REVIEW ARTICLES

Xenophon at Play

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A.J. Bowen, *Xenophon: Symposium*, Warminster, England: Aris and Phillips, 1998. 146 pp. ISBN 0 85 668 681 6.

B. Huß, *Xenophons Symposion: Ein Kommentar*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde Bd. 125, Stuttgart and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1999. 493 pp. ISBN 3519 0767 48.

Studies of the Greek symposium have blossomed over the last two decades, precisely at the time that Xenophon's literary reputation has enjoyed a considerable upswing. In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable that more than one book on Xenophon's *Symposium* should have appeared in recent years. The *Symposium* is a charming work, playful but not without substance. While Xenophon, as always, has a pedagogical aim in composing the work (see 1. 1), here he wears his didacticism lightly, portraying Socrates and his fellow symposiasts in an entertaining and illuminating way. The cast of characters found at the party given by the notoriously wealthy Callias is varied. There is the young, athletic, and beautiful Autolycos, courted by Callias; his father (and chaperon) Lycon; Nicias' son Niceratos; Crito's son Critobulus; Charmides; the pious Hermogenes; the argumentative Antisthenes; and, of course, Socrates. We also find in the *Symposium* a troupe of entertainers, led by a Syracusan impresario, and an uninvited guest, the comedian Philippus. The work seems to be a casually linked series of episodes, but is, in fact, carefully structured. Discussions held by Callias and his guests alternate with performances by the professional troupe. The post-prandial conversation is lively, even dialectical at times, and ranges over such varied topics as the capabilities of women, the practical lessons to be learned from Homer, and the uses of wealth, to name just a few. Eros —

its power and pleasures — is a strong undercurrent throughout the work, and we hear of a series of homosexual and heterosexual attachments.

Background descriptions are of great importance in literary symposia and our *Symposium* is no exception. In his narrated dialogue, Xenophon includes a great deal more than talk. He depicts the setting, sights, and sounds of the party, and describes the professional entertainments at considerable length. We are also privy to the reactions and thoughts of the party's participants. This makes us feel — rightly or wrongly — that we are being shown a slice of Greek life, and are virtually present at the home of a wealthy Athenian towards the end of the fifth century BCE.

The Socrates of Xenophon's *Symposium* is an attractive figure, the liveliest portrayal of the philosopher to be found in all of Xenophon's Socratic works. He is flanked by two would-be imitators, the rigid and rude Antisthenes who is proud of his ascetic lifestyle and interrogatory powers, and the pious Hermogenes who is guided in life by his good friends, the gods. We appreciate Socrates all the more when we contrast him with these two: the philosopher is less contentious than Antisthenes and more open-minded than the somber and self-satisfied Hermogenes. Urbane, mild-mannered, but quick-witted, Socrates of the *Symposium* is, as his fellow-guest Lycon admiringly notes (9. 1), a true *kalos kagathos*. We see the philosopher — and Xenophon — at the height of his powers when he competes with Critobulus in a beauty contest. The competition (ch. 5), conducted in mock-judicial form, is a delight. Socrates attempts to demonstrate that his protruding eyes, thick lips, and flaring nostrils are much more useful for seeing, kissing, and smelling than the classically beautiful features of Critobulus, and consequently are more attractive. Critobulus does not argue; he simply settles the question by having the judges look at him in the light. This scene is an exemplary instance of *spoudaiogeloion*, couching a serious argument about utilitarianism and the beauty of form adapted to function, in playful terms. In another noteworthy passage, Socrates asserts that he prides himself on his ability as a procurer. He establishes his startling claim by conducting a cross-examination which verges on a parody of the Socratic method (4. 56 ff.): a chorus of respondents automatically respond to each of Socrates' questions with the standard Platonic assent 'yes, indeed' (πάνυ μὲν οὖν), even after the philosopher has stopped asking 'yes or no' questions. No one who reads the *Symposium* can doubt that Xenophon had a sense of fun and irony, whatever his tone in his other works.

Plato's shadow lies heavy over all of Xenophon's Socratic dialogues: it is virtually impossible for us to read any of Xenophon's philosophical compositions without comparing them to the (superior) dialogues of Plato. In the

case of the *Symposium*, Plato's work of the same name is a particularly strong presence, often obscuring or undermining many of the merits of Xenophon's composition. The two Socratic dialogues share a sympotic setting, a competitive round of speeches, and extensive analyses of the workings of eros, and the exact relationship between the two *Symposiums* has given rise to much scholarly discussion. Chapter 8 of Xenophon's work seems particularly influenced by Plato, but theories on the relationship between the two dialogues can be more complex. An influential argument by Thesleff (*BICS* 1978) alleges that Xenophon wrote a *Symposium* before Plato, inspiring the latter to compose one of his own. Xenophon then supposedly produced the final version of his work after absorbing, in turn, Platonic elements.

While the comparison with Plato's *Symposium* cannot be ignored — such questions are the bread and butter of classical scholarhip — Xenophon's work deserves a careful reading in its own right. There are many points in his dialogue which need to be explicated or clarified, beginning with the very opening of the work. Why does Xenophon start off his composition with the abrupt ἀλλά? Is he really claiming to have been present at the party he describes, when as the ancients already noted (Athenaeus 5. 216d), he must have been no more than a youngster in 422, the dramatic date of the party? Should Autolycus' father Lycon be identified with the homonymous prosecutor of Socrates? Ideally, a good commentary on Xenophon's *Symposium* should do what Xenophon avows is his aim in his work and combine seriousness with playfulness: that is to say, feed us digestible bits of useful, didactic information without allowing us to lose sight of the charms of the composition.

The two volumes under review are both commentaries on the *Symposium*, but are very different in scope, approach, and intended audiences. The book by Bowen (B.) is in the increasingly popular Aris and Phillips series, and has an introduction, Greek text and facing English translation, commentary, and indices. The lemmata of the commentary are in Greek as well as English: comments keyed to the Greek text are chiefly linguistic, meant to aid the beginning student in understanding Xenophon's language, while the other notes deal with historical and cultural matters. Unusually for the series, Bowen includes a Greek-English vocabulary as well. While it is undoubtedly useful for readers to have text, commentary, and mini-dictionary in a single volume, the Greek-English vocabulary supplied by B. is perhaps the wrong kind of help, for the entries are not in the standard format of the intermediate Liddell-Scott lexicon which students normally use. Verbs, for instance, are

listed in the infinitive form and nouns often appear without their gender or genitive. Parts of speech are not distinguished.

B.'s introduction is disappointing. He first tells of Xenophon's life (1-6), and then briefly (and somewhat inaccurately) summarizes Xen.'s varied literary output and earlier models for his work (4-5). B. sees the exiled Xenophon as writing chiefly in order to win attention back in Athens. Next comes a running synopsis of the *Symposium* (5-7), followed by a short and unsatisfactory discussion of the Socratic writings of Xenophon and his contemporaries (7-10), including the inevitable comparison with Plato's *Symposium*. B. accepts Thesleff's suggestion of a two-stage, pre- and post- Platonic composition by Xenophon (see too 19). This is followed by a discussion of the *dramatis personae* of the Symposium (10-14), in which B. interweaves the historical evidence for these figures with the role they play in Xen.'s work. He concludes (14) that 'both in their characters and in their circumstances Xenophon seems to present his cast as they were'. On the whole, B. does not distinguish between fact and fiction in the *Symposium* and treats Callias' gathering as if it were simply an actual, historical symposium, described by Xenophon many years later. And so, for example, when commenting on Callias' spontaneous invitation to Socrates and his friends to join his party, at the opening of the work, B. finds it odd that Callias 'was relying on chance encounters to make up what is virtually Autolykos' coming-of-age party' (89), and does not allow for the possibility that it is Xenophon who is responsible for the guest list and the 'chance' meeting between Socrates and Callias. The assumption that Xenophon is reporting upon an actual party that took place makes matters simpler for the commentator. He need not puzzle over the choice of guests and the reason for their appearance in the work. B. is also relatively uninterested in the character of Socrates and his relation to the historical figure. He sees (8) Xenophon as successfully depicting 'a man of earthy moral shrewdness and an uncommon sense of justice'.

The next section of B.'s introduction deals helpfully with the social customs and attitudes underlying a symposium in classical Athens (14-16), and includes an interesting, too-brief note (n. 57) on the variety of relationships between males found in the *Symp*. This is followed by an analysis of Xen.'s literary style and vocabulary (16-18). The final section of the introduction is a look — brief and somewhat idiosyncratic — at the literary qualities of Xen.'s work (19).

Matters improve considerably when we turn to B.'s translation and commentary. The translation is readable and accurate, and the commentary is generally helpful in both linguistic and general matters. B. pays careful

attention to aspect and tense, *particulae*, and *hapax legomena*, and clarifies matters of syntax. At times, though, his syntactic explanations are too succinct and need to be unpacked by the reader. There is a wealth of useful information on the historical and social background, as well as material culture. B. also has, at times, perceptive notes on more literary matters, but such piecemeal comments are not enough to convey the flavor of Xenophon's literary artistry. A student who does not, for example, appreciate the niceties of the beauty contest on his own will not be sufficiently enlightened by B., who does not include general introductions to the various chapters and their chief subsections. If B. sees as the aim of his edition 'both to consolidate linguistic control and to enlarge the sense of Greek culture' (vii), he has succeeded. It is a shame that his readers will not emerge with a greater appreciation of Xenophon the writer as well.

Huß' work is a massive 493-page volume, based on his Munich dissertation, and is clearly aimed at a more knowledgeable readership of advanced students and professional classicists. The book includes an introduction, running commentary, and two appendices (listing parallels between Xen.'s *Symposium* and the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* of Plato), as well as an index rerum and extensive bibliography. The lemmata are keyed to the Greek text and the commentary on each chapter is prefaced by a brief discussion of the content and key issues of the chapter as a whole.

The introduction begins with a preface (11-12), briefly setting out H.'s overall approach to the *Symp.* and acknowledging his debt to Olof Gigon's work on the Socratics. H. then turns to the date of the *Symp.* (13-18), dismantling Thesleff's thesis, and arguing for echoes of Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Phaedrus* as well as his *Symp.* in Xen.'s composition. This means that H. assigns a late date, after 365 BCE, to the work. H. sees the *Symp.* as a 'pastiche', i.e. rich in allusions to contemporary literature, and he looks at intertextuality in each chapter of the *Symp.* (18-25), finding echoes of a wide range of works by writers of old comedy, Plato, Aeschines, and Antisthenes. The remains of the latter two authors are, of course, fragmentary, and this means that H. is often speculative here, postulating the influence of largely lost texts. H. sees Xenophon as the first of the *literary* Socratics, well versed in earlier depictions of the philosopher, but with no philosophical interest of his own. His conclusion (25) is that the *Symp.* is 'ein rein literarisches, fiktionales, eklektisches Werk'. This leads naturally into a discussion of Xen.'s portrayal of Socrates. The Socrates of the *Symp.* is not — and is not intended to be — a reflection of the historical figure, according to H. He is a literary creation, doubly removed from the actual flesh and blood figure, because he is based on the image of the philosopher found in earlier Socratic

writings. Socrates is, H. notes, also a typical Xenophontic hero, demonstrating the same ideal behavior and moral attitudes as those displayed by Agesilaus of the *Agesilaus*, Cyrus the Great of the *Cyropedia* etc. (25-9). Perhaps justifiably, H. does not attempt to link these two claims and an intriguing crux — why are all of Xenophon's heroes so similar to Socrates? — remains unresolved. Less understandable is H.'s seeming reluctance to allow that Xenophon's own personal acquaintance with Socrates may also have played a part in the fabrication of the latter's literary persona.

The next section of H.'s introduction (30-7) deals with the structure and overall composition of the *Symp.* H. contends that the *Symp.* is carefully planned and illustrates this claim, perhaps too briefly, by surveying two features found throughout the work: the leitmotif of *eros* and the use of *spoudaiogeloion*, the blending or alternation of serious and playful elements. He then (38-49) points to the conciliatory atmosphere of the *Symp.*, intended to dispel or rewrite gloomy historical realities at a time when Xenophon was re-establishing good relations with his native Athens. Since H. thinks the symposium is pure fiction, he must explain Xen.'s choice of characters for the party, and he acquits himself admirably. Interestingly, he notes that both victims of — and partners in — the misdeeds of the Thirty join together happily at this party held during the *aurea aetas Socratica* imagined by Xenophon. Socrates himself is shown educating the young rather than corrupting them. Indeed, H. argues that Lycon of the *Symp.* is, in fact, Socrates' accuser (compare B.'s introduction 10 n. 32), so that we find the philosopher acting as a model of behavior for the son of his (future) prosecutor. Next comes a brief characterization of Xenophon's readers (49-51): H., like B., thinks that Xenophon wrote first and foremost for an Athenian audience. The *Symp.* provides a greal deal of evidence for actual sympotic practices in classical Athens and in his next section (51-5), H. discusses the symposium as a cultural and historical institution, briefly tracing the change in its function over the archaic, classical and Hellenistic periods. The final section of the introduction (55-9) deals with the transmission of the text and utilizes the recent work of Cirignano. The book is beautifully printed, with an attractive Greek font, and my only reservation concerns the decision to include only transliterated Greek in the introduction.

Huß' scholarship is broad, wide-ranging, and impressive. In a typical comment on a given passage, he includes several pertinent citations from a wide variety of ancient sources along with a survey of the chief relevant bits of modern scholarship over the last century (or even the last several centuries!). Some notes serve as a very full apparatus criticus to the text, while others investigate the linguistic, historical, cultural and literary aspects of the

work. Virtually every word or phrase of the *Symp.* merits a comment of some kind. The introductions to each chapter are good. Particularly attractive is his analysis of the riddling boasts made by the various symposiasts in chs. 3 and 4 (175-6, 203). H. point out that each speaker paradoxically prides himself on a quality one would normally assign to another member of the party with e.g Antisthenes (not Callias) boasting of his wealth, and Callias (not Socrates) proclaiming his ability to make people better. H.'s interpretation of ch. 6 (332 ff.), on the other hand, seems too benign. The darker undercurrents and tensions, the unpleasant rivalries between the various symposiasts have been smoothed over by H. and consequently are not explained. If at first sight the thoroughness and sheer volume of H.'s notes are somewhat daunting, his comments are almost invariably easy to read and enlightening. It is also convenient to have a vast array of modern — and not so modern — scholarship surveyed and annotated in this fashion. H.'s book demonstrates that a thorough and very full commentary can be anything but tedious or verbose.

The two commentaries by B. and H. are, then, as different in their approach to — and appreciation of — the *Symp.* as they are in length and format. It is tempting to argue for a middle ground between H.'s totally fictional party and personages and B.'s historical figures. While it is very likely that Callias' symposium never took place, Xenophon *was* acquainted with some of the real-life characters featured in his work, and he may have used these actual people as the basis for their portrayal, even while lending them a fictional quality or two. Ending with a bit of a *spoudaiogeloion*, we might ask ourselves which of the two commentaries Xenophon himself would have preferred. B. has something of Xenophon's practical, pedagogical manner, as he sets beginners on the right path towards mastering a staple of Greek literature. H. is more thoughtful, more leisurely, and more enlightening.

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