

CLCS4009

READING ANTIQUITY: A SURVEY OF ANCIENT LITERATURE



Lecture 4: Politics,
Education and
Sex:

The Symposium;
Lyric and Elegaic
Poetry

What is a Symposium?

- Symposium (pl. Symposia): drinking parties, but also fundamental institutions for education, social definition, testing boundaries of acceptability and cultural norms.
- During the archaic period, they became a definitive part of Greek culture.
- A *symposiarch* or ‘master of the symposium’ was appointed to supervise the mixing of wine with water. *Civilised* drinking lies at the heart of the symposium.

What is a Symposium?

When the tables had been removed and the guests had poured a libation and sung a hymn, there entered a man from Syracuse, to give them an evening's merriment. He had with him a fine flute-girl, a dancing-girl—one of those skilled in acrobatic tricks,—and a very handsome boy, who was expert at playing the cither and at dancing; the Syracusan made money by exhibiting their performances as a spectacle.

Xenophon, *Symposium*, 2.1

What is a Symposium?

“Since it has been resolved, then,” said Eryximachus, “that we are to drink only so much as each desires, with no constraint on any, I next propose that the flute-girl who came in just now be dismissed: let her pipe to herself or, if she likes, to the women-folk within, but let us seek our entertainment today in conversation. I am ready, if you so desire, to suggest what sort of discussion it should be.”

Plato, *Symposium*, 176e

Symposium: Contained Liberation

[14] He will tell you that there are many people in the city, sons of respectable persons, who in sport, after the manner of young men, have given themselves nicknames, such as Ithyphalli [Erections] or Autolecythi [Beggars], and that some of them are infatuated with mistresses; that his own son is one of these and has often given and received blows on account of some girl; and that things of this sort are natural for young men. As for me and all my brothers, he will make out that we are not only drunken and insolent fellows, but also unfeeling and vindictive.

Demosthenes, *Against Conon*, 54.14

I have reached the point when a man feels most pleasure in drinking wine,
Being neither sober at all nor yet excessively drunk.

Whoever goes beyond the limit of drinking, that man no longer
Is master of his own tongue or of his mind;

He talks recklessly, saying things which the sober find disgraceful,
And feels no shame in any action when he is drunk,

A man of sound sense before, and now a fool. But you,

Understanding these things, should not drink to excess,

But either stand up and leave before you get drunk --don't let your belly
Overpower you as if you were a base labourer hired by the day –

Or else stay put and refrain from drinking. [...] [...]

That man is truly invincible, Who though he has drunk many cups says
nothing foolish. As for the rest of you, take care in what you say as you
linger around the wine bowl, Steering well clear of quarrels with one
another, Speaking in a way that any may hear, whether you address one or
all together. Conducted in this way, a drinking-party proves far from
unpleasant.

Theognis, 477-496

Symposium: Contained Liberation



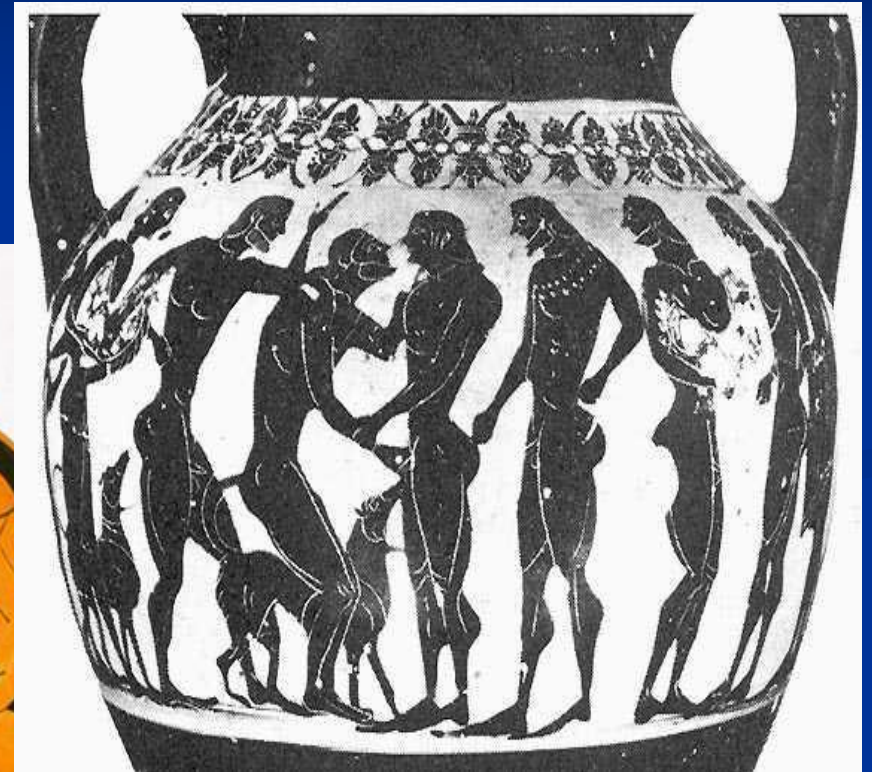
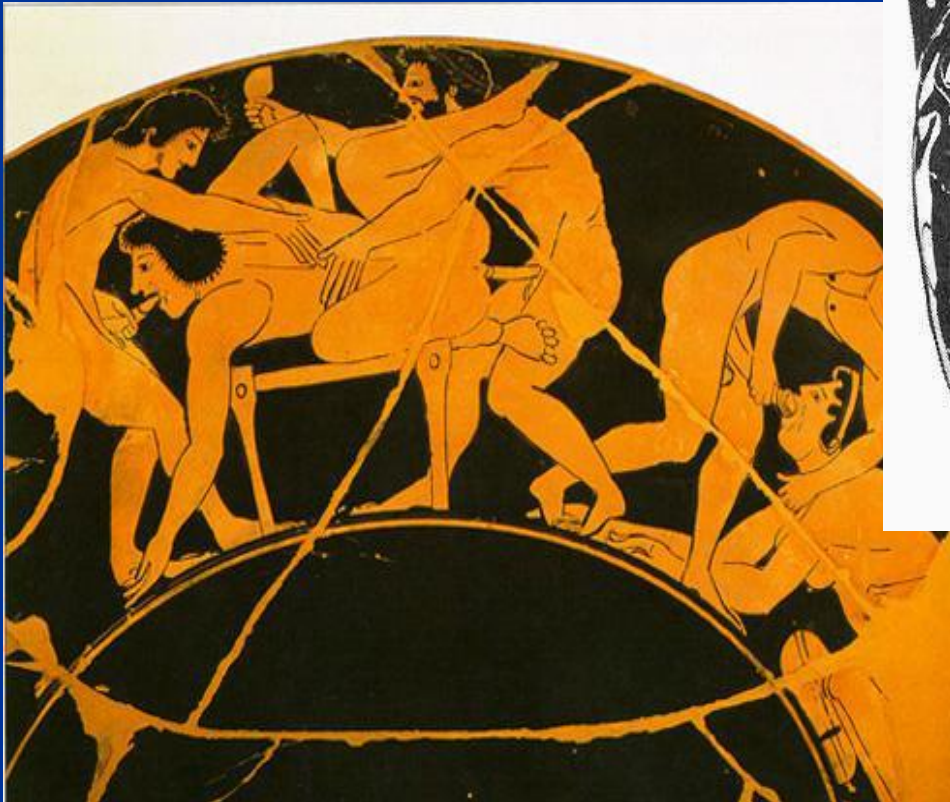
Symposium: Contained Liberation

- Plutarch, *Sympotic Questions*, 707e: characterised by ‘quantities of free speech’.
- Cleitus, however, would not yield, but called on Alexander to speak out freely what he wished to say, or else not to invite to supper men who were free and spoke their minds, but to live with Barbarians and slaves, who would do obeisance to his white tunic and Persian girdle. [... More and more provocation until eventually] And so, at last, Alexander seized a spear from one of his guards, met Cleitus as he was drawing aside the curtain before the door, and ran him through. Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 51.3-6

Then when Dionysus arose and gave his hand to Ariadne to rise also, there was presented the impersonation of lovers kissing and caressing each other. The onlookers viewed a Dionysus truly handsome, an Ariadne truly fair, not presenting a burlesque but offering genuine kisses with their lips; and they were all raised to a high pitch of enthusiasm as they looked on. [6] For they overheard Dionysus asking her if she loved him, and heard her vowing that she did, so earnestly that not only Dionysus but all the bystanders as well would have taken their oaths in confirmation that the youth and the maid surely felt a mutual affection. For theirs was the appearance not of actors who had been taught their poses but of persons now permitted to satisfy their long-cherished desires. [7] At last, the banqueters, seeing them in each other's embrace and obviously leaving for the bridal couch, those who were unwedded swore that they would take to themselves wives, and those who were already married mounted horse and rode off to their wives that they might enjoy them.

Xenophon, *Symposium*, 9.5-7

Symposium: Contained Liberation



The Literature of the Symposium

- A context for the performance of literature.
- Symptic poetry: 'lyric' and 'elegaic'.
- **Lyric Poetry:** sung in a variety of contexts; small-scale pieces commemorating a specific event.
- **Elegaic Poetry:** The elegaic couplet is a pair of metrical lines, a single hexameter followed by a single pentameter.
- Both evoke a sense of time and place.
- Symptic themes: love, politics etc.

Kyrnos, as I work my craft let a seal be set upon
These words of mine, and they will never be stolen unremarked,
Nor will anyone change the good that is there to something worse;
And this is what everyone will say: 'These are the lines of Theognis,
The man from Megara' --famous throughout all peoples.
But all my fellow citizens I have not yet been able to please.
This is nothing to wonder at, son of Polypaos, for not even Zeus
Pleases everyone, whether he rains or holds it back.
To you with kindly intent I offer such advice as I myself,
Kyrnos, heard from noble men when I was still a child.
Be intelligent, and do not at the cost of shameful or unjust deeds
Attempt to draw to yourself honours of merits or wealth.

Theognis19-30

Sympotic Poetry and Fame

To you I have given wings, on which you may fly aloft
Above the boundless sea and all the earth
With ease. At feasts and banquets you will be present
On all occasions, lying in the mouths of many,
And to the clear-toned sound of pipes young men
With seemly grace and loveliness, their voices fair and
clear,
Will sing of you. And when beneath the hollows of the
murky earth
You go to Hades' halls ringing with lamentation,

Sympotic Poetry and Fame

Not even then, though dead, will you ever lose your fame;
instead, you will be known

To people of all time, your name imperishable,
Kyrnos, roaming through mainland Hellas and up and
down the islands,

Passing over the restless fish-swarming sea,

Not mounted on the backs of horses, but sent abroad

By the radiant gifts of the Muses, violet-crowned:

To all who care for them, even to those who are not yet
born, you will be

Alike a theme of song, so long as earth and sun exist

.From you, however, I get scant respect;

Instead, you cheat me with words as if I were a little child.

Theognis 237-254

Sympotic Poetry: Love / Sex

Cleobulus is the one I love

Cleobulus is the one I'm mad for

Cleobulus is the one I gaze upon

Anacreon fr. 359

Thracian filly, why do you look me askance

And persistently flee me, thinking me lacking in wisdom?

Be sure, I could put the bit on you well,

And holding the reins turn you around the limits of the course.

But as it is, you graze in meadows and play, skipping lightly;

For you lack any clever rider, experienced on horseback.

Anacreon fr. 417

Follow-up Reading

- Bowie, E. L. 'Early Greek Elegy, Symposium and Public Festival', *JHS* 106, 1986, pp. 327-46
[<http://www.jstor.org/stable/629640>]
- Hammer, D. 'Ideology, the Symposium, and Archaic Politics', *AJPb* 125, 2004, pp. 479-512
[<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1562221>]
- Kurke, L. 'Inventing the *Hetaira*: Sex, Politics, and Discursive Conflict in Archaic Greece', *CA* 16, 1997, pp. 106-150
[<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25011056>]

Preliminary Reading

- For next session please read:
- **Lecture 5 Workshop Handout: Epinicia, Athletes , Poets and Love: Pindar, Bacchylides and Sappho** (available on Moodle).
- **Lecture 6 Workshop Handout: Epic and the Oral Tradition: Homer's *Odyssey* 8** (available on Moodle).
- **PLEASE PRINT OUT BOTH HANDOUTS AND BRING WITH YOU TO NEXT THURSDAY'S CLASS.**