13. EXPELLING THE MIND:
POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY IN FLAVIAN ROME

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pius, fortis, fidelis, ex paruo creuit, sestertium reliquit trecenties, nec umquam philosophum audiiuit.

(Petronius, Satyricon 71)

Conscious of duty, courageous, trustworthy, he started with little, left thirty million, and never let a philosopher tell him what to do.

Alexandria Quartet

When Vespasian was at Alexandria, preparing to set out for Rome and the imperial destiny towards which the gods of Judaea and Egypt were summoning him,¹ he is said to have conversed in his palace with three philosophers: Apollonius of Tyana, Dio Chrysostom and Euphrates.² Vespasian muses on how the shortcomings of his predecessors have brought the principate into disrepute and asks for advice on how to wield power effectively and fairly. Both Euphrates and Dio suggest a restoration of power to the people—Euphrates through the establishment of a democratic form of government, Dio through a referendum by which the people could choose what form of government they desired.³ Apollonius rejects these suggestions as impractical; it is the kind of advice one might expect a philosopher to accept, but not an ambitious politician who has already put plans in operation to acquire the most powerful office in the world. Instead he gives practical advice on how Vespasian should conduct himself and his government once he has gained his objective, advice that,

¹ For the god of the Jews see the prophecy delivered from Mount Carmel (Tac. Hist. 2.78; Suet. Vesp. 5; cf. also Joseph. BJ 3.8.9, 4.11.7, 6.6.4); for the gods of Egypt, Tac. Hist. 4.81–3; Suet. Vesp. 7.
² The story is narrated in Philostr. V1 5.27–37.
³ This is not therefore a rerun of the ‘ideal constitution’ discussions that we get at Hdt. 3.80–2, Cic. Rep. 1.65–9 and elsewhere; contra Moles (1978) 83.
composed with the advantage of authorial hindsight, the historical record shows largely to have been followed. Euphrates and Dio are discredited; but that is not the end of the story. Apollonius will not take up Vespasian’s offer to become his philosophic adviser through anger at his decision to rescind Nero’s declaration of independence for Greece.4

So Philostratus begins his writing of Flavian Rome.5 Ever since Plato developed the idea of the philosopher-ruler and set up the Academy as a school for statesmen, the relationship between philosophy and government had been problematic; a signal example is Plato’s own thorny relationship with the tyrannos of Syracuse. The conversation at Alexandria sets up the possibility that this new reign will be one of those rare moments where there is fruitful dialogue between philosopher and princeps. But such is not to be. As the positions advanced by Euphrates and Dio Chrysostom in Philostratus’ narrative show, philosophy has dangerously democratic tendencies.6 Such pockets of resistance cannot be accommodated in the principate; Greece cannot be allowed to remain free, and philosophy must be firmly put in its place. The tone of the dynasty is set; one of Vespasian’s first acts on returning to Rome is to expel the philosophers:

καὶ πάντας αὐτίκα τοὺς φιλοσόφους ὁ Οὔσεππασιανός, πλῆν τοῦ Μυσονίου, ἐκ τῆς Ῥώμης έξέβαλε, τὸν δὲ δὴ Δημήτριον καὶ τὸν Ὄστιλιανόν καὶ ἔς νήσους κατέκλεισε.

(Cassius Dio, Roman History 65.11.2)

And Vespasian at once expelled all the philosophers from Rome, with the exception of Musonius, and he even confined Demetrius and Hostilianus to islands.

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5 The episode is normally regarded as fictitious: cf. Moles (1978) 83; Bowie (1978) 1660–2; Anderson (1986) 179; Rawson (1989) 248. On the other hand, as Bowersock (1970) 19, points out, such a meeting is chronologically possible. I use it here, as Philostratus did, to adumbrate important themes in the relation between philosopher and ruler in the Flavian era; in that respect its historicity is irrelevant.
6 Cf. Cass. Dio 64.12.2, where ‘praising democracy’ is listed as one of the elder Helvidius’ faults.