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Table talk: words, exchange, and power in the Roman convivium

The Roman convivium of the late republic and early empire placed persons of differing social status in a single space for an interval of time and caused them to interact face-to-face, particularly through speech. While the convivium in its various aspects has been investigated intensively and fruitfully in recent years (e.g., contributions in Murray, ed., *Symptica* [1990]; idem, *In Vino Veritas* [1995]; Slater, ed., *Dining in a Classical Context* [1991]), evidence for the forms and functions of the speech that occurs in this setting has not been systematically examined. I argue here, necessarily from literary evidence, that speech may be seen as one of several objects and services exchanged between host and guests: other exchange-objects include the initial dinner-invitation, its acceptance/rejection, the food and drink and entertainment, and a variety of other gifts, large and small. Applying modern exchange theory (Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* 1972; Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* 1982), I show that this circulation of objects and services in the convivium serves to establish, reinforce, or undermine hierarchical power relations among the participants through the dynamics of gift-exchange and commodity-exchange. The exchange-value of speech in particular—hence its capacity to impact these power relations—depends upon whether it gives pleasure or displeasure. This analysis of convivial speech calls into question the efficacy of organizing all hierarchy-establishing exchange relations under the rubric of “patronage.”

First, I survey briefly the characteristics of the formal convivium that mark it as a socially inegalitarian event. As is well-known, status distinctions among participants were marked by whether they stood (slaves), sat (children, “respectable” women), or reclined (adult males). Among the latter, status differentials were further marked by their position on the couches, and sometimes by the quantity and quality of the food they received (D’Arms in *Symptica* 1990: 308-19; Bradley in *Meals in a Social Context* 1998: 36-55). Moreover, most (but not all) representations of late republican and early imperial convivia present a socially dominant host and subordinate guests.

I next examine the varieties of speech that occur in this inegalitarian social context, and how speech functions as an object of exchange. Ideally, perhaps, guests reciprocate acceptable offerings of food and drink, and seek further gifts in turn, with verbal interventions calculated to please the host (Plut. *Mor.* 682A): fanciful or entertaining tales (Mart. 9.35), learned literary or philosophical discussions (Gell. 19.9), and even abject flattery (Plut. fr. 180 Sandbach). Conversely, some hosts are pleased by jesting or insulting speech—whether directed at themselves or others—which can be thought particularly appropriate in the convivium thanks to the presence of wine (*Liber*), which makes men’s tongues “free” (*liber*) (Hor. *Serm.* 1.4.86-90; Sen. *Ep.* 122.11-13; Curt. 8.2.2). Subordinate guests who please superior hosts with these or other forms of convivial speech may receive further invitations or other gifts from him (Plut. *Mor.* 629E-34F, *Ant.* 24.7-12; Suet. *Tib.* 42). These amicable exchanges confirm and naturalize the vertical social bonds between guest and host. Yet these same kinds of convivial speech—either deferential/flattering or jesting/“free”—may in other circumstances displease the host, whereupon a hostile exchange of reprisals may ensue, usually to the

guest's disadvantage (Sen. *Ira* 3.8.6, 3.13-17; Juv. 5.125-27; cf. Sen. *Ben.* 3.27, Val. Max. 5.1 ext.3). The host's own speech and actions also matter. Lofty hosts are sometimes represented as seeking to humiliate or abash their guests by expounding the exotic origins or great cost of the food or dining-room appointments, and/or by serving them conspicuously inferior food and drink (i.e., the initial offering is not a friendly one); the guests must then either risk perpetuating hostile reciprocity with laughter, insults, or even flight (Hor. *Serm.* 2.8; Sen. *Tranq.* 1.7), or seek to establish amicable exchange—e.g., by flattery (Petr. 52.7). In sum, no single, fixed strategy on the guest's part can reliably generate an amicable (or hostile) exchange in any given convivium: the positive or negative gift-weight of his speech, hence the reciprocation it elicits and its impact on power relations, is in each case highly contingent, depending upon on his social adroitness, sensitivity to nuance, and other ad hoc criteria.

Roman historians have generally organized under the rubric of “patronage” the study of unequal power relations based on reciprocal exchange. Convivia, however, have not been studied as sites of patronal activity, and indeed the jittery, contested, dialogical construction of power relations that occurs there sits ill with the relatively staid, stable image of the patron's relationship to his client. Focusing on “exchange” rather than patronage allows us to see new ways in which giving and receiving sustains or challenges social hierarchies, and new arenas (such as the convivium) in which such dynamics occur.