

## *Fragmentation and coherence in Plutarch's Sympotic Questions*

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### READING MISCELLANISM

This volume attempts to draw out some of the ordering principles which lie beneath the surface of the Roman Empire's compilatory writing. The difficulty of identifying any such principles is particularly acute for works which have a strongly miscellanistic quality. I should say at the outset that it is hard to isolate any clearly bounded ancient genre of the 'miscellany'. It seems more fruitful instead to recognise the recurring presence of a range of miscellanistic characteristics across many different kinds of writing. Miscellanistic works – in the sense in which I understand that term here – are marked primarily by the disparateness of the material they accumulate. In some cases that quality of disparateness is supplemented by other markers: for example, many miscellanistic texts claim that their primary aim is to give pleasure to their readers', rather than to instruct or to be comprehensive; many make claims about the randomness of their own structures. Sometimes, for sure, all of these characteristics are combined with each other. Moreover, in some cases we find authors situating their own texts in relation to other miscellanistic writing. For example, Aulus Gellius, *Attic nights* pr. 4–10, not only chooses a title which evokes the idea of variety (the many different nights the author has spent in reading and compiling), but also compares his title with the titles other miscellanistic writers have chosen, in a way which suggests a high degree of self-consciousness about his work's place among a series of other similar texts.<sup>1</sup> At other times, however, these miscellanistic characteristics find their way in a diluted form into works

<sup>1</sup> Vardi (2004) usefully discusses the difficulty of defining any genre of 'miscellanism', while also at the same time mapping out some of the recurring tropes of miscellanistic writing in Gellius' preface and elsewhere. It is worth noting, however, that even Gellius, who is one of the ancient writers who comes closest to identifying a genre of miscellanism and identifying his own work as part of it, insists on undermining that identification even as he gestures towards it, since one of his main aims in this preface is actually to distinguish his own work from the others he lists, which he criticises for their excessive bulk (e.g., Gell. *NA* pr. 11–12).

which fit (similarly fluid) categories like encyclopedic or technical writing. In that sense I hope the problems this chapter raises will have resonances for a wide range of different kinds of compilatory writing, not only for those who make it into Gellius' list of rival miscellanists.

How can we make sense of writing which is apparently marked by lack of system and lack of order? There are many possible approaches: one might look, for example, for underlying ideological coherence – a sense that disparate material is unified through being imbued with distinctive ways of viewing the world; such analysis might reveal the unseen effects of particular ethical priorities or particular assumptions and anxieties about hierarchies of social status, gender or cultural superiority (as argued for Pollux's lexicographical compilation in the introduction to this volume). One might also look for recurring images and thematic patterns lying beneath the apparently chaotic surfaces of these texts – despite the fact that they so often claim not to have any such patterning. We should perhaps be cautious of that approach: the gesture of rehabilitating texts on the grounds of their thematic coherence is in some ways a relic of old-fashioned literary criticism,<sup>2</sup> and there is an obvious danger of anachronistically mapping our own critical preoccupation with making sense of ancient literature on to ancient readers. I argue here, however, that the idea of thematic order does nonetheless have some applicability for the miscellanistic writing of the Roman Empire. Many ancient miscellanists, I suggest, gesture towards thematic order, drawing us into a search for patterns while also at the same time disrupting and frustrating that search. On that argument, the claim many miscellanists make, that they are composing at random, turns out, at least in some cases, to be a matter of convention, a miscellanistic pose which can hide careful structuring beneath it.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most importantly, one might think about the way in which disparate material may be unified by a consistent methodology of reading. In particular, the image of the active reader, who must use his or her reading as a resource, a starting-point for his or her own coherent philosophical development, is a common one

<sup>2</sup> E.g., see Eagleton (1996) 40–4 for a convenient account of the importance of coherence for the New Criticism of the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> For claims about random composition, see, for example, Gell. *NA* pr. 2–3, discussed by Holford-Strevens (2003) 34, who cites a number of parallels, including Pamphile (attested by Phot. *Bibl.* 17: 119<sup>b</sup> 27–32), Clem. Al. *Strom.* 6.2.1; Plin. *Ep.* 1.1.1; Pliny's claim in particular has been shown to be dubious: see Sherwin-White (1966) 21–3 and 42–51; cf. Vardi (2004) 169–79 who draws a contrast between the genuinely random structure of Gellius' miscellany, and other miscellanistic works where we find much clearer signs of thematic grouping (with brief mention (169–70) of Plutarch's *Quaest. conv.*, along with works by Athenaeus, Macrobius, Clement and Solinus). Cf., p. 62, below, for discussion of the disingenuous nature of Plutarch's claims about the randomness of his own composition in *Quaest. conv.*.

in ancient philosophical literature. Here one of the most obvious Imperial examples – albeit not a miscellanistic example – is in the work of Galen, who often represents his medical writing as provisional, stressing the fact that each reader must reach a full understanding of each individual subject, and of the medical art as a whole, for him- or herself, via proper application of logical method.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter takes Plutarch's *Sympotic questions* (*Quaest. conv.*) – an enormous accumulation of dinner-party conversations on scientific, literary and sympotic topics, recorded accurately, so Plutarch claims, from several decades of symposium-going – as a test-case for those approaches. I want to suggest that this work exemplifies all of the different kinds of order outlined in the previous paragraph. I also want to suggest, however, that Plutarch is in some ways highly untypical, especially in the degree to which he is self-conscious about his own project of conjuring order from diversity.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, I argue that the *Sympotic questions* does offer us, contrary to first impressions, a carefully orchestrated vision of how we can draw coherence out of its own fragmented aggregation of material, if only we read with proper philosophical attention. In order to achieve that effect, it draws on models of how to read which are carefully theorised elsewhere in Plutarch's oeuvre (more on that in the next section). The *Sympotic questions* prompts us to read actively – in other words to respond creatively and philosophically for ourselves to the many different questions under discussion, and to stay alert to the recurring themes and patterns of the

<sup>4</sup> E.g., see Gal., *Thras.* 3–4 for one good example of that.

<sup>5</sup> The *Quaest. conv.* had demonstrable influence over later miscellanism, but none of its imitators quite matches Plutarch's fascination with the tension between order and disorder: see Gell. *NA* 3.6 and 17.11 for essays which take their material from the *Quaest. conv.*; and cf. n. 3, above, for Vardi's argument that Gellius on the whole resists the underlying coherence of the *Quaest. conv.*; however, see also Morgan (2004) on the underlying ethical coherence of Gellius' work; also Gell. *NA* pr. 16–18, where Gellius emphasises, like Plutarch, his hope that the reader will be inspired to personal reflection and improvement by his reading of the work, a passage which shows some traces of Plutarchan requirements for the reader to create his or her own coherence. Macrobius draws on the *Quaest. conv.* heavily in *Saturnalia* book 7, but he is much less interested than Plutarch in showing his guests indulging in inventive speculation (e.g., the Greek guests in the *Saturnalia* are repeatedly criticised by other speakers for their ingenuity and inventive styles of argumentation (e.g., 7.5.1, 7.9.9, 7.16.1)). At first sight, he seems to fall far short of Plutarch's ideals of active reading (i.e., the idea that each individual – both the symposium guests and the reader of the *Quaest. conv.* – should value the process of thinking creatively more than getting the right answer); on closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Macrobius is committed to the principle that verbatim quotation of the literature of the past is quite compatible with creative, original, personally distinctive expression: 'language, for Macrobius, was what the present user made of it, even though the thoughts and expressions of the present were inseparable from what had been thought and written earlier by others' (MacCormack (1998) 82). In that sense, as for Gellius, we may be seeing the traces of a Plutarchan insistence on the way in which the interpretations of the individual reader or sympotic speaker brings a kind of order to diverse material.

texts. Plutarch also shows us his fellow dinner-guests learning that style of active response for themselves, using the topics they discuss as springboards for personal response, as stepping-stones in their philosophical lives. The work demonstrates, in other words, how processes of universally relevant philosophical enquiry can start from frivolous snatches of conversation. In that sense, it follows the principle stated in Xenophon, *Symposium* 1.1, that the true philosopher can do philosophy anywhere.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, I also argue that Plutarch hints at parallels between those patterns of philosophical learning, and the organising patterns of social and political life in Roman Greece. Plutarch sets all of these discussions on specific occasions, many of them in specific cities, contexts which are briefly but vividly sketched in their opening lines. In doing so, as we shall see, he not only foregrounds the links between fragmented conversational subject matter and all-empowering philosophy, but also, in a way which is closely parallel with that, insists on the power of fragmented local identities within the all-embracing political and philosophical culture of the Roman Empire. It is a vision of overarching Greek culture as something which depends on and encompasses local specificity, and which is in tune with the prominence Plutarch gives elsewhere to the intertwining of local identity with philosophical cosmopolitanism within his own life.<sup>7</sup> And that vision, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, frames and enhances his insistence on engagement with detail in the quest for overarching philosophical knowledge.

What implications does that parallel have for our understanding of Plutarch's view of the cultural and political hierarchies of his own contemporary Greco-Roman world? We have suggested in our introduction that the archival patterns of thought which map unity through diversity may be fundamentally 'imperial' patterns, developed in the service of empire. We have also suggested that they are available to be reshaped in ways which subvert or redirect the rhetoric of imperial dominance. Plutarch's use of the themes of unity and diversity is one such reshaping, based on the conviction that the final unified framework within which the fragmented diversity of the world can most powerfully be contained will be a philosophical one. And that philosophical framework, he suggests, finds not only its most

<sup>6</sup> The question of whether it is right or possible to combine philosophical speech with the playful atmosphere of the symposium is the subject of both the preface and first dialogue of book 1; in the preface (612d) Plutarch justifies that combination with reference to the philosophical symposia of Plato and Xenophon and others.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Plutarch's *Greek questions*, where his exploration of Greek tradition takes the form of inquiry into obscure local customs and local terminology.

fertile ground but also its most powerful guiding metaphor in the Panhellenic interweaving of local commitment with overarching Greek identity. That is not to say that Plutarch's philosophical project in the *Symptotic questions* is insulated from the realities of Roman power. On the contrary, he is obsessed with its capacity to encompass and explain Roman culture as well as Greek,<sup>8</sup> and with the many things it has in common with non-Greek thought, Roman, Egyptian and otherwise.<sup>9</sup> But it is nevertheless strongly marked as a Greek project, dependent upon patterns of thought whose basic technique of seeking unity in diversity resembles the unity-in-diversity of Greek Panhellenic experience.

#### PLUTARCH ON READING

Plutarch is repeatedly interested in giving us guidelines for proper philosophical response to texts and speeches. That insistence on personal response as a central part of philosophy, is one of the things which unites his many writings – whether historical, scientific, ethical – as part of a broader philosophical project. The text which lays out those principles in most detail is Plutarch's *On listening*. In the traditional order of the *Moralia* the work comes close to the beginning of the collection, preceded only by *On the education of children*, and *On how the young man should listen to poetry*. Whoever arranged these treatises seems to have seen these three works as programmatic and interconnected, moving as they do from the techniques of education and interpretation suitable for the very youngest children, through to the approaches which are appropriate for young men, and indeed all men, once they graduate to proper study of philosophy. That assumption of coherence is in some ways unconvincing, not least because the first work, *On the education of children*, is generally believed to be by someone other than Plutarch.<sup>10</sup> But there are clearly signalled overlaps between the second and third works in the series, on poetry and listening respectively. The work on poetry suggests strategies of reading suitable for the young, who listen to poetry before they graduate to philosophical subject matter, and who should accustom themselves to reading creatively, imposing ethically edifying interpretations even on passages which at first sight seem unsuited to such interpretation, in order that they will be more prepared for philosophical ideas once they are exposed to

<sup>8</sup> E.g., see Preston (2001), Boulogne (1992) and (1987) on those themes in the *Greek and Roman questions*.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., in his work *On Isis and Osiris*. <sup>10</sup> See Whitmarsh (2001) 98–100 for brief discussion.



them.<sup>11</sup> *On listening* deals with the next step on that path, as the very opening sentence of the work suggests in offering advice to a young man named Nicander, who has just reached adulthood, with the freedom to manage his own education which that implies. Plutarch emphasises first (*On listening* 1 (37c–e)) the need for Nicander to take reason as his controlling guide, rather than revelling in the sense of freedom from guidance which adulthood might be thought to bring with it. He then suggests (2 (37e–38a)) that Nicander will be familiar with philosophical reasoning already because of the way in which his early training has been saturated with it. Clearly the addressee is envisaged as someone who has been brought up according to the precepts of *On how the young man should listen to poetry*; the techniques recommended in *On listening* are part of a lifelong project of philosophical education.

After this prefatory address to Nicander, Plutarch then stresses both the benefits and the dangers the sense of hearing can bring with it, arguing for a style of listening that is obedient and attentive, but also at the same time selective and sceptical.<sup>12</sup> The whole of the rest of the dialogue is dedicated to illustrating those principles, and above all to demonstrating the way in which listening should be an active process, which involves responding for oneself to the arguments one has heard. It is a technique which may not come easily to the young, he explains, but which can be developed with perseverance (17 (47b–d)): 'For the mind is not like a vessel in need of filling, but rather, like wood, needs only a spark to kindle it, to produce an impulse towards inventiveness, and a desire for the truth' (18 (48c)).<sup>13</sup> Passive, unreflective listening, by that standard, can never be adequate for anyone who aspires to philosophical progress.

One of the work's many striking features – which hints at the relevance of these principles to the *Sympotic questions* – is the recurring presence of the symposium as a point of reference. For Plutarch, in this text at least, the symposium is both an imagined context for the styles of listening and response he recommends, and at the same time an important metaphor for those styles. In 6, for example, he suggests that one should listen affably, 'as though one is a guest at a dinner or a festival banquet', in other words not in a spirit of rivalry, but also not in a way which buries one's capacity for criticism:

<sup>11</sup> See Whitmarsh (2001) 49–54; cf. Zadorojnyi (2002) for the argument that this stress on ethical response in *On how a young man should listen to poetry* is Platonic in character.

<sup>12</sup> See Goldhill (1999) 106–7 for brief discussion.

<sup>13</sup> οὐ γὰρ ὡς ἀγγεῖον ὁ νοῦς ἀποπληρώσεως ἀλλ' ὑπεκαύματος μόνον ὥσπερ ὕλη δεῖται, ὁρμητὴν ἐμποιοῦντος εὐρετικὴν καὶ ὁρεξίν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

When speakers are successful, we should assume that they are successful not by chance or by accident, but rather through their care and hard work and study, and we should imitate these qualities, feeling admiration for them and envy. When speakers make mistakes, on the other hand, we must turn our minds to the question of what the reason for the error was and where it came from. (6 (40b))<sup>14</sup>

Similarly in 10 we hear that we should be willing to listen respectfully, but also be ready to contribute problems for discussion when that is appropriate, just as an ideal symposium guest would do. And in 14 Plutarch explains that we should avoid the temptation of passive listening, like those who sit back and enjoy themselves at a dinner party while others do the work. Rather we must work together with the speaker, criticising our own arguments as much as his. Mutual respect and co-operation between listener and speaker are the hallmarks of Plutarchan listening, as they are of all sympotic conversation. And these skills of responsive, self-reflexive interpretation are precisely the things which allow us to draw together the varied impressions our experience of the world confronts us with, just as they allow us to draw together in a morally coherent way the varied material of Plutarch's oeuvre, and the ostentatiously varied miscellanism of the *Sympotic questions*.

What relevance do these principles of responsive reading have, in practice, for Plutarch's massive enterprise of knowledge aggregation? For one thing they hint at ethical significance lying behind Plutarch's agglomerations of detail, which have the potential to spark self-reflection and morally admirable lifestyle in the responsive reader. That is most obvious in his collections of historical material, both in the *Lives* and elsewhere, with their focus on the deeds and sayings of individuals, which offer both positive and negative examples for the reader to decipher and assess. A number of these historical compilations actually underline the disjointed nature of the excerpted material they present us with, and yet at the same time prompt us to see an underlying potential for unity. In the prefatory letter of his *Sayings of kings and commanders*,<sup>15</sup> for example, Plutarch draws attention to the way in which the emperor Trajan will be able to read these snippets briefly and yet also profitably: 'taking away from these brief words (ἐν βραχέσι) the opportunity for reflection (ἀναθεώρησιν) on many men who have been worthy of memory' (172e).<sup>16</sup> Those closing phrases of the work's

<sup>14</sup> τοῖς μὲν οὖν κατορθουμένοις ἐπιλογιστέον ὡς οὐκ ἀπὸ τύχης οὐδ' αὐτομάτως ἀλλ' ἐπιμελείᾳ καὶ πόνῳ καὶ μαθήσει κατορθοῦνται, καὶ μιμητέον ταῦτα θαυμάζοντάς γε δὴ καὶ ζηλοῦντας τοῖς δ' ἀμαρτανουμένοις ἐφιστάναί χρὴ τὴν διάνοιαν, ὅφ' ὧν αἰτίων καὶ θέν ἡ παρατροπή γέγονεν.

<sup>15</sup> See Beck (2002) for arguments in favour of viewing the prefatory letter as Plutarch's own work.

<sup>16</sup> ἐν βραχέσι πολλῶν ἀναθεώρησιν ἀνδρῶν ἀξίων μνήμης γενομένων λαμβάνοντι.



prologue draw attention to the paradoxical combination of brevity with lasting value, whose attainment will be dependent on the reader's capacity to respond through active 'reflection' (ἀναθεώρησις), a word Plutarch uses similarly elsewhere to describe the most desirable kind of reflective response to reading.<sup>17</sup> In the prologue to *Bravery of women*, similarly, Plutarch proclaims both the disjointed nature of his narrative, and at the same time the need to look for a defining essence of bravery which underlies the superficial differences between the many examples he is presenting us with, and which is the same for women as for men, though it may not at first sight seem so.<sup>18</sup> Coherence comes, then, in part from the capacity of disparate material to be interpreted within a consistent moral framework.

Secondly, and perhaps less obviously, it has increasingly been recognised that Plutarch embeds the requirement for personal response in the very form of his writing, forcing us to take up the provocative challenges of interpretation precisely through his arrangement of material. In the *Lives*, for example, the final passages of *synkrisis* – where the pairs of biographical subjects are compared with each other at length, after they have been individually biographised – not only prompt reflection on similarities and differences between the men in question, but also force us to reassess each of them individually, through their frequent inconsistency with the material we have already encountered.<sup>19</sup> In that sense the ordering of the work's details is very far from being neutral and artless, but rather makes a central contribution in provoking response.

#### LEARNING TO READ IN THE SYMPOTIAC QUESTIONS

The *Sympotic questions*, I will argue here, is the among most intricate and self-conscious of all Plutarch's actualisations of those principles. And yet, despite that, the text has frequently had a bad press.<sup>20</sup> The negative attention it has received is typical of common criticisms of encyclopedic and miscellaneous writing. Plutarch's arguments, for example, are branded ineffective, even frivolous. François Fuhrmann, not untypically, laments as follows:

<sup>17</sup> E.g., the same word is used in *Quomodo adul.* 19e to describe the process of creative reading, which goes beyond face value in its search for meaning in a text.

<sup>18</sup> Plut. *De mul. vir.* 243b–d. For the general point, see McInerney (2003) on the way in which Plutarch's new understanding of conjugal relations emerges (but only partly) from beneath this apparently disparate collection of conventional moralizing material.

<sup>19</sup> See Duff (1999), esp. 243–86.

<sup>20</sup> For an important exception to that, see Romeri (2002), esp. 109–89, who analyses at length the way in which Plutarch privileges speech ahead of consumption, drawing on Platonic precedents, in this work and others.

Au lieu de chercher les causes véritables des phénomènes, Plutarque se contente en général de la vraisemblance, en citant plusieurs théories qui s'y rapportent, ou en rappelant ce que divers auteurs en ont dit. Les différentes opinions se succèdent ainsi sans aucune analyse et le plus souvent sans solution, comme si ceux qui sont chargés de les défendre s'amusaient avec elles.<sup>21</sup>

In this case, the fault is attributed not so much to Plutarch himself as to the generic assumptions he is working with<sup>22</sup> and to the 'affaiblissement général de l'esprit scientifique',<sup>23</sup> an assumption which exemplifies a common failure to understand the rhetorical idiom of so much ancient scientific writing.<sup>24</sup> And second, closely related to that criticism, is the suggestion that Plutarch's main interest is in the indiscriminate amassing of information. Michel Jeanneret, for example, categorises Plutarch with Athenaeus and Macrobius, as writers who aim for quantity and variety of material, in an 'orgy' of erudition, rather than seeking narrative realism or convincing argumentation.<sup>25</sup> Both of those criticisms, I suggest, underestimate more than anything the importance of Plutarch's self-conscious exploration of the activities of reading, listening and interpreting within this work. And both of them are criticisms to which the *Sympotic questions* has powerful in-built replies.

The first point to make is that the *Sympotic questions* shows us how comprehensive erudition can be adapted for specific social situations, through the symposiasts' capacity for creative manipulation of their wide reading. Knowledge in the Plutarchan symposium is always a performance.<sup>26</sup> In that sense, the *Sympotic questions* resists commonly stated modern assumptions that the project of compiling knowledge in textual form, and the practice of exhaustive reading, are faceless exercises of indiscriminate absorption and accumulation.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Plutarch draws on the traditional status of the symposium as a space for elite initiation in representing these conversations as occasions for himself and his fellow symposiasts to learn the distinctive

<sup>21</sup> Fuhrmann (ed.) (1972) xxiv, quoted approvingly by Teixeira (1992) 221; and by Flacelière and Irigoin (eds.) (1987) lxxxiii. Cf. similar criticisms elsewhere, e.g., Barrow (1967) 21.

<sup>22</sup> See Fuhrmann (ed.) (1972) xxiii. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 'cette "trivialité" était, hélas, le lot du genre'.

<sup>24</sup> On the rhetorical character of Imperial scientific writing, see esp. Barton (1994b).

<sup>25</sup> E.g., see Jeanneret (1991) 166–7; for criticism of Jeanneret's assumption, see Relihan (1992) 218.

<sup>26</sup> Martin (1998) discusses the way in which performance, often within a sympotic context, is a central part of the wisdom of the seven sages of Greek tradition; Plutarch's engagement with that tradition is clear from his work *Symposium of the seven wise men*, which depicts the seven sages drinking and talking together, and which has many similarities with the guiding principles of sympotic, philosophical discussion in the *Quaest. conv.* – especially in those passages where the sages take it in turns to offer opinions on ethical and political problems – as Romeri (2002) 109–89 shows.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. n. 29, below, for Jeanneret's claims about the facelessness of the *Quaest. conv.* and other sympotic compilations.

styles of ingenious analysis with which the work is saturated, not only by listening but also by responding in a spirit both of imitation and of friendly rivalry to the conversations they hear. For example, he repeatedly returns to the scene of young men learning appropriate styles of speech from their older companions, or of Roman readers working hard to learn and participate in Greek styles of speech.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, he draws attention to his own involvement,<sup>29</sup> and the involvement of his Roman addressee, Sosius Senecio, in many of the conversations he describes. Often, for example, as we shall see further in the next section, Plutarch is himself the figure who speaks last and most authoritatively, as if to set an example to the younger or less experienced men who have spoken before him. At other points he takes us back to the symposia of his youth, for example in book 9, where we see Plutarch as a star pupil in the skills of sympotic conversation, trumping his fellow students in front of their great philosophical mentor, Ammonius. We, too, are offered instruction, both in the prologues, where Plutarch often lays out explicit recommendations for habits of learning and speaking; and also, implicitly, in the models for action which are presented to us in the conversations themselves. If the young symposiasts are to learn from the example of watching and responding to the arguments of their elders – as Plutarch recommends repeatedly in his work *On listening* – it seems hard to avoid the impression that we are being prompted to engage with those models in similar ways ourselves through the act of reading.<sup>30</sup> Learning, for these young symposiasts at least, works by repetition. The recurring rhythms and gestures of sympotic conversation become ingrained in them through repeated exposure. And the repetitions of Plutarch's text invite us to share in that experience.

What, then, are the defining features of the style of speech which is on display? Most distinctively of all, it is a style of speech which aims for a variety of different explanations for each question which is proposed. The questions under discussion tend to arise from the circumstances of the symposium, as the symposiasts comment on recent events, on their surroundings, or on the running of the symposium they are attending.

<sup>28</sup> See Swain (1990) 130–1.

<sup>29</sup> Claims that Plutarch takes a back seat in this work could hardly be more wrong: e.g., see Barrow (1967) 15 and Jeanneret (1991) 167, who writes that 'the author melts into an anonymous collector and mediator'. For good examples of discussions where Plutarch makes his own contribution the climax of the discussion, see (in addition to those discussed below): *Quaest. conv.* 1.9, 5.2, 5.4, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, 7.5.

<sup>30</sup> Cf., e.g., Swain (1996) 138: 'A key part of Plutarch's plan for moral improvement, with the aim of constituting one's life according to philosophy, was the observation of others', with several examples from the *Moralia*.

Plutarch and his fellow guests then take it in turns to propose solutions.<sup>31</sup> They quote repeatedly from their wide reading, in a way which often leads to juxtaposition of competing explanations from different authorities: Plato and Aristotle figure most often, but they share the stage with a dazzling range of other authorities. In addition, the speakers often speculate on their own account, with varying degrees of plausibility and ingenuity. Originality and ingenious, improvised speculation seem to be valued almost as much as exhaustive knowledge of earlier writing.<sup>32</sup> The use of alternative explanation as an interpretative strategy was of course far from being unusual. It was enshrined most influentially in a number of Aristotelian works (esp. Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems*), which raise scientific problems in question form, and then proceed to answer them with one or more possible explanations.<sup>33</sup> It is also widespread within the aetiological and scientific work of many of Plutarch's contemporaries, and Plutarch himself uses variations of it in a great many of his own works.<sup>34</sup> There is also evidence from the Hellenistic period and later for specific association of this style of analysis with learned sympotic writing and styles of sympotic speech.<sup>35</sup>

What effects does Plutarch achieve through his traditional but also unusually vivid emphasis on this strategy of 'interpretative pluralism'?<sup>36</sup> Plutarch's use of it signals his alignment with the precedent of the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems*, casting his own work as a version of Aristotle's projects of systematising and advancing a great range of different areas of human knowledge. It also signals his alignment with some of Aristotle's successors. Theophrastus, for example, in his meteorological work, repeatedly accepts a variety of possible explanations for one single phenomenon. In doing so, he not only gives an impression of comprehensiveness, showing that he has

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Jacob (2001), esp. xxx–iii on Athenaeus' very similar use of the technique of *zētēsis* (which he suggests may date back to the symposia of the Mouseion of Alexandria (Ixxii)), whereby one guest proposes a problem, which is then answered by others: the difference is that Athenaeus' speakers rely more heavily than Plutarch and his fellow-guests on quotation of texts recalled from memory, and less on the kind of ingenious personal response which so often follows on from the quotation of past authorities in the *Quaest. conv.*

<sup>32</sup> The *Quaest. conv.*'s distinctive style of ingenious conversation is best analysed by Frazier and Sirinelli (eds.) (1996) 177–207.

<sup>33</sup> Ps.-Aristotle, *Problems* are quoted and argued over in *Quaest. conv.* 1.9, 3.7, 3.8, 3.10, 6.8, 6.9, 7.5, 8.3 and 8.10; see also Boulogne (1992) 4689, n. 47, citing *Metaph.* 983b4–6, 995b1–3.

<sup>34</sup> In that sense Feeney (1998) 129 is surely wrong to characterise alternative explanation as an exclusively Latin technique: in doing so he mentions that alternative explanation features in Plutarch's *Roman questions*, which analyse Roman customs, but not in his *Greek questions*; that distinction ignores the prevalence of this technique elsewhere in Plutarch's work: e.g., see *Natural questions* (discussed by Harrison (2000)), *On the E at Delphi*, *On the sign of Socrates* and *On Isis and Osiris*; see also Pailler (1998) on the recurring presence of the question within Plutarch's lives of figures from the archaic period.

<sup>35</sup> See Cameron (1995) 71–103 (esp. 103).

<sup>36</sup> See Hardie (1992) 4754 for that phrase.



investigated a range of possible causes; he also emphasizes the importance of the four elements – earth, air, fire and water – for his view of the workings of the universe, offering one explanation for each element.<sup>37</sup> It also has some overlaps with methods of analysis which were common in Epicurean<sup>38</sup> and Pythagorean<sup>39</sup> philosophy. In addition, it was closely related to common patterns of argumentation which were ingrained in rhetorical theory, and which would presumably have come as second nature to Plutarch and many of his readers, given their likely saturation in rhetorical training.<sup>40</sup> And it was well suited to express the speculative, agonistic idiom which lay behind much ancient scientific reasoning, and which seems to have arisen – at least originally – from the practice whereby different experts would offer competing explanations for the same phenomenon in public contexts.<sup>41</sup> In the *Sympotic questions* that point takes on added complexity through the presence of individuals from a wide range of different professions, so that the variety of different responses is in a number of places represented as a vehicle for productive comparison between different professional viewpoints.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps most importantly, it offers the opportunity to bring different authors of the past into dialogue with each other and with the symposiasts of the present,<sup>43</sup> allowing for comparison between different explanations and different principles of explanation, and in the

<sup>37</sup> See Taub (2003) 121–4; also 151 on similar techniques in Seneca's meteorological writing.

<sup>38</sup> See Hardie (1992) 4761; Asmis (1984) 321–36. Epicurean theory holds that all explanations are equally valuable, the main aim of explanation being to remove superstition by showing that a number of plausible rational explanations exist; in some of his works Plutarch rejects that assumption, tending to hierarchise his alternative explanations according to plausibility (cf. Boulogne (1992) 4694), but the *Quaest. conv.* in places comes close to endorsing that Epicurean view, albeit for very different reasons, by the suggestion that all responses may be equally valid because of their equal capacity to inspire philosophical reflection.

<sup>39</sup> E.g., see Hardie (1992) 4781–3, mentioning the close links between Platonism and Pythagoreanism in this period, and the influence of Pythagoreanism on Plutarch's teacher Ammonius.

<sup>40</sup> See Schenkenveld (1997) and (1996).

<sup>41</sup> E.g., see Barron (1994b), esp. 133–7 on medicine as a 'conjectural' skill within which guesswork played a necessary and accepted role within prognosis, and 147–9 on the centrality of the *agôn* to ancient science.

<sup>42</sup> See Hardie (1992) 4754–6, with reference a number of examples: e.g., *Quaest. conv.* 9.14 where the guest list includes 'the rhetor Herodes, the Platonist philosopher Ammonius, Plutarch's brother Lamprias, Trypho the doctor, Dionysus of Melite the farmer, the Peripatetic Menepylus, and Plutarch himself' (4755), many of whom tailor their own answer to the question under discussion according to their own professional or philosophical preoccupations.

<sup>43</sup> Cf., e.g., Russell (1973) 44–6: he quotes 5.3 (676C–677b) as a striking but not at all unusual example of intricate knowledge of a large number of writers within a very short passage; cf. 8.2 (718c), where one of the guests suggests making Plato a 'partner' or 'contributor' (κοινωνόν) in the discussion. That technique of introducing authors of the past into dialogue stretches back to Plato (e.g., the ventriloquising of Simonides at *Pl. Prt.* 339a–347b), but the sheer frequency of Plutarch's quotations takes it on to a different scale. For similar examples in other Imperial authors, see Vitr. *De arch.* 9, pr. 17 on the process of entering into conversation with the authors of the past.

process demonstrating the thoroughness with which one has considered the full range of possibilities. In some cases there is a sense that the explanations offered can be hierarchised according to criteria of plausibility. That impression is particularly prominent in some of Plutarch's other dialogues, where there seems to be a gradual progression from less to more plausible interpretations.<sup>44</sup> However, even there it is rarely the case that one single version is flagged unequivocally as the right one, and in some cases, especially in the enterprise of interpreting mythical material, that sense of indeterminacy, in the face of the secrets of the divine, is represented as necessary and even desirable.<sup>45</sup>

Speculative, sometimes even absurd, explanations are valued so highly within the *Sympotic questions*, as we shall see repeatedly in the section following, that Plutarch at times seems to be flaunting the unreliability of the responses he and (especially) his fellow symposiasts offer, and so making it deliberately difficult for us to judge exactly what lessons about reading and responding we should take away from this work. One explanation for that impression is the co-existence of two separate criteria for judging the value of explanations within the work. The first is the criterion of plausibility. But the second, which sometimes conflicts with that, is the requirement for explanations which conform to the requirement of sympotic harmony and entertainment – what Plutarch calls the 'friend-making' character of sympotic argument<sup>46</sup> (not that the two are incompatible, since for Plutarch the forging of friendship can come from measured discussion as much as from frivolous speculation). As long as one of these two criteria is satisfied, it seems, the argument in question is likely to be acceptable, although the relative significance of those two criteria is also always open to playful negotiation, and there are moments when characters are criticised for being excessively ingenious or excessively rhetorical.<sup>47</sup> The co-existence of these two different criteria for valuing contributions – plausibility and ingenuity – forces us to face up to the difficulty of distinguishing in practice between appropriate and inappropriate pieces of analysis. It shows us the value of ingenuity, but also underlines the need for personal experience in judging how far to take that ingenuity, or what circumstances to use it in.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., see Hardie (1992) 4755, making that point for *On the E at Delphi* and *On Isis and Osiris*.

<sup>45</sup> See Hardie (1992) 4752–4.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., see the prologues to books 1 (612d) and 7 (697d); see also many of the articles in Montes Cala, Sanchez Ortiz de Landaluze and Gallé Cejudo (eds.) (1999) for discussion of Plutarch's approval of moderate consumption of wine for its capacity to encourage friendly interaction (esp. Montes Cala (1999), Teodorsson (1999), Gómez and Jufresa (1999) and Stadter (1999)).

<sup>47</sup> E.g., see 8.4 (723f–724a).



More importantly, however, Plutarch's playful displays of 'interpretative pluralism' in this work enact his positive valuation of active reading and listening; and in the process challenge the work's readers to participate for themselves, to judge between the explanations on offer, or to come up with others which are more plausible or more ingenious. It is this skill of active reading, I have suggested, which allows us to bring coherence out of fragmentation. In that sense, the symposiasts whose answers fall towards the more speculative end of the spectrum are, paradoxically, giving an entertaining *performance* of the 'serious' philosophical requirement for personal response to discussion, where the fact of participating in the practice of alternative explanation is as important as the explanations themselves.<sup>48</sup> The combination of 'serious' and 'frivolous',<sup>49</sup> and the tension between single explanation and shared discussion where all contributions are valued equally,<sup>50</sup> are, of course, central to the symposium tradition. But in the *Sympotic questions* those crucial sympotic ingredients are given a distinctively Plutarchan spin, as the frivolous joys of ingenious speculation are shown to embody the most important principles of philosophical education. Not only does the text flaunt the diversity and triviality of the subjects which are used as starting-points for discussion, but its subject matter is also further fragmented, and in some cases further trivialised, by the range of pathways each discussion follows, as new speakers attempt new explanations. In other words, the diversity of the *Sympotic questions*' subject matter is itself further intensified by the action of multiplication which is central to the technique of alternative explanation, which fragments the world into seemingly independent and incompatible viewpoints. And yet this technique of fragmentation is itself, paradoxically, the starting-point for overarching philosophical understanding.

TRIVIALITY AND COHERENCE: SYMPOTIC QUESTIONS  
BOOKS 2 AND 3

How, then, does Plutarch embed these principles within the detailed texture of his work? For one thing, he regularly offers his readers or his fellow symposiasts explicit justification for the strategies of ingenious and creative

<sup>48</sup> Just as in the context of Roman religious interpretation the performance of multiple explanations for any single ritual may be in itself more significant than the desire for interpretative 'accuracy': see Feeney (1998), esp. 127–31.

<sup>49</sup> For Plutarch's justification of the mixture of seriousness and frivolity in the *Quaest. conv.*, see, e.g., the prologue to book 6 (686d).

<sup>50</sup> See Relihan (1992).

argumentation. In 6.8, for example, Plutarch records his own attendance at a public ritual designed to drive out the disease of *boulimia*; and then afterwards at a symposium gathering where the disease was discussed. First, he tells us, a number of suggestions were made about the origins of the disease's name and of the ritual which had just been performed. In summing up this first phase of the discussion Plutarch emphasises the atmosphere of co-operation in which it was conducted: 'These were the things which made up the shared *eranos* of conversation' (6.8 (694b)).<sup>51</sup> an *eranos* being a feast funded by the shared contributions of the participants. Discussion then proceeds to the causes of the disease. After a number of suggestions about why *boulimia* tends to afflict those who walk through heavy snow, the symposiasts lapse into silence, at which point Plutarch offers his readers a brief aside: 'When silence fell, I reflected on the fact that to idle and untalented people listening to the arguments of their elders brings a feeling of relaxation and satisfaction; whereas those who are ambitious and scholarly use it as spur to make their own attempt at seeking and tracking down the truth' (694d).<sup>52</sup> He then shrewdly introduces a claim made by Aristotle about the natural heat of the body, and the conversation once more begins to circulate, 'as one would expect' (ὅπερ οὖν εἰκός (694e)). This passage is typical of patterns which are repeated over and over again throughout the *Sympotic questions*: the use of past authority to provide a stimulus for present discussion; explicit recommendation of independent thought, in language which is closely reminiscent of Plutarch's work *On listening* (especially the contrast between passive filling of the mind and active kindling of it at 48c, quoted above); and use of the language of contribution to describe individual attempts at explanation. The last of those is especially frequent, and is often combined with an emphasis on the way in which Plutarch's own 'contributions' to discussion are improvised, made whether or not he is confident of having a reliable answer. In 3.5 (652b), for example, Plutarch tells us that he is reusing an argument he had come up with a few days before, when he had been forced to extemporise (αὐτοσχεδιάσαι). In 2.2 (635c), similarly, Plutarch speaks 'in order to avoid the impression of joining in the conversation without making a contribution'.<sup>53</sup> The requirement of being an entertaining conversationalist, and to be generous with one's

<sup>51</sup> ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἔρανον κοινόν ἐκ πάντων συνεπλήρου λόγων.

<sup>52</sup> γενομένης δὲ σιωπῆς, ἐγὼ συννοῶν ὅτι τὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἐπιχειρήματα τοὺς μὲν ἀργοὺς καὶ ἀφυσίς οἷον ἀναπαύει καὶ ἀναπλήρει, τοῖς δὲ φιλοτίμοις καὶ φιλολόγοις ἀρχὴν ἐνδιδῶσιν οἰκείαν καὶ τόλμαν ἐπὶ τὸ ζητεῖν καὶ ἀνιχνεύειν τὴν ἀλήθειαν . . .

<sup>53</sup> ὑπὲρ τοῦ μὴ δοκεῖν ἀσύμβολος τοῦ λόγου μετασχεῖν.

own interventions, seem to outweigh any requirement to aim for a single, correct answer.

There is also a recurring emphasis on the requirement for young men to learn from their fellow symposiasts, as I suggested earlier. Those scenes of learning contain both explicit and implicit instruction on the styles of speech and interpretation one should aim for, lessons offered both to the young symposiasts themselves and to us. Plutarch's teacher Ammonius plays a prominent role, both in book 9 and elsewhere, as if to remind us of the way in which Plutarch's own interpretative virtuosity has itself been learnt, painstakingly and gradually, in the course of a long process of development from pupil to expert.<sup>54</sup> In 3.1, for example, Plutarch records an occasion in Athens, at a party held after a sacrifice to the Muses, where Ammonius criticises the practice of wearing flower garlands at a symposium as an unworthy practice for serious philosophers, and so prompts the 'young men' (οἱ νεανίσκοι (646a)), at least those who do not know him well, to remove their garlands in embarrassment. Plutarch, however, knows better, as Ammonius' star-pupil should, and so sets out to refute his philosophical mentor: 'I knew that Ammonius had thrown the topic into our midst in order to encourage practice and further enquiry' (646a).<sup>55</sup> He seems to have grasped the need to exercise one's ingenuity, and the need to admit at least certain types of pleasure into the symposium, in contrast with the other young men who fall for Ammonius' insistence on a complete banishment of frivolity. Plutarch's impressive display then continues in 3.2, which is represented as a continuation of the conversation in 3.1. Ammonius sets out an argument for the belief that ivy is a hot plant, rather than a cold one, as is commonly believed. Once again the young men are cowed into silence. The other, more experienced, guests then urge the young symposiasts to attempt a response, and it is once again Plutarch who speaks, as soon as a promise has been secured from Ammonius not to intimidate the young men by arguing against them. Plutarch contradicts Ammonius with

<sup>54</sup> E.g., see Clement and Hoffleit (eds.) (1969) 95 for the point that the conversations of the *Quaest. conv.* seem to date over a period of twenty to thirty years; cf. Jones (1966) 206–7 on changing representation of Ammonius through the work, portrayed with varying degrees of authority depending on the degree of maturity in his pupils and fellow guests. In 9.15, for example, Ammonius' speech occupies almost the whole discussion, and thus stands as the closing speech of the whole work. In 9.14 Ammonius guides discussion (e.g., at 744b, where he rejects too ready acceptance of an implausible explanation; and at 746b, where he calls for more responses at the very end of his own speech, despite the fact that five guests have spoken already), and has the penultimate speech (745d–746b), with only Plutarch to follow him; in other words it is Plutarch who himself responds to Ammonius' prompting, as often elsewhere (e.g., at 8.3 (721d) and 9.2 (738a)), as if to show how Plutarch's career has itself been shaped from his teacher's encouragement.

<sup>55</sup> ἐγὼ δ' εἰδὼς ὅτι γυμνασίας ἕνεκα καὶ ζητήσεως καταβέβληκεν ἐν μέσῳ τὸν λόγον ὁ Ἀμμώνιος ...

reference to precisely the passage of Aristotle used by Ammonius himself. Strikingly, that technique of arguing against an opinion with reference to exactly the principles cited in support of it is used similarly by Florus in 3.4 (651c), on a different occasion, in a way which offers us the opportunity to build a cumulative picture of the lessons embedded in the text through consecutive reading of these different and apparently disjointed dialogues.

In the second half of book 3 (3.6 and 3.7) – as often elsewhere – Plutarch switches from description of his early philosophical training to description of occasions much later in his life, after he has reached a position of authority.<sup>56</sup> In 3.7, for example, Plutarch's aged father proposes to 'the young men who were interested in philosophy' (τοῖς φιλοσοφοῦσι μεираκίοις) (655f) a discussion of why sweet new wine is the least intoxicating kind of wine, while the experienced Plutarch looks on. On this occasion there are several contributions, in contrast with the silence of 3.1 and 3.2.<sup>57</sup> Plutarch sums up these contributions with praise of the young men's ingenuity and readiness to speak, although he also points casually to two very obvious explanations they have missed, one of them taken from Aristotle, as if to remind us – and them – that ingenuity on its own is never enough, unless it is supplemented by exhaustive reading. The contrast between the young Plutarch and the old Plutarch, at the beginning and the end of book 3, seems deliberately pointed, reminding us of how the day-to-day experience of philosophical speculation can contribute to lifelong education and philosophical self-improvement.

The *Symptotic questions*' many scenes of learning are thus threaded through the work in a way which prompts us – as well as the young symposiasts of the dialogues themselves – to draw lessons from them. We undergo a repeated process of exposure to common patterns of argumentation, dialogue after dialogue, just as the young men must learn night after night, and gradually we begin to build up a sense of how we can make the different dialogues fit together with each other. There is space here to discuss only one other example of that kind of patterning, from book 2. Here

<sup>56</sup> There are several similar instances in other books of older men setting an example for their younger fellow-guests, although their authority is not always unchallenged: e.g., at 1.2, Plutarch's father begins the discussion by playfully criticising Plutarch's brother Timon for his seating of the guests; Timon disagrees, and Plutarch and his other brother Lamprias then argue themselves over the dispute; in 5.3 (676e–677b) a learned rhetorician impresses the younger men, but Plutarch and his friend Lucianus make a point of disagreeing.

<sup>57</sup> That silence has also just been mirrored in 3.6 (653e), another of the dialogues set later in Plutarch's life where the young men are reduced to silence when one of the older guests contradicts their claim that Epicurus should not have introduced discussion of the best time of day for sex into his *Symposium*.



again recurring themes and principles of argument cluster together in a way which gives a shadowy impression of coherence and progression to the book. 2.1, for example, is a discussion entitled 'What are the subjects about which Xenophon says people, when they are drinking, are more pleased to be questioned and teased than not'. This is the longest dialogue in the whole of the *Sympotic questions*, but the problem also spills out beyond the end of 2.1, into the repeated scenes of teasing with which the rest of book 2 is saturated, as if to emphasise the need to supplement theoretical discussion, however exhaustive, with personal experience: it may not be enough to have theoretical knowledge of teasing; in addition one must learn by seeing teasing in action. In 2.2 (635a), for example, in the course of a discussion on 'Why men become hungrier in the autumn', Plutarch's brother Lamprias is teased for his gluttony; at 2.10 (643e), a totally separate occasion, Lamprias acknowledges his own gluttony but accuses Hagias of the same; in 2.3 (635e) Plutarch is teased by Alexander for not eating eggs, but then teases Alexander in return (635f); and Soclarus is teased in 2.6 (640b) for the strangeness of the plants which grow in his garden, an observation which then leads into erudite scientific/horticultural discussion on techniques of grafting.

Equally prominent in book 2, though perhaps less obvious, since it is not the subject of explicit discussion at any stage, is a recurring interest in the dangers of misattributing causes in analysing remarkable natural phenomena. In 2.7, for example, there is a long discussion of a type of fish called the 'ship-holder' (ἐχενήϊς), which is said to have the power to slow down ships, despite its tiny size, by attaching itself to their hulls. At the end of this discussion, Plutarch debunks a whole series of explanations for that remarkable power by suggesting that the ships are held back not by the fish, but by seaweed, which is precisely the thing which attracts the fish there in the first place. In other words, he rejects the possibility that the presence of the fish is the cause of the ship's slowness, pointing out that the presence of the fish and the slowness of the ship may instead be common symptoms of a third phenomenon, the seaweed. That strategy of argument is closely matched in the two *quaestiones* which follow. In 2.8 Plutarch rejects the explanations offered for the belief that horses bitten by wolves tend to be unusually spirited, by suggesting that it is only the spirited horses who escape from the wolves in the first place. And then finally in 2.9, we hear a discussion about why sheep bitten by wolves have sweeter flesh. Here, however, there is no explicit attempt to draw the obvious conclusion – not that they have sweet flesh because they are bitten, but rather that they are bitten because they have sweet flesh to begin with. As so often, Plutarch

seems to be leaving us to make that conclusion independently, drawing out for ourselves the lessons of the two preceding dialogues.

Plutarch thus repeatedly emphasises the requirement that the philosopher should be able to use any conversation as a starting point for philosophy, by applying his or her own distinctive skills of reading. In that sense it should not matter whether we read things disjointedly and out of context or not. And yet at the same time he weaves complex thematic continuities into his work, challenging us to draw these out for ourselves and so to experience the way in which disparate material can begin to resolve itself into unity if only we read carefully enough – not only ethical unity, but also narrative unity, for example in this intricately developed progression of examples of particular types of argumentation in Book 2, which between them tell a carefully structured story about how we can hone our own skills of analysis.<sup>58</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the *Sympotic questions* aspires to any kind of overarching and continuous narrative coherence. As we have seen, it is a work which values single, disjointed facts and specific occasions very highly. The *Sympotic questions* aspires to unity only through its attention to the specific, which we must put into shape for ourselves. But it does, I suggest, frequently gesture towards thematic connections and progressions between its different parts, as if to give us a faint and preliminary glimpse of the kind of coherence we can expect to emerge from our own readings of Plutarch's work, and of the world, if we are only willing to put the effort in.

Those impressions throw a provocative light on Plutarch's deceptively simple programmatic statements of intent. Here I look briefly at the most often quoted of those, in the prologue to book 2. There Plutarch catches breath to look back at the subject matter and arrangement of the previous book. He distinguishes, first, between 'sympotic' subjects (συμπотικά) on the one hand, which consist of debates about the proper way to run a symposium and to behave at one; and 'symposiac' subjects (συμποσιακά) on the other, which form suitable topics of symposium conversation, but without having any direct connection with the symposium setting; and he categorises the *quaestiones* of book 1 retrospectively according to that scheme. And then in the closing sentences of the prologue he proclaims the randomness which underlies his principles of composition – 'These things have been recorded haphazardly and without being put in order,

<sup>58</sup> In that sense Gallardo (1972) 189 seems wrong to say that the gaps between adjacent *quaestiones* in the *Quaest. conv.* prevent a coherent reading: 'Dada la estructura de la obra, resulta imposible hacer un estudio de los personajes o de la progresión de la acción, pues esta última no existe.'



but rather as each of them came to my memory' (629d)<sup>59</sup> – before finally explaining to his addressee, Sosius Senecio, that the reader is likely to come across some of Sosius' own contributions to discussion in what follows. In both of these claims, I suggest, this prologue is more complex than it might initially appear, and than is usually assumed. First, in the light of the work's constant saturation with didactic material, of the kind we have already glimpsed above, the stated distinction between 'sympotic' and 'symposiac' subjects begins to seem disingenuous. In fact all of the discussions of the *Sympotic questions* are 'sympotic', in the sense that each of them is equally concerned with exploring the question of how best to speak and behave in the symposium. All of these dialogues are equally didactic. Secondly, the claim to have composed haphazardly breaks down, as we come to perceive the *Sympotic questions*' shadowy overtones of patterning emerging from the mass of disjointed detail. Plutarch's claim to have composed 'as each thing came to my memory'<sup>60</sup> looks, on closer inspection, not like a statement of the work's randomness, but rather like an attempt to equate the ordering of the work with the retrospective patterning which memory inevitably imposes. The statements Plutarch makes in this prologue might at first sight be taken to support stereotypes of artlessly structured miscellanistic writing. But on closer inspection we can see that Plutarch actually plays along with those stereotypes knowingly, while at the same time ultimately resisting them, at least for those who can read closely and creatively enough to spot the trick.

#### LOCAL IDENTITIES IN THE *SYMPOTIC QUESTIONS*

What, then, of the political world, the world of the Roman Empire? The first thing to note is Plutarch's representation of geographical distinctions. The overriding impression the *Sympotic questions* projects is one of men with a shared Hellenic education talking as equals. However, this stress on the cultural homogeneity of the speakers is regularly nuanced by references to the local origins of individual participants, who are drawn from a range of cities across the Greek world. In much the same way, Plutarch pays frequent attention to their differences of philosophical persuasion or of profession, explaining, for example, that one is a rhetor, another a grammarian, another a doctor and so on.<sup>61</sup> These sporadic reminders of difference contribute to an impression of cosmopolitanism in their conversations, conjuring up a

<sup>59</sup> σποράδην δ' ἀναγέγραπται καὶ οὐ διακεκριμένως, ἀλλ' ὡς ἕκαστον εἰς μνήμην ἦλθεν.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. n. 3, above, on parallels for this claim (not always justified) in Aulus Gellius and others.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. n. 42, above.

picture of a network of cohesive elite hospitality stretching through the cities of the Greek world, while also foregrounding the possibility that differences of background might contribute to differences in their conversational contributions. There is a similarly frequent though sporadic attention given to the geographical settings of these conversations: some are introduced with no specific setting, while others are carefully grounded in specific occasions and specific cities. In 2.2, for example, we hear of a gathering at Eleusis: 'At Eleusis, after the mysteries, at the height of the festival, we were having dinner at the house of Glaukias the rhetor. When the others had finished eating, Xenokles the Delphian as usual began to tease my brother for his Boeotian gluttony' (2.2 (635a)). The phrase 'as usual' (ὡς ὅτι εἰώθει) lets us in on a world where ease of travel and widespread sharing of a common literary heritage oils the wheels of elite guest-friendship across the Greek world. The stereotype of Boeotians as gluttonous reminds us, however, that it is a world where local difference is still conspicuous, even if frivolously treated. In 7.7, we see Plutarch hosting a similarly cosmopolitan gathering in his home city:

When Diogenianos the Pergamene was visiting in Chaironeia, there was a conversation over drinking about types of entertainment, and we had trouble fighting off a bearded Stoic sophist who brought up Plato's criticism of those who listen to flute-girls in their symposia but who are unable to entertain themselves through conversation. Philip of Prusa, even though he came from the same philosophical stable, told us to forget about those guests of Agathon's, who spoke more pleasantly than any flute or lyre. (7.7 (710b))

The effect of these repeated patterns is to draw attention to the way in which shared Greek culture is formed from Panhellenic diversity. And the world it conjures up, where a cosmopolitan, Hellenic philosophical identity will often be combined with political engagement in specific local contexts, is one which Plutarch himself was committed to throughout his life, in his devotion to his home city of Chaironeia.<sup>62</sup>

Rome can be made a part of this world, as I suggested earlier.<sup>63</sup> The addressee of the *Sympotic questions*, Sosius Senecio, is a Roman politician probably from the west.<sup>64</sup> Plutarch suggests that Senecio can use the text as a

<sup>62</sup> See Jones (1971) 3–64 on Plutarch's career, including detailed discussion of the identity of the many friends mentioned in the *Quaest. conv.* and elsewhere.

<sup>63</sup> See Jones (1971) 48–64 on Plutarch's western friends: Swain (1990) 129–31 on Roman participants learning Greek styles of speech.

<sup>64</sup> See Swain (1996) 426–7 on Senecio's western identity: even if Senecio did not come from the west of the empire, as Swain claims, he nevertheless 'presented himself consistently as a Roman, and held high positions in Trajan's administration', as Stadter (2002) 23, n. 27 points out.

o his own progress in philosophy, using it to reconstruct entertaining edifying conversations he has been involved in. As that suggestion es, Senecio is present at many of the discussions Plutarch describes, g his hand at Greek styles of ingenious, philosophical speech. The same e of a number of other Romans, most conspicuously Mestrius Florus. i Florus and Senecio can hold their own in the philosophical banter of Plutarchan symposium, although both are represented as having things to learn. At one point, for example, Florus, in a fit of ostentatious lenic role-playing, objects to the inclusion of Egyptian material in a ussion; Plutarch takes him to task for failing to realise the capaciousness the Greek interpretative tradition, its capacity to accommodate other tural traditions (5.10 (684f–685a)).

Moreover, it is striking that many of these conversations are set at local tivals, at sympotic gatherings which have a semi-official flavour. Often e symposium hosts are festival officials or local priests, holding small nquets for friends and local notables in their own homes – a common nvention in festivals in the east, where the dividing line between the rivate symposium and the large-scale civic banquet was far from clear. he implication, as I aim to show in the examples which follow, is that he philosophical conversations of Plutarch and his guests are somehow quivalent to the social interaction of sacrificial banquets, and the skills of gonic competition, though Plutarch also hints at differences between them, representing his *quaestiones* as more elevated versions of those festive activities. If we follow the implications of that parallel, sympotic conversa- tion is to be seen as a performance of cultural memory just as much as the processions and sacrifices which traced their way through the city streets of the Greek east so frequently.

Approximately 25 per cent of the *Sympotic questions*' conversations are explicitly set at specified festival occasions<sup>65</sup> (it is difficult to give an exact figure, since in some cases the text makes it difficult to be sure about whether consecutive chapters are held on the same occasion). Of those, I give just two examples. 5.2, first of all, is a discussion of whether or not the poetry contest is the most ancient component of the Pythian games. Plutarch starts the dialogue as follows: 'At the Pythian festival there was a discussion about whether the newer competitions ought to be abolished' (674d). He then he sets out some of the main arguments used on either side. It sounds at

<sup>65</sup> The number of conversations does not correspond to the number of chapters, since some conversations are spread over more than one chapter. I count a total of fifty-seven conversations; of those, I count fourteen which are set at specified festival occasions: 1.10, 2.2, 2.4–5, 2.10, 3.7, 4.1, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.8, 6.10, 7.5 and 9.1–15.

first as though the discussion which Plutarch summarises is a discussion of the opening discussion, but we then learn in the next paragraph that these opening sentences actually refer to a discussion of that topic in a Pythian Council meeting, where Plutarch himself had spoken against making any change to the festival programme:

During the Council meeting I argued against those who wanted to change the established programme and who criticised the contest as if it was a musical instrument with too many strings and too many notes. And then at the dinner which Petraios the agonothete hosted for us, when the same topic of conversation came up again (ὁμοίων λόγων προσπεσόντων), I once again defended the musical arts; and I demonstrated that poetry was not a late and recent addition to the sacred games, but that it had been awarded victory crowns even in the ancient past. (674c–f)

The learned and ingenious styles and topics of speech which we find in Plutarch's symposium conversations seem to be useful and authoritative for more public, official contexts too, in the sense that they contribute to highly publicised decisions about festival programming. Plutarch hints here that there is no clear dividing line between frivolous private speech and authoritative public pronouncement. The phrase ὁμοίων λόγων προσπεσόντων – 'since similar topics of conversation happened to come up at dinner' – backs up the impression of links between the two different types of speech. Plutarchan symposium conversation, by that standard, has political significance, whatever its surface appearance of frivolity.

My second example comes from 8.4:

When the Isthmian games were happening, during the second of Sosipis' spells as agonothete, I avoided most of the dinners, when he entertained together all the foreign visitors, and often all the citizens as well. Once, however, when he invited his closest and most scholarly friends to his home, I was present too. When the first course was cleared away, someone came in bringing a palm-frond and a woven garland to Herodes the rhetor, sent by a famous competitor who had won a contest in the encomium contest. He accepted them, then had them taken away again; and then he said he had no idea why different contests have different types of garland, while all of them alike give palm-fronds as prizes. (723b)

They then proceed to discuss that problem at length. Here we see several characteristic features. For one thing Plutarch hints that the conversational skills which Plutarch and others – like the rhetor Herodes – are displaying are connected with the skills on display in the festival's contests. It is as if Herodes' style of speech – which is in a very loose sense encomiastic, in the sense that his answer to the question under discussion involves him in praising the palm tree – has been the model for his pupil's victory in

the competition. The opening lines also imply that the banquet Plutarch attends is part of Sospis' official duties as agonothe. Plutarch thus represents the conversation as an episode which falls within the boundaries of festival time, although he also insists on his own discriminating dislike of banquets where too many people are present. In that sense the conversations he records are not direct equivalents of general festival practice, but instead are represented as more elevated versions of festival banquets and festival contests as they are most commonly done.

This grounding of philosophical discussion within particular social occasions, even within the bounds of festival time, is, of course, not new for the literary-philosophical symposium tradition.<sup>66</sup> We need only look back to the fourth-century BCE *Symposium* of Xenophon, which shows Socrates and friends relaxing at a banquet held to celebrate the victory of the boy Autolykos in the *pankration* at the Panathenaic games, to see that; or the *Symposium* of Plato, in honour of Agathon's victory at the Dionysia. But Plutarch's text takes this structural feature to a new level by recording a whole range of symposium conversations, set at many different social occasions, and many different festivals, and so driving home the point that the true philosopher can do philosophy in any setting. In choosing that structure for his work, Plutarch offers us glimpses of conventions of festival feasting which we see from a very different angle in the many Imperial-period inscriptions which record provisions made by benefactors for sacrificial banquets.<sup>67</sup> Many of the common features of the banquets those inscriptions record are replayed in a more elevated, philosophically inflected form within the conversations of the *Sympotic questions*.

For readers familiar with the conventions of sacrificial feasting, that resemblance may well have enhanced the sense that the philosophising of Plutarch and his fellow guests was an activity particularly appropriate to festival time. For example, the presence of young men learning from their elders in Plutarch's sympotic dialogues picks up the common motif of young men attending banquets together with their fathers, preparing themselves, presumably, to take up their roles as full citizens.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, banquet

<sup>66</sup> That said, there were models available – which Plutarch chooses not to follow – for almost entirely non-contextualised portrayal of erudite sympotic conversation, perhaps most famously in the sympotic writing of Epicurus, which seems to have conspicuously neglected any detailed attention to dramatic setting: see Usener (ed.) (1887) 115, with reference to several passages of Athenaeus (177b, 182a, 186e, 187b); Plutarch's own familiarity with Epicurus' *Symposium* is clear from a number of references, including, in the *Quaest. conv.*, prologue 1, 3.5 and 3.6.

<sup>67</sup> See Schmitt-Pantel (1992) 255–420 on sacrificial feasting in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, and 471–82 on the way in which Plutarch's *Quaest. conv.* engages with the realities of public banqueting.

<sup>68</sup> See Schmitt-Pantel (1992) 396–7.

inscriptions often stress the presence of foreign visitors in festival banquets, often with particular attention given to Roman visitors, just as Plutarch's text fosters an atmosphere of cosmopolitan hospitality, where Greek cultural tradition can forge unity across local and even Greek/Roman boundaries.<sup>69</sup> Most importantly of all, perhaps, inscriptions celebrating banquets – like inscriptions celebrating festival benefaction or agonistic victory – tend to be very much aware of their part in a series. In some cases, for example, we find inscriptions for individual benefactors recording a whole string of different banquets and distributions spread across the year, each one slightly different from all the others.<sup>70</sup> In other cases, large numbers of almost identical banquet inscriptions seem to have been put up very close to each other within Greek cities, recording each new event through familiar, formulaic language, adjusted only to take account of variations in the identity of benefactors or setting.<sup>71</sup> These inscriptional series conjure up an impression of the recurring rhythms of festival time as something which structures the life of the city. Plutarch draws on those patterns of representation in his *Sympotic questions*, showing us how the recurring rhythms of sympotic conversation are both framed by and equivalent to – though also elevated above – the repeated patterns of the local and Panhellenic festival calendar.

In what sense, then, does Plutarch politicise his patterns of textual organisation? He does so, I have argued, above all by showing us that the gesture of combining the specific and the universal, of drawing universal significance out of fragmented detail, is not only an abstract, intellectual one. It is also, as the framing passages of his dialogues make clear, a process which is central to social and political interaction throughout the Greek east, where Panhellenism always requires an awareness of local specificity. Plutarch repeatedly characterises the speech of himself and his fellow guests as an elevated equivalent of festival competition and display, carried out within a philosophical version of cosmopolitan festival commonsality. In making that equation, he brings an added dimension to his portrayal of the techniques of active reading by which, so he suggests, the diversity of the world can best be understood. It is not only that these techniques find a productive breeding-ground within the cosmopolitan, elite society of the Greek city; they are also, Plutarch suggests, performances which can match the central role played by festival performance

<sup>69</sup> See Schmitt-Pantel (1992) 389–96.

<sup>70</sup> E.g., see the long inscription in honour of the banquets and distributions funded by Epaminondas of Akraiphia at *JG* vii, 2712, with Oliver (1971).

<sup>71</sup> E.g., see the series of second-century CE banquet inscriptions from Syros in *JG* xii, 659–67.



and festival commensality within Hellenic cultural self-definition. The text hints, moreover – by repeated juxtaposition of locally specific dramatic framing with philosophical discussion – that the technique of allowing universal knowledge to emerge from engagement with the smallest and seemingly most insignificant details of argument may be related to the fundamentally Greek instinct, ingrained within centuries of civic ritual and political engagement, of constructing Panhellenic unity through attention to local diversity. I began this chapter with claims about the potential for both thematic and ideological unity to be encoded within the random accumulations of miscellanistic compilation. Plutarch's unwieldy collection of scientific, literary, historical conversations, I have argued, is powerfully, and paradoxically, imbued with both, not only through the complex narrative patterns which lie beneath its surface, carefully designed to provoke response from us as readers if only we can read with proper philosophical attention; but also through the way in which Plutarch imprints those patterns with political resonance, foregrounding their link with the civic and religious rhythms of his contemporary world.

## CHAPTER 3

*Galen and Athenaeus in the Hellenistic library*

John Wilkins

## INTRODUCTION

The ordering of knowledge was a major issue for two writers of the late second and early third centuries CE. Athenaeus in his *Deipnosophistae* (*Sophists at dinner*) and Galen in a number of nutritional and pharmacological treatises set out to review the state of knowledge in the domain of food, nutrition and culture. The Galenic treatises under discussion here, although only a small part of his output, reflect important aspects of his research methodology; of the works of Athenaeus, only the *Deipnosophistae* survives.<sup>1</sup> The *Deipnosophistae* and Galen's treatises on nutrition and pharmacology have in common not only a subject matter based on foods, drinks and medical treatises, but also an aim to research previous technical works and a strategy for cataloguing complex data. The data could be found by library-based research, and tested by experiment and personal experience. Once gathered, this data could be ordered in a list or catalogue, or other format. In this respect, Galen and Athenaeus resemble, for example, the lexicographer Pollux, some of the Hellenistic doctors, and others who produced catalogues in their own and previous centuries, although they apply those techniques rather differently from each other. Galen prefaces his works with chapters or whole books on methodology, while Athenaeus combines cataloguing with anecdote (for which compare Aulus Gellius and Aelian) and sympotic forms that resemble Plutarch's *Sympotic questions*.<sup>2</sup>

The domains of food and pharmacology had become vast and complex by the second century CE. This was partly due to the diversity of practice found in the many Greek and non-Greek cities of the Mediterranean. A second factor was the stimulation to the flow of foods and related goods from Asia into the Mediterranean area that followed the expeditions of

<sup>1</sup> For recent discussions of his treatises on the kings of Syria and a comedy of Archippus see Braund (2000b) and Wilkins (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, above.