

H. North. Sôphrosune. Chapter VII

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North

Sophronie

VII

Literary and Popular Usage
after Plato

IF Greek literature after the close of the classical period yields no startling development in the concept of *sophrosyne*, it nevertheless offers a wealth of allusions in poetry, prose, and inscriptions which reveal the pervasive importance of this excellence. The Fragments of New Comedy, elegy, epigram, versified Cynic diatribe, and Theocritean idyll—to mention only those remains of Hellenistic poetry that contain references to *sophrosyne*¹—present a remarkably unified view. *Sophrosyne* is nearly always interpreted as the control of appetite, usually erotic. Menander, for example, normally employs the word *sôphrôn* with the meaning “chaste” and applies it indifferently to men and women.² The phrase *kosmios kai sôphrôn* is now entirely devoid of political implications and means only “decent and respectable” (*Samia* 129).³ The scope of *sôphrôn* in the *Monostichae* is somewhat broader; it includes “modest” or

¹ Several important Hellenistic authors—Aratus, Apollonius of Rhodes, Bion, Moschus, Herondas—ignore *sophrosyne*. Theocritus uses the word *sôphrôn* only once, to describe a modest and respectable woman (28. 14).

² *Epit.* 702, *Samia* 129, Frags. 610, 238. The use of *sôphrôn* in fragments of Middle and New Comedy corresponds to its meaning in a third-century poem in praise of an officer at the court of Alexandria (Page, *Select Papyri*, III, 466, No. 111), where it makes one of a long list of adjectives: some were familiar in classical Attic usage (*χρηστός, εὐγενής*); while others reflect the Alexandrian background (*φιλοβασιλεύς, φιλέλλην*). Here *sôphrôn* implies the rather vague commendation (like our “decent”) so often found in Isocrates. Otto Skutsch (*C.Q.* 13 [1963], 94–95) compares with this fragment a similar list of qualities in Ennius (*Ann.* 234–51), where *prudenter* (250) or possibly *suo contentus* (245) might represent *sôphrôn*.

³ The proper name Sophronie (Prudence) became a stock name for the old nurse in New Comedy (Menander *Epit.* and *Hero*; Terence *Eunuch*).

