Between Seriousness and Play
Imperial Platonic Readings of the Aristotelian Natural Problems (Plutarch, Taurus, Apuleius)
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Text 1: Plu., OC 8, 10 (Clement – Hoffleit)
Προβλήμασιν Aristotelóων φυσικοίς εντυγχάνων Φλώρος εἰς Θερμοπύλας κομισθεῖσιν αὐτός
τε πολλῶν ἀποριῶν, ὅπερ εἰσόδησα πάσχειν ἐπεικίς αἱ φυλόσοφοι φύσεις, ὑπεπήμπλατο καὶ τοῖς
ἐταίροις μετείδισθον, μαρτυρῶν αὐτός τῷ Ἀριστοτέλει λέγοντι τὴν πολυμάθειαν πολλὰς ἄρχας
ποιεῖν. τὰ μὲν οὖν ἅλλα μὲν ἢμεράν οὐκ ἤχαρον ἢμιν ἐν τοῖς περίπτωσις διατηρήθην παρέσχεν τὸ
dὲ λεγόμενον περὶ τῶν ὑπονικίων, ἢς ἐστὶν ἄβεβαια καὶ γευθῇ μάλιστα περὶ τοὺς φυλόσοφους
μήνας, οὐκ οἴοδ᾽ ὡς ἐφ᾽ ἔτερος λόγος πραγματευσμένον τοῦ Φαβορίνου μετὰ τὸ δεύτερον
ἀνέκυψαν. Τοῖς μὲν οὖν σοις ἐταίροις ἐμὸς δ᾽ ήθος ἔδοκε λελυκέναι τὴν ἀπορίαν Ἀριστοτέλης,
καὶ οὔδὲν ψόντο δεῖν ζητεῖν οὐδὲ λέγειν ἄλλ᾽ ἣ τοὺς καρποὺς, ὡσπερ εἰκεῖνος, αἰτιάθηαι. Κτλ.

Florus, who was engaged in reading a copy of Aristotle’s Natural Problems that had been brought
to Thermopylae, was himself full of questions, as is natural for a philosophical spirit, and shared
them with his friends too, proving Aristotle’s own statement that “great learning gives many
starting-points.” Most of the questions raised provided us with a pleasant pastime during our
daytime walks; but the common saying about dreams – that they are especially likely to be
unreliable or false in the fall months – somehow came up after dinner, after Favorinus had
finished a discourse on other topics. Your friends, my sons, thought that Aristotle had solved
the problem, and that there was no point in any further inquiry or discussion, except to say, as he
had, that the harvest is to blame. Etc.

Text 2: Gell., N4 19, 6 (Rolfe)
Quod pudor sanguinem ad extera diffundit, timor vero contrahit.
In Problemati Aristotelis philosophi ita scriptum est: Διὰ τί οἱ μὲν αἰσχύνομένοι ἐρυθρωσάν, οἱ
dὲ φοβούμενοι οὐρωσάν, παραπληθόν τῶν παθῶν άντον; ὅτι τῶν μὲν αἰσχυνομένων διαχέεται
tὸ αἷμα ἐκ τῆς καρδίας εἰς ἀπαντὰ τὰ μέρη τοῦ σώματος, ὡστε ἐπιπολάζειν τοῖς δὲ φοβηθείσην
ςυντρέχῃ εἰς τὴν καρδίαν, ὡστε ἐκλείπειν ἐκ τῶν ἄλλων μερῶν. Hoc ego Athenis cum Tauro
nosto legimus percontatus esse quid de ratione ista reddita sentire, “Dixit quidem,”
inquit, “probe et vere quid accideret diffuso sanguine aut contracto, sed cur ita fieret non dixit.
Adhuc enim quae potest quam ob causam pudor sanguinem diffundat, timor contrahat, cum sit
pudor species timoris atque ita definitur: ‘timor iustae reprehensionis.’ Ita enim philosophi
definient: αἰσχύνη ἐστὶν φόβος δικαίου ψυχοῦ.”

That shame drives the blood outward, while fear checks it.
In the Problems of the philosopher Aristotle is the following passage: “Why do men who are
ashamed turn red and those who fear grow pale; although these emotions are similar? Because
the blood of those who feel shame flows from the heart to all parts of the body, and therefore
comes to the surface; but the blood of those who fear rushes to the heart, and consequently leaves
all the other parts of the body.” When I had read this at Athens with our friend Taurus and had
asked him what he thought about that reason which had been assigned, he answered: “He has
told us properly and truly what happens when the blood is diffused or concentrated, but he has
not told us why this takes place. For the question may still be asked why it is that shame diffuses
the blood and fear contracts it, when shame is a kind of fear and is defined by the philosophers
as ‘the fear of just censure.’ For they say: αἰσχύνη ἐστὶν φόβος δικαίου ψυχοῦ.”

Text 3: Gell., N4 20, 4 (Rolfe, adapted)
Artificium scaenicorum studium amoremque inhonestum probrorumque esse; et super ea re
verba Aristotelis philosophi adscripta.
Comoedos quispiam et tragedeos et tibicines dives adulescens, Tauri philosophi discipulus, ut
liberos homines in deliciis atque in delectamentis hahetabat. Id genus autem artifices Graece
appellantur oī perì τὸν Δίονυσον τεχνίτα. Eum adulescentem Taurus a sodalitatibus convictus
That devotion to play-actors, and love of them, was shameful and disgraceful, with a quotation of the words of the philosopher Aristotle on that subject.

A wealthy young man, a pupil of the philosopher Taurus, was devoted to, and delighted in, the society of comic and tragic actors and musicians, as if they were freemen. Now in Greek they call artists of that kind oi peri Diónoun tēxhetai or “craftsmen of Dionysus.” Taurus, wishing to wean that youth from the intimacy and companionship of men connected with the stage, sent him these words extracted from the work of Aristotle entitled Universal Questions, and bade him read it over every day: “Why are the craftsmen of Dionysus for the most part worthless fellows? Is it because they are least of all familiar with reason and philosophy, since the greater part of their life is given to their essential pursuits and much of their time is spent in intemperance and sometimes in difficulties too? For both of these things are incentives to wickedness.”

[Asat.], Pr. 30, 10, 956b11-15 (Mayhew)

Why are Dionysian artists in most cases bad people?

Is it because they least of all partake of reason and wisdom, owing to most of their life being concerned with the necessary arts, and because most of their life is passed in incontinence, and some of it also in difficulties? Both of these prepare the way for baseness.

Text 4: Apul., Apo. 36 (Hunink, with adaptation)

Let him (sc. Aemilianus) read the monumental works of ancient philosophers, so that he finally understands that I am not the first one to have looked for these things. For a long time my masters have done so – I mean Aristotle, Theophrastus, Eudemus, Lyco, and the other successor Platonists, who have left on record many books on the origin of animals, their diet, anatomy, and differentiating characteristics. Thank goodness this case is held before you, Maximus! Of course, as an educated man you have read Aristotle’s many volumes, On the Origin of Animals, On the Anatomy of Animals, and On the History of Animals, and the countless Problemata by the same man, and by others from the same philosophical school, in which various similar subjects are treated. If they earned fame and glory by writing on material which they had gathered with so much care, why would it be shameful for us to attempt this, particularly since I try to write more coherently and concisely on these matters, both in Greek and in Latin, while adding details that have been left out and correcting errors?