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978-0-521-88685-7 - Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture

Jason König

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PART I

Conversation and community

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CHAPTER I

Locating the symposium

EATING AND DRINKING IN ANCIENT AND MODERN CULTURE

The ancient Greek and Roman obsession with representing food and feasting is matched in many ways by our own. Our weekend newspapers, bookshop shelves and television screens are overloaded with lavish offerings from celebrity chefs. That interest overflows into fiction and film.¹ For many, these representations appeal not just because they show us how to cook and eat for ourselves, but also because they offer us the pleasure of fantasising about consumption.² The desire to read about food, and to fantasise about food, is a desire many ancient readers understood, and for many of the same reasons.³ For one thing, the pleasures of food writing within modern western culture are related to the increasing breadth of available culinary experience. Increasing globalisation in the present day opens up new cuisines and ingredients for our delectation, and makes it pleasurable to hold in our minds an imagined vision of the richness which is accessible to us. Greek and Roman writing on food could similarly offer images of the gastronomic richness of (for example) the Roman empire, with its enormous regional and culinary diversity.⁴ Food and feasting in the modern world are also bound up with issues of social status. In that respect too the ancient world was no different. Eating and drinking contribute to our sense of who we are, all the more powerfully so for being embodied practices, linked with the day-to-day patterns of our physical existence, and so familiar that we rarely subject them to analysis. Culinary choices and culinary knowledge act as vehicles of self-definition and

¹ For an accessible anthology of modern food writing, see Levy (1996); for food in modern Italian literature, see Biasin (1993); for food in the literature of the Romantic period, see Morton (2004).

² On the pleasures of food description for its own sake, see Gowers (1993) 8–9, with reference to Barthes (1975).

³ E.g. Gowers (1993) and Davidson (1997) for particularly vivid illustrations, on Latin and classical Athenian literature respectively.

⁴ See Dalby (2000a); Wilkins (2003) and (2008).

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communal identity at all levels of society. For example, indulgence in expensive produce and exotic cuisine can be (among other things, and whether that is acknowledged or not) a vehicle for imagining or projecting high social status. The same goes for luxurious food in Greek and Roman society.⁵ The institutions of eating and drinking – dinner party, restaurant, pub, canteen – with their own distinctive expectations about what constitutes proper behaviour, are similarly vehicles for social definition and for projecting membership of imagined communities. Here, too, the ancient world was no different. Moreover, food habits are still sometimes linked with religious identities, just as they were in the classical world.⁶ And we still see strong connections between particular foods or food customs and particular regional identities and local histories.⁷ In all of these ways we might see ourselves as inheritors of a classical mentality.

A closer look, however, suggests that the differences between the ancient and modern world may be equally significant.⁸ Most striking of all is a difference of intensity. Elaborate, often voluptuous descriptions of food, fictional scenes of eating and drinking, often involving bizarre or gluttonous consumption, depictions of song or conversation at drinking parties, lists of moralising instructions for nutritional self-care and proper convivial behaviour, metaphorical uses of the language of eating and drinking to describe the processes of writing and reading⁹ – all of these things appear in Greco-Roman literature with even greater frequency than they do in our own.¹⁰ The evidence for that unquantifiable claim will emerge, I hope,

⁵ Goody (1982) esp. 102–5 sees Roman culture as typical of European culture more broadly in having a strong distinction between high cuisine (with a sophisticated literature) and low cuisine; see also Garnsey (1999) 113–27 for more detailed discussion.

⁶ See Garnsey (1999) 82–99.

⁷ See Purcell (2003) on food and the Roman past; Lawrence (2005) 172–87 on Christian feasting and memory in 1 Corinthians; MacDonald (2008) 70–99 on food and memory in Jewish culture, with particular reference to Deuteronomy; both Lawrence and MacDonald draw on Sutton (2001), who gives an account of food and memory in modern Greek society; and for food and memory in French culture, see Barthes (1979) 170–1: ‘food permits a person . . . to partake each day of the national past . . . ; . . . food frequently carries notions of representing the survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized . . . ; . . . food brings the memory of the soil into our very contemporary life’ (170).

⁸ For overviews of ancient food, see Dalby (1996); Garnsey (1999); Wilkins and Hill (2006); also the very wide-ranging collection of essays in Longo and Scarpi (1987). For accounts of the way in which habits of eating and drinking have developed in distinctive ways in different cultures in the post-classical world, see (among many others) Farb and Armelagos (1980); Montanari (1994); Flandrin and Cobbi (1999); Bober (1999).

⁹ For that last point, see Gowers (1993), although she also acknowledges – see esp. 40–6, with reference to, among others, Bevan (1988) – the existence of links between food and text in modern European literature; cf. Jeanneret (1991) esp. 112–39 on a similar association in Renaissance table-talk texts.

¹⁰ Cf. Wilkins and Hill (2006) 20–1 for a similar claim about the importance of food for Greek and Roman culture and literature.

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from everything which follows. In addition, judgements about what kinds of eating and drinking behaviour were admirable or reprehensible were, not surprisingly, shaped by ethical and religious beliefs quite alien to modern culture. The idealisation of extreme fasting within early Christian culture is perhaps the most obvious example.¹¹ Ancient processes of food production and distribution were also vastly different from our own, and that too made a difference to the way in which certain types of food behaviour were valued. For example, chronic food shortage was a constant threat, and city dwellers in particular often relied heavily on the generosity of wealthy benefactors.¹² Luxurious feasting and largesse could thus signal and contribute to political influence, especially when it involved large-scale handouts to urban populations. At the same time, these things could also (especially in Roman culture) lay one open to moralising attack from rivals,¹³ and could risk transgression of ‘sumptuary laws’ which outlawed excessive expenditure, put in place ostensibly for moral reasons, but in practice also to prevent excessive political self-promotion by the rich.¹⁴

Perhaps most importantly of all, the *institutions* of eating and drinking, and the literary forms connected with them, were only very distant ancestors of our own, often far removed from anything within the bounds of present-day experience, partly through being tied to religious ritual: dinner meetings of professional associations and funeral clubs, sacrificial banquets where whole cities would feast together in celebration of the gods, communal citizen dining groups (*sysitia*) in the cities of archaic and classical Greece, most famously Sparta and Crete,¹⁵ and the institution of the Greek ‘symposium’ (drinking-party), whose influence on Greek elite society and Greek literature for many centuries was so enormous. The literature of the symposium generated some modern descendants, for example in the Renaissance table-talk genre, much of which imitates classical precedents,¹⁶ but even a quick glance at ancient sympotic poetry and sympotic miscellanies makes it clear that these texts are so closely bound up in their (to us) alien institutional setting that they may be difficult at first to understand or enjoy.

¹¹ See further discussion in chs. 11 and 12 below. ¹² See Garnsey (1988) and (1999), esp. 12–61.

¹³ On political abuse, see Edwards (1993), esp. 173–206.

¹⁴ On sumptuary laws as a response to Roman appropriation of Greek luxury and Greek gastronomic knowledge, see Wallace-Hadrill (2009) 315–55.

¹⁵ On Sparta, see Fisher (1989); on Crete, see Willetts (1955) 20–2 and 25–7.

¹⁶ E.g. Jeanneret (1991); and Cox (1992) on Renaissance dialogue more broadly; Burke (1993), esp. 89–122 on early modern manuals of conversation, many of them influenced by ancient sympotic writing; also Boehrer (1997) 42–79 on Renaissance rewritings of ancient convivial literature (especially Martial) in the work of Ben Jonson.

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The guiding argument for much of this book is that telling stories about eating and drinking, and about the conversation which accompanied those activities, was a way of conjuring up idealised images of community and identity (or in some cases images of aberrant or transgressive community). Modern western culture is familiar with similar techniques. However, it should also be clear, even from this brief introductory survey, that the fantasy visions of community and commensality many ancient texts present to us are in some ways quite alien to modern experience. It requires a certain amount of background knowledge, and a considerable leap of imagination, to begin to understand how they might have appealed to their original audiences.

GREEK SYMPOSIA AND SYMPOSIUM LITERATURE BEFORE ROME

Of all the institutions just mentioned, by far the most important for this book is the symposium. What exactly was the symposium? The Greek word – *symposion* – literally means ‘drinking together’. The roots of the institution lie in the archaic period, the eighth to sixth centuries BCE. In practice it must have taken many different forms in different contexts and locations, but there are recurring features. The symposium was a drinking party, held most often in private homes. It was a venue for elite, male sociability, sometimes even viewed as a politically subversive, anti-democratic space.¹⁷ The only women present would standardly have been courtesans (*hetairai*).¹⁸ It had established rules and elements of ritual: drinking usually followed a meal (*deipnon*), and was preceded by libations (offerings of wine to the gods), and led by a ‘symposiarch’ (leader of the symposium), chosen by the other guests, and responsible for supervising the mixture of wine with water and controlling the pace of drinking. The symposium was often represented as a typically civilised, Hellenic institution in contrast with the customs of barbarians who did not mix their wine with water. It was also often represented as a place for education of young men into their duties as citizens,¹⁹ sometimes also as a place

¹⁷ However, see Hunter (2004) 7 for debate on the question of how elitist the classical Athenian symposium really was, with reference to (among others) Fisher (2000) and Wilkins (2000a) 202–11, both of whom argue that the symposium was not such an exclusive space as many have assumed; and cf. Steiner (2002), who discusses the democratic institution of dinners at public expense, and shows how they have much in common with the elite culture of the symposium.

¹⁸ On *hetairai* at the symposia of classical Athens, see Davidson (1997) 91–7; for a challenge to the traditional view of gender inequality in the symposium, see Schmitt-Pantel (2003); for a survey of evidence for women’s commensality in the ancient world, see Burton (1998).

¹⁹ See Levine (1985) 178–80 for good examples from Theognis; and for Plato’s adaptation of that assumption in the *Laws*, see Tecusan (1990).

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for homosexual courtship of young men by older men.²⁰ The physical space of the Greek dining room (*andrôn* – literally ‘room for men’), as we know from its many surviving examples, was an intimate, inward-looking space. Standardly it consisted of either seven or eleven couches, each one long enough to hold two people reclining, arranged around three and a half sides of a square, leaving room for servants to enter on the fourth side.

The symposium could be a venue for musical entertainment provided by outside entertainers.²¹ Even more important, however, was the entertainment provided by the guests themselves, through singing and conversation. Symptotic talk and symptotic song, as they are represented in the literature of archaic and classical Greece, were thought of as shared, community-forming activities:

It is necessary, whenever we come together to such an occasion as friends, to laugh and play, while still displaying excellence, and to take pleasure in being together, and to joke with each other with mockery of the kind that brings laughter. But seriousness is necessary as well: let us listen to each other speaking in turn; for this is the mark of excellence in a symposium. (Adesp. el. 27, lines 3–8, *IEG*)²²

Different speakers would speak in turn, showing their poetic knowledge and poetic skills. Sometimes that might involve reference to earlier poetry, including quotation of famous passages from epic,²³ or reperformance of famous passages from earlier symptotic lyric. It was also a place for performance of new (in many cases improvised) lyric compositions.

The symposium in fact seems to have been the original performance venue for much of the surviving lyric and elegiac verse of the archaic and classical periods.²⁴ Much of this poetry is concerned with drinking or with love and sex.²⁵ Particularly common are exhortations to drink. Alcaeus

²⁰ However, see Bremmer (1990) on the waning in importance of love between older and younger men at the symposium at the end of the archaic period.

²¹ See Schäfer (1997), with a comprehensive survey of visual evidence.

²² See Halliwell (2008) 114–19 for brief discussion of this passage.

²³ Hence the important role played by martial themes in symptotic verse: ‘when performed in the aristocratic symposium martial exhortation poetry represents a type of heroic self-fashioning, an attempt to claim for its singers a status within a wider community equivalent to that of epic heroes’: see Irwin (2005) 19–62 (62 for this quotation), drawing on Bowie (1990).

²⁴ For general discussion of archaic and classical symptotic poetry, see (among many others) Vetta (1983); Bowie (1986) and (1990); Fabian, Pellizer and Tedeschi (1991); Stehle (1997) 213–61; Ford (2002) 25–45; Whitmarsh (2004) 56–66; Carey (2009) 32–8; see also Dupont (1999), esp. 21–100 for an attack on the tendency in modern scholarship to analyse symptotic lyric poems as texts to be read, rather than as faint textual traces of symptotic performance.

²⁵ See (among many others) Campbell (1983) 1–27 on love in Greek lyric, and 28–53 on wine.

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in particular had a reputation for returning to that theme over and over again.²⁶

Let's drink! Why do we wait for the lamps? There is only a finger of daylight remaining. Bring down the large cups, my friend, the decorated ones; for the son of Semele and Zeus gave wine to men to help them forget their worries. Mix one part of water to two of wine, pour it in up to the brim, and let one cup push aside the next . . . (Alcaeus fr. 346)

The exhortation to drink is addressed in part to the singer's fellow symposiasts, but it also appeals, like so much sympotic verse, to a sense of fantasy, inviting the listeners to imagine themselves momentarily into an idealised moment of sympotic companionship removed from the one in which they find themselves.²⁷ Other collections of material, like the verses ascribed to Theognis²⁸ and Anacreon,²⁹ combine that theme with exhortations to moderation which anticipate the philosophical preference for sympotic moderation in later centuries, as in the following passage from Theognis: 'There are two fates, in drinking, for wretched mortals, limb-loosening thirst and harsh drunkenness. I shall steer in the middle of these two, and you will not persuade me either to drink nothing or to drink too much' (Theognis 837–40). That passage characteristically acts as a display of literary ingenuity, with its reference to the two fates of Achilles from *Iliad* 9.410–16, uniting the singer and his audience by their shared, effortless appreciation of a canonical body of earlier poetry.

Proper behaviour in the symposium – and especially in the conversational exchanges of the symposium – was viewed as something which needed careful attention. That attitude, too, reflected the idea that attending the symposium was a way of enacting membership of a community, united by shared sympotic ethics. Much of the surviving sympotic poetry we have is highly self-reflexive, not only in the sense that it describes the act of drinking, but also in the sense that it sets out rules for proper sympotic behaviour and sympotic talk at considerable length, like the passage quoted above ('It is necessary, whenever we come together . . .').³⁰ That self-reflexiveness is echoed in the art of the symposium, which survives widely

²⁶ See Campbell (1983) 30–4.

²⁷ Cf. Halliwell (2008) 117: 'The ideal symposium is a dream, even a hallucination, of perfection'.

²⁸ See Campbell (1983) 41–7.

²⁹ See Campbell (1983) 36–9; Budelmann (2009).

³⁰ The most commonly cited example of self-reflexive sympotic verse is Xenophanes 1, but a better example for our purposes here is Theognis 467–96, which gives much more detailed discussion about what kinds of speech are appropriate. For the general theme, see also (in addition to many of the general studies of sympotic lyric already quoted) Bielohlawek (1940); also W. J. Slater (1990) on the *Odyssey* as a poem concerned with sympotic ethics, with useful parallels from later poetry.

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Figure 1.1 Red-figured *kylix* showing boys serving wine, painted by Douris; c. 485 to 480 BCE.

in classical Athenian vase paintings, and which characteristically depicts sympotic scenes. Figure 1.1, dating probably from around 480 BCE, is a typical example, where the user is invited to compare his own current drinking activity with what he sees on the cup. Some scenes of this type offer an idealised picture of sympotic pleasure. Others, however, throw a humorously unflattering light on the activities the drinkers themselves are engaged in, for example by showing drunken or even bestial behaviour.³¹ The tradition of the literary symposium is similarly saturated with examples of insulting speech and drunken excess, which sail close to the boundaries of civility, and in some cases transgress them.³² We should not imagine that these kinds of behaviour were always a part of the elite symposium. However, ancient symposiasts often seem to have been interested in flirting with unacceptable, excessive behaviour, even while for the most part showing a carefully judged ability to stay just on the right side of the line. Often sympotic speech was marked by an atmosphere of *spoudogeloion*

³¹ See Lissarrague (1990), esp. 87–106 and (1992); also Dentzer (1982).

³² On the constant risk of violence in the symposium, see Collins (2004) 70–83.

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(seriocomic),³³ and ancient symposiasts often indulged in light-hearted mutual criticism ('mockery of the kind that brings laughter'),³⁴ and competitive capping of each others' speech.³⁵ Teasing was, in fact, a way of performing and questioning elite identity. It was a standard way of acting out a sense of community: it implied a set of shared values held in common by all those who joined in with the laughter, including even, potentially, the object of mockery, who might seek to maintain face by directing teasing in turn against his original tormentor. It could also presumably be used more cruelly and coercively in order to direct scrutiny against those who fell short of the unwritten rules of elite belonging, all the more effectively so for its superficial light-heartedness.³⁶

The final scenes of Aristophanes' *Wasps* offer a wonderful example of sympotic behaviour which tests the boundaries of propriety.³⁷ There Philokleon, an old man obsessed with serving as a jury member, is persuaded by his son Bdelykleon to attend a symposium, as a way of taking his mind away from the law-courts. In 1122–263, Philokleon initially expresses his reluctance to get involved in drinking and to wear fashionable clothing, but he eventually submits to Bdelykleon's attempts to teach him the basics of smart sympotic manners: for example, how to recline – 'stretch out your knees and throw yourself down athletically and languidly on the covers' (1212–13) – and how to deal with the *skolion* game (1222–49), a common feature of the symposium, where every symposiast would sing in turn, each one trying to cap the previous contribution.³⁸ In the final scene (1292–537), after the party has broken up, Philokleon's slave Xanthias describes his misbehaviour: 'in this way he insulted each of them in turn, mocking them boorishly and also telling stories, in the most ignorant fashion, which were not appropriate to the occasion' (1319–21). Philokleon himself then comes on stage in a state of extreme drunkenness and accompanied by a flute-girl. On one level Philokleon's behaviour clearly goes too far, as Xanthias' account implies. However, there are also hints – for example in his instant mastery of the insulting potential of the *skolion*

³³ See Collins (2004), esp. 63–83; Hunter (2004) 9–11; and Hermogenes, *On Method* 36 (Rabe (1913) 454) for ancient theorisation of the importance of this characteristic for sympotic writing in the tradition of Xenophon and Plato.

³⁴ Adesp. el. 27, *IEG*, quoted at more length above.

³⁵ Good recent discussions include Collins (2004) 63–163 and Hesk (2007).

³⁶ See Pellizer (1990); Whitmarsh (2004) 54–5; and cf. Plutarch, *Sympotic Questions* 2.1 for debate on what kinds of teasing are appropriate to the symposium, discussed further in ch. 3, below; see also Halliwell (1991) 291 on the way in which laughter is expected and sanctioned within the symposium, and viewed therefore as inconsequential, but also with the constant danger that it will transgress acceptable norms; and on laughter in the symposium generally see Halliwell (2008), esp. 100–54.

³⁷ See esp. Pütz (2007) 83–103 for wide-ranging discussion of this scene.

³⁸ On this scene as evidence for the *skolion* game, see Collins (2004) 99–110 and Hesk (2007) 130–1.