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The Aesthetics of Plutarch's Concept of Mimesis

Plutarch's treatment of mimesis focuses on the perception of art rather than on the process of artistic production. Thus the role of the audience and its response looms large. A striking element in Plutarch's discussions pertaining to artistic mimesis is the prevalence of the notion of contemplation (*theorein*), as well as the ubiquity of the spectator (*theates*). *Theorein* and its cognates, which occur repeatedly in association with *mimesis*, focus attention on the role of the senses in the viewer's apprehension of a representation. The essential quality of a mimetic product for Plutarch lies in its being a thing perceived (*aestheta mimemata*, in *de Tranquillitate*).

As Plato does, Plutarch also evaluates mimesis in epistemological terms. The viewer's experience of artistic representation in Plutarch occurs through sensory faculties as opposed to the cognitive. The apprehension through the senses is judged to be an inferior form of perception. Thus, in the preface to *Pericles*, a passage yielding rich readings, *mimesis* is posed in opposition to scientific inquiry (*historia*). The spectator (*theates*) is not changed by viewing the representation (*mimesis*) of the Good, but by engaging his intellect upon the representation.

In this respect, Plutarch differs from Aristotle for whom the senses and the image partake of the intellectual process of decision-making (*de Anima*). Plutarch's *Quaestiones Convivales* 5.1. addresses the same question as found in Aristotle's *Poetics* 4. 1448b, namely why one enjoys viewing representations (*mimoumena*) of painful subjects. Whereas for Aristotle the enjoyment is based on cognitive understanding, for Plutarch, the viewer's reaction is characterized by instinct. Similarly, Plutarch's use of the Aristotelian concept of *enargeia* in reference to mimesis (in *bellone pace*) is devoid of the rational element so crucial in Aristotle.

Lastly, the paper discusses how the concept of mimesis provides the framework for the interaction between the statesman and the *demos* in the *Political Precepts*. The fact that the *demos*, always lacking reason in Plutarch's conception, stands in the same relationship as the viewer (*theates*) of an artistic representation, reinforces the point that for Plutarch the aesthetic experience of mimesis is a lower form of cognition. The workings of Plutarch's aesthetic mimesis, with its appeal to sense-perception, is apt for illustrating the way in which the *demos* can be reached.