

*Fragmentation and coherence in Plutarch's
Symptotic 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 readers¹, 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.¹ At other times, however, these miscellanistic characteristics find their way in a diluted form into works

¹ 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,² 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.³ 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

² 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.

³ 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^b 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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

⁴ E.g., see Gal., *Thnat.* 3–4 for one good example of that.

⁵ 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.

