own personality. They do not develop an independent moral character. And then “there is another class, who, eager to be thought astute and attentive out of due place, wear out the speakers with loquacity and officiousness, by continually propounding some extraneous and unessential difficulty (*προσδιαπορούντες*: cf. infra) ... Now such persons are, according to Hieronymus, like cowardly and persistent puppies which, at home, bite the skins of wild animals, and tear off what bits they can, but never touch the animals themselves” (48AB).

All this looks very Plutarchan and natural: drones were the natural opposite to bees, and they are often mentioned together; little birds are hungry and want predigested food, and little dogs (probably hunting hounds) instinctively (cf. supra, on the natural instinct of bees) go for the skin of wild animals. Apparently, only the bee, i.e. the artistic and pure listener, is able to have his instinct guided by reason.

Thus Plutarch’s classification of listeners is as follows:

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10 This means: ‘appreciative of what is essential’ and ‘pure, not mislead by the style’: cf. B.P. Hillyard, *o.c.*, pp. 118-119.
“pasturage”\textsuperscript{11} & listener \\
women: garlands of flower-clusters: “what is pleasant” // drone & the one who looks for “flowery and dainty language and theatrical and spectacular subject matter” \\
bee: honey & τὸν φιλότεχνον καὶ καθαρὸν ἀκροατὴν looks for “what is useful and profitable” \\
unfledged nestlings & repeatedly ask questions about the same things: they want everything predigested \\
little puppies: skins of wild animals & display loquacity and officiousness, propounding extraneous and unessential difficulties

The category of the drone-listeners, in which we will apparently find the φιλόμυθοι and the φιλόλογοι of De audiendis poetis, is labelled as “playing the sophist” (σοφιστικόντων: cf. infra).

\textsuperscript{c)} In De audiendis poetis §10, the essence of Plutarch’s advice to the kids was to neglect matters of style and stick to matters of content, and “especially to those that lead toward virtue and have the power to mould character” (28E). The same idea returns in De audiendo. The real profit for a listener from listening to lectures is

“to estimate whether any one of his emotions has become less intense, whether any one of his troubles weighs less heavily upon him, whether his confidence and his high purpose (φρόνημα) have become firmly rooted, whether he has acquired enthusiasm for virtue and goodness” (42AB).

In De audiendis, the advice was soon (§11 and 12) followed by the image of the bee; that is also the case in De audiendo; the listener

“should be grateful if by pungent discourse someone has cleansed his mind teeming with fogginess and dullness, as a beehive is cleared by smoke” (42C).

But again, there is something wrong with the image of the bee, for normally it is the bee that gets driven out of the beehive by smoke! Here the fog in the mind is driven out by smoke. That means that the bee is fog. Somewhat clumsy ...

Anyway, Plutarch concludes that a listener should have his priorities: subject matter matters first, not matters of pure Attic style à la Lysias (42D).

\textsuperscript{11} The women are indeed in the same category as the animals. ‘This ‘inadvertent’ classification may testify to Plutarch’s ‘inadvertent’ dependence on Greek prejudice; on the other hand, it might be a conscious strategy in order to disqualify the ‘drone-model’ in the eyes of his (male) audience.
III. In *De proiectibus in virtute*, Plutarch comes to talk about young people and their fascination for language and speech again. For the change in dealing with language and speech by “beginners in philosophy” is a symptom of progress in virtue. This time, we are dealing with young people’s active use of language and speech; and, like in *De audiendis poetis*, he classifies them in a kind of priamel and compares them to animals:

“some of these beginners, like birds, are led by their flightiness and ambition to alight on the resplendent heights of the Natural Sciences; while others, ‘like puppies, delighting to pull and tear’, as Plato (*Resp.* 539b) puts it, go in for the disputationes, knotty problems (*ἀπορίας*: cf. supra), and quibbles (*σφίσματα*: cf. supra); but the majority enter a course in Logic and Argumentation, where they straightway stock themselves up for the practice of sophistry (*σοφιστεία*: cf. supra); while a few go about making a collection of apophthegms and anecdotes” (78EF).

‘Hieronymus’ of *De audiendo* has become ‘Plato’, but the little dogs are very much the same: they are fond of ‘knotty problems’. But where is the positive image of the bee, where is the negative example of the little nestlings?

The bee flies in a little further in the essay, right after the explicit advice that one ought to pay attention to the ideas which “tend to improvement of character or alleviation of emotion” (79C):

“For as Simonides says of the bee that it fits among the flowers making the yellow honey its care, while the rest of the world contents itself with their colour and fragrance, getting nothing else from them, so, while the rest of the world ranges amid poems for the sake of pleasure or diversion (παιδία), if a man ... finds and collects something worth wile, ... he has made himself capable of appreciating what is noble and appropriate” (79CD).

Not commendable is the attitude of those students who “make use of Plato and Xenophon for their language (λέξιν), and gather therefrom nothing else but the purity of the Attic style” (79D; cf. supra!). And then, the image of the nestlings returns in a passage that makes it clear when education has failed and how this affects the use of speech:

“those who are still studying, and busily looking to see what they can get from philosophy which they can straightway haul out for display in the Forum, or at a gathering of young men, or at an evening part at Court, ought not to be thought to practice philosophy ...; rather, a charlatan of this sort (*σοφιστής*) does not differ at all from the bird described by Homer, for whatever he gets he proffers through the mouth to his pupils as to an ‘unfledged brood’,
badly, however, it goes with himself,
if he does not devote to his own advantage, or assimilate at all, anything of
what he receives” (80A).

3. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

At this point, we can summarize Plutarch’s thoughts and expressions in the following
diagram12, and then make some final observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>De audiendis poetis, §10-12</th>
<th>De audiendo, §8-9/§18</th>
<th>De prof. in virt., §7-8</th>
<th>De am. prolis, §2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A 10, 28DE: image of the fruit</td>
<td>A 8, 41EF: image of the fruit</td>
<td>E 7, 78E-F: trahit sua quemque voluptas: birds, dogs (Plato!)</td>
<td>F 2, 494A: Simonides fr.88P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B 10, 28D: λέξις versus πράγματα</td>
<td>C 10, 28D: basic target: ἀρετή, ἡθος</td>
<td>E 8, F41F-42A: trahit sua quemque voluptas: bees, drones</td>
<td>B 8, 79C: λέξις versus πράγματα</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C 10, 28D: basic target: ἀρετή, ἡθος</td>
<td>C 8, 41A-B: basic target: κοψισμός πάθους, φρόνημα, ἀρετή, τὸ καλὸν</td>
<td>C 8, 79C: basic target: ἡθος, κοψισμός πάθους</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D 11, 29F: Aeschylus at the Isthmian games (training)</td>
<td>G 9, 42C-D: καθαρότης of the Attic (Lysias)</td>
<td>F 8, 79C: Simonides fr.88P</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E 11, 30D-E: trahit sua quemque voluptas: bee, goat, swine, “other animals”</td>
<td>B 9, 42D: λέξις versus πράγματα</td>
<td>G 8, 79D: καθαρότης of the Attic (Plato, Xenophon)</td>
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12 Not all the items listed in the diagram were mentioned and treated in this paper: Plutarch’s documentation was more extended than this paper suggested so far. The occurrence of the quote from Simonides and that of Homer in each other’s vicinity in De amore prolis suggests that the link between those quotes was firmly rooted in Plutarch’s mind.
1. If Hillyard is right, and Plutarch lectured *De audiendo* from notes, I think the diagram offers a general outline of one such note. This kind of complex and somewhat ornate train of thought, repeated in three writings is, anayway, what I call a Plutarchan hypomnema\(^\text{13}\). It remains to be seen, however, how Plutarch made use of this hypomnema in the writings dealt with: was it originally conceived as a unit, destined to function within a specific writing?; or is it simply taken from a writing and made to function within other writings as well? These questions can only be answered (if at all) after a detailed analysis of a.o. the place of the ‘hypomnema’ in the structure of each of the writings involved. This investigation, however, would take more space than the present volume allows for.

2. It is obvious that, in Plutarch’s view, the educational strategy must be consistent: from the very start education is targeted on developing a philosophical gentleman, and the education at the level of secondary school as well as that in College should focus on developing moral personality (éthos) rather than bellettristic tastes (such as Atticism or Asianism). The persistent use of the priamel indicates that Plutarch is a participant in the struggle of cultural ideals, and that he firmly opposes his ideal to that of those whom he calls ‘sofists’: speakers who aim at, and are admired for, the brilliant fireworks of their speech. Perhaps Plutarch made his hierarchy of cultural values most clear in his approval of Menedemus’ remark (*De profectibus* 81EF):

“For he said that the multitudes who came to Athens to school were, at the outset, wise (σοφούς); later they became lovers of wisdom (φιλοσόφους), <later still orators (ῥήτορος)>; and, as time went on, just ordinary persons, and the more they laid hold on reason the more they laid aside their self-opinion and conceit”.

\(^{13}\) *Cf.* L. Van der Stockt, “A Plutarchan hypomnema on self-love”, *AJP* 120, 4, 1999, pp. 575-599.