CHAPTER 6

On Problemata 3: Wine-Drinking and Drunkenness

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1 The Peripatetic Background

The drinking of wine and drunkenness was a topic of interest among the early Peripatetics. Diogenes Laertius’ catalogue of Aristotelian writings contains the title Symposium (5.22). It comes tenth among the dialogues, with which the catalogue begins. An alternative title, On Drunkenness, is used by Athenaeus to refer to the same work.1 Indeed, the work may have carried the double title Symposium or On Drunkenness.2 Theophrastus too wrote a work entitled On Drunkenness. It is listed in Diogenes’ catalogue of Theophrastean writings (5.44) and was used by Athenaeus, with and without title.3 Like the Aristotelian work, that of Theophrastus will have been a dialogue.4 In addition, both Hieronymous and Chamaeleon are reported to have written works that carried the title On Drunkenness. The work of the former is cited twice by Athenaeus,5 and that of the latter twice by Athenaeus and once by Clement of Alexandria.6 Most likely these works as well were dialogues. In all four works,
the conversation will have been presented as taking place at a symposium. A variety of topics were discussed: not only drinking mixed and unmixed wine, sobriety and drunkenness, but also the games and rituals that took place during symposia, lexical issues related to drinking and drunkenness, legislation intended to control drinking and the physiological consequences of drinking, both good and bad. In regard to good consequences, one thinks of drinking as a way to relieve the despondency of old age, and in regard to bad consequences one might cite a loss of sexual drive due to heavy drinking.7

Given such a variety of topics, it would be unreasonable to believe that the dialogue format had an exclusive claim on discussions of drinking and drunkenness. An ethical treatise (an esoteric work used in teaching within the Peripatos) might consider the behavioral consequences of heavy drinking, and a political treatise might suggest legislation intended to curb excess. A lexicon might list words that are either peculiar to the use of wine or acquire a special meaning when used in regard to heavy drinking. And a scientific treatise focusing on human physiology might have much to say about the effects of drunkenness. An example of the last is our special concern: namely, Book 3 of the pseudo-Aristotelian work entitled Φυσικὰ προβλήματα (Physical Problems). The heading to Book 3 runs: “Ὅσα περὶ οἰνοποσίαν καὶ μέθην, “Those [Problems] Which Concern Wine-drinking and Drunkenness.” Taken by itself, the heading might be thought to open the door to a variety of issues, ethical, political, lexical, etc., all dealing with wine and drunkenness. But on the whole that is not what we find in Pr. 3. The focus is on physiology as might be expected when one keeps in mind the title of the work, i.e., Physical Problems. In the heading to Pr. 3, the relative ὅσα connects with the title Φυσικὰ προβλήματα,8 and that limits the range of topics that will be discussed.

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7 Regarding the variety of topics discussed in the Theophrastean work, see Fortenbaugh (2011, 223).

8 That προβλήματα is to be understood with ὅσα seems to me quite certain. It should, however, be noted that in several manuscripts including the earliest and best (codex Parisinus 2036), the connection between the title Φυσικὰ προβλήματα and the first problem (introduced by ὅσα) is not immediate. The phrase κατ’ εἶδος συναγωγῆς comes between the two. In my judgment, the phrase is a descriptive addition and not to be construed as part of the title. For discussion see Fortenbaugh (2013, 81–82 n. 40).