STATESMANSHIP IN A MINOR KEY?

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Plutarch’s *An seni respublica gerenda sit* and *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* are rightly prized as giving a rare insider’s view of day-to-day politics in the Greek cities of the Roman Empire. Two aspects in particular have attracted special comment: Plutarch’s insistence on the need always to remember the presence of Roman authority, with its over-riding concern for civic order, on the one hand; and on the other, his “Machiavellian” readiness to countenance collusion within the political class, and the stage-management of public debate.

My concern in this paper, however, in keeping with the overall theme of this volume, is with the idea and ideal of statesmanship embodied in the two treatises, and with how one might seek to relate it to political ideology in Plutarch’s day more generally. A great deal of interesting work has been done over the last few decades on the politics and political theorizing of the Imperial period. The themes of euergetism, the competitive pursuit of honour, the assertion of class identity and the defence of privilege have emerged as central to our understanding of the dynamics of civic life and civic administration. It seems a good idea to manoeuvre Plutarch’s two texts into some part at least of this theoretical territory, in order see what might emerge.

The reference in my title to “a minor key” picks out what I take to be a fairly uncontroversial point about the frame of reference within which Plutarch chooses to operate in the *An seni* and the *Praecepta*. In both texts, the role he envisages and recommends for the *politeuomenos*, the man engaged with the business of the city, is in one way or another

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2 Relations with and attitudes to Rome are the main theme for Jones and Swain; the “Machiavellian” label is referred by Desideri (1986) 375 to the disenchanted analysis of Carrière (1977) 240.

avowedly circumscribed. This is wholly explicit in the Praecepta, with its reminder of the constant looming presence of the Roman governor and his troops, and of the inescapable truth that the old heroic days of glory, and of deadly risk, are gone for ever.⁴ The same message is subtly conveyed also in the treatise’s noticeably diminuendo conclusion. In the very last image, Plutarch compares the proper conduct of personal disputes, in and out of the lawcourts, with the use of padded boxing-gloves for training in the palaestra (in contrast, implicitly, to the leather thongs used for real bouts in Greek boxing and the metal-studded caestus of the Roman arena).⁵ Although this image has overtly a specific, limited reference, its positioning, and its coherence with a larger system of imagery (of athletic competition for political activity),⁶ make it easy to take as a more general verdict on the scope of contemporary politics: these days the button never comes off the foil, it’s all shadow-boxing.

The Praecepta are addressed to a young (or young-ish) man, on the verge of entering public life; we may easily imagine that his juvenile enthusiasm and declamation-fed view of political action need to be damped down in this way by the sober realism of an older hand. The An seni, from one older hand to another, is understandably more upbeat, centred on the insistence that both the state and the individual politikos stand to benefit if he resists the temptation to retire too early. This overall tone too seems to be reproduced in the text’s concluding image. Old herms, says Plutarch (meaning herms with older features rather than those made long ago), are shown “without hands or feet, but with their private parts stiff”; this, he claims, “hints at” (i.e. represents allegorically) the truth that older men are valuable not for their physical but for their mental prowess.⁷ The overt message here (as allegorically deciphered) is irreproachably respectable; but I wonder if the sexual reference can be entirely reduced to virtuous metaphor, especially as Plutarch himself blurs the dividing line by using the sexually significant words ἐνεργός (“active”) and γόνιμος (“fertile”, “potent”) to characterize the continuing mental vigour of the elderly. There is something here, I think, of two old timers casting youthful claims to superior potency back in their makers’ faces, in what is, on any account, a happy, confident ending. And yet, when the treatise is taken as a whole,

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⁴ Praec. 813D–814C.
⁵ Praec. 825EF.
⁶ Cf. 804B–C, 804D, An seni 783B, 785D, 786F, 793F.
⁷ An seni 797F.