

Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

THE ROLE OF REALITY IN PLUTARCH'S *QUAESTIONES CONVIVALES*

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Abstract

In his *Quaestiones Convivales*, Plutarch is, if not the first, one of the first to fuse the genres of problem-collection with more traditional symposiastic literature. Later works like Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* and parts of Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* show that the hybrid remained a popular one. This is surely at least partially a function of the lively nature of the *Quaestiones* themselves. Is another part of the attraction the opportunity to look through a window at Plutarch, his private life, and family? If so, does it matter whether or not these dinner parties actually took place? Yes and no, depending on the reader's viewpoint. The literal reality of the dinner parties is a tactic, part of the arsenal of techniques with which Plutarch will lead us to a greater reality that is much more meaningful.

The *QC* open with an address to Sossius Senecio, in which Plutarch tells us what he means to do in these essays, and why he has written them, or written them down:

“...to consign to utter oblivion all that occurs at a drinking-party is not only opposed to what we call the friend-making character of the dining-table, but also has the most famous of the philosophers to bear witness against it, – Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Speusippus, Epicurus, Prytanis, Hieronymus, and Dio of the Academy, who all considered the recording of conversations held at table a task worth some effort,– and since, moreover, you thought that I ought to collect such talk as suits our purpose from among the learned discussions in which I have often participated in various places both at home in your company and among us in Greece, with table and goblet before us, I have applied myself to the task and now send you three of the books, each containing ten questions which we have discussed” (*Mor.* 612E).

Of the authors Plutarch lists above, we have only the symposia by Plato and Xenophon to which we can compare the *QC*. There are obviously many similarities, including the use of historical figures for the participants, and the philosophic nature of the debate, but the *QC* are much more varied in content and setting. Symposiastic authors after Plutarch, notably Athenaeus and Aulus Gellius, continue Plutarch's general format of miscellaneous and learned discussion over the dinner-table, but confine the conversation to one night's dinner. Since he wrote only a century after Plutarch, and since he cites over 1,000 different authors, it seems odd that Athenaeus cites Plutarch of Chaeronea only once, in a passage about a doctor who avoided intoxication by consuming bitter almonds before a symposium (II 52). The fact that there is no other specific mention of Chaeronean Plutarch has led to the suggestion

that this passage was not by Athenaeus, but interpolated (Olson, vol. 1, x-xi). It may be that the Plutarch of Alexandria who is one of the dinner guests is, in fact, a reference, or even compliment, to Plutarch of Chaeronea. This kind of correlation may be true of other Deipnosophists also, like Ulpian (for the jurist Ulpian of Tyre), Philadelphus of Ptolemais (for the Egyptian king Ptolemy Philadelphus), or the philosopher Democritus of Nicomedia (for the philosopher Democritus of Abdera). Since either, neither, or both of those things could be true, it is sufficient here to establish the generic link between some writings of Plutarch and Athenaeus.

Aulus Gellius, writing in the latter third of the second c. CE, was quite familiar with Plutarch's works. He cites Plutarch numerous times, referring to at least four different works, including the *QC*. In fact, his very first essay discusses a lost Plutarchan treatise "on the mental and physical endowment and achievements of Hercules while he was among men" (*NA* 1.1.) In his introduction, Gellius makes it clear that he is using a similar system to Plutarch's own notebooks, or hypomnemata¹, and in fact this is how he explains the character of the *Attic Nights* and where they got their name: "For whenever I had taken in hand any Greek or Latin book, or had heard anything worth remembering I used to jot down whatever took my fancy, of any and every kind, without any definite plan or order; and such notes I would lay away as an aid to my memory, like a kind of literary storehouse, so that when the need arose of a word or a subject which I chanced for the moment to have forgotten, and the books from which I had taken it were not at hand, I could readily find and procure it... And since, as I have said, I began to amuse myself by assembling these notes during the long winter nights which I spent on a country-place in the land of Attica, I have therefore given them the title of *Attic Nights*" (Praef. 4). So in fact, Gellius has a lot more in common with Plutarch in terms of methodology than their mutual authorship of symposiastic literature.

Their very nature makes the *QC* challenging to describe, or categorize any further than this. Once past the basic "nine books, ten questions" format Plutarch himself describes, there is no obvious pattern. All nine books contain some dialogues that are linked dramatically². Some books begin with very long questions, the longest in the book (I, II, IV), but others' longest question is #7 (V) or #6 (VII). The books themselves are of different lengths (IV and IX are missing questions #4 and 5, respectively). Yet it is clear there must be some kind of structure. Plutarch goes to so much trouble to describe the well-made dinner party as something that has little obvious, but much concealed structure³ that it is counterintuitive to assume that there is NOT a similar structure to this work. We do not have to agree with Gellius' statement that symposiastic or convivial literature authors valued quantity above quality (*solam copiam*, praef.

¹ On Plutarch's notebooks, see *De Tranq. An* (*Mor.* 464F with VAN DER STOCKT, 575-79).

² I 2-3; II 4-5, 8-9; III 1-2, 3-5, 7-9; IV 4-6; V 5-6, 8-9; VII 7-8, 9-10; VIII 1-2, 7-8; all of Book IX).

³ *Mor.* 614A: "the height of sagacity is to talk philosophy without seeming to do so..."

11), accumulating material indiscriminately (*sine cura discriminis*) to observe that whatever this structure might be, it is not easily detected.

Harrison has suggested that in the *QC*, Plutarch is not only experimenting with superimposition of the symposiastic form, but in some places is constructing an actual parody, and that an underlying armature, or structure, is in place: "Beyond expanding its scope so that it could encompass all the different genres of *quaestiones*, Plutarch brought an episodic structure to the symposium, which allowed the reader to take up and put down his convivial reminiscences at will and browse through them rather like a collection of poems or fables instead of a work whose argument had to be followed sequentially" (197). Gellius, at any rate, would not agree, rather observing that reading such works brings on fatigue before the reader actually encounters anything worth reading (*NA Praef.* 11). True or not, it would be very difficult to prove such a theory, but it is easy to agree with the suspicion that the *QC* are unlikely to be organized completely randomly, even though the subject matter is wide-ranging and unpredictable.

For it certainly is both. Many essays deal with every-day, human behavior, and have an almost medical cast. "Why Old Men Read Best at a Distance" (*QC* 1.8⁴), for instance, is evidently a problem of very long standing. "Why Women Do Not Eat the Middle Part of Lettuce" (*QC* 4.10) is less of a concern these days. "Why Noises Are Better Heard in the Night than the Day" (*QC* 8.3), "Why in Autumn Men Have Better Stomachs than in Other Seasons of the Year" (*QC* 2.2), and "Which Is the Fittest Time for a Man to Know His Wife?" (*QC* 3.6) are other examples. Some essays are flat-out invitations to debate, such as "What Is Plato's Meaning, When He Says That God Always Plays the Geometer?" (*QC* 8.2), "Whether the Sea or Land Affords Better Food?" (*QC* 4.4), "Which of Venus's Hands Diomedes Wounded?" (*QC* 9.4), or "Whether the Jews Abstained from Swine's Flesh Because They Worshiped That Creature, or Because They Had an Antipathy Against It?" (*QC* 4.5). Other essays, predictably, cover party management. "That one should guard especially against the pleasures derived from degenerate music, and how to do so", which describes with horror a situation where "music can inebriate, more effectively than any wine, those who drink it in as it comes, with no restraint. For the guests were no longer content to shout and clap from their places, but finally most of them leapt up and joined in the dancing with movements disgraceful for a gentleman, though quite in keeping with that kind of rhythm and melody" (*QC* 7.4). There is quite a lot about dancing in the *QC*, as one would expect, as well as much valuable information about parties in general—seating, discussion topics, wine and its effects. Some problems appear to be common to all times: "Concerning Those Guests That Are Called Shadows, and Whether Being Invited by Some to Go to Another's House, They Ought to Go; and When, and to Whom" (*QC* 7.6); others less so, i.e. "Whether it Is Fitting to Wear Chaplets of Flowers at Table" (*QC* 3.1) or "Whether Flute-girls Are to Be

⁴ References to the *QC* henceforth will take the form of book and question number.

Allowed at a Feast” (*QC* 7.7). And there are many scientific questions, such as “Why Fresh Water Washes Clothes Better than Salt?” (*QC* 1.9), “Which Was First the Bird or the Egg?” (*QC* 2.3), “Whether Ivy Is of a Hot or Cold Nature?” (*QC* 3.2), and “What Is the Reason That Hunger Is Allayed by Drinking, but Thirst Increased by Eating?” (*QC* 6.3).

The difficulty in discerning an over-arching structure and the disparity among the various essays may be one reason why an important aspect of scholarly discussion about Plutarch’s *QC* has centered on “authenticity,” that is whether or not something is or is not literally true⁵. This debate assumes that whether or not these dinners took place where, when, and with whom Plutarch describes is crucial to understanding the *QC*: as Teodorsson puts it, “Whether his model works were symposiac dialogues or not, Plutarch’s contribution to the symposiac genre is obvious. This is due specifically to the element of authenticity... This element is essential to the work⁶”. To be fair, Teodorsson does not suggest that Plutarch staged these dinner parties in order to mine the party chatter, nor that he had these dinner-talks recorded, but rather that as he wrote later in life, he remembered them, sometimes even the particular themes. In fact, this is what Plutarch tells us himself:

that he wrote these conversations down sporadically, as each came to mind, evidently expecting readers to view these conversations as invented saying “Nor must my readers be surprised, if though addressing myself to you, I have introduced some of your own past conversation also; for indeed if the getting of knowledge does not insure that one remembers it, frequently the same end is attained by recollection as by learning” (*QC* 2. Intro).

But focusing on the literal reality of the banquets, possibly, is to miss a much larger point. Early in the *QC*, the *grammatikos* Marcus invites debate on Neanthes’ *Sagas of the State*. Fellow banqueter Milo wants to establish the truth of a particular anecdote in the work before commencing discussion. Philopappus says the veracity of the anecdote is not an issue “because the discussion will provide occasion for practice, even if it provides nothing else useful” (*QC* 1.10). The reality described by Plutarch at the dinner parties is just as real for his purposes as a video recording. To insist on “authenticity” or truth as an important lens through which to view the *QC* is to fail to distinguish the subtle differences between and among history, biography, and autobiography. What the *QC* present us with is something a little in between: what at least conveys the texture of what MIGHT have happened, COULD have happened, and periodically HAD in fact happened. For Plutarch’s purposes, this is really all the same thing. He seems to refer to this in *Solon* (27.1):

“That Solon should discourse with Croesus, some think not agreeable with chronology; but I cannot reject so famous and well-attested a narrative, and,

⁵ S.-T. TEODORSSON, vol. 1, 12-13 a good background to this discussion.

⁶ S.-T. TEODORSSON, vol. I, 13.

what is more, so agreeable to Solon's temper, and so worthy his wisdom and greatness of mind, because, forsooth, it does not agree with some chronological canons, which thousands have endeavoured to regulate, and yet, to this day, could never bring their differing opinions to any agreement”.

But Pelling is surely right not to put too much weight on this⁷: “It is simply that the boundary between truth and falsehood was less important than that between acceptable and unacceptable fabrication, between things which were ‘true enough’ and things which were not. Acceptable rewriting will not mislead the reader seriously, indeed readers will grasp more of the important reality if they accept what Plutarch writes than if they do not. Truth matters; but it can sometimes be bent a little” (156).

As far as we know, we do not see flat-out fantasy in the *QC*, and clearly Plutarch cannot stray too far from reality, particularly in terms of the other symposiasts. Philopappus, for instance, was a Roman consul during Trajan's reign. L. Mestrius Florus, the man who obtained Plutarch's Roman citizenship for him, and Sossius Senecio, another Roman consular to whom some of the *Parallel Lives* and *Moralia* are dedicated⁸, also make appearances in the *QC*. We hear about and from many of Plutarch's relatives, like his father, sons, and father-in-law⁹. Some of the banquets take place in Rome, but many are hosted in Chaeronea, providing opportunity for local details on politics, landmarks, and religious festivals. However, in this process, it is dangerous to draw too many or too firm conclusions about Plutarch himself, or his life and family, despite their frequent participation in this essay. Too much inter, or meta, or subtextuality can lead to overreading.

One example of the sort of problem that can arise from mining Plutarch's work for autobiographical elements centers on the answer to the question of why Plutarch resided in Chaeronea, instead of Rome, or at least Athens. At first glance this is straightforward: Plutarch says he chose to stay there because it was such a small town that even one absent citizen would be noticed (*Dem.* 2). Although this is a charming sentiment, it is a little disingenuous to be accepted at face value. Perhaps first and second century CE Athens was a little too Roman for Plutarch, whether that meant expensive, bureaucratic, crowded, impersonal, dangerous, or a combination of the above. Plutarch may not have liked big cities, Rome in particular; he believed that living in a big city was not necessary for living a virtuous and happy life; he did not wish to compete in the international arena any more than was unavoidable through his local political work and his friendship with Roman officials, perhaps because of a kind of apprehensive caution that should not be called by as strong a term as fear. In light of his lack of confidence in his Latin, he could not make use of the library and intellectual resources that would make the expense and stress of life in Rome “worthwhile”. Perhaps his natural diplomacy preferred

⁷ C. B. PELLING, 1990, pp. 143-44, pp. 156-162.

⁸ *Theseus, Demosthenes, Dion; Quomodo quis suos in virtute sentiat profectus.*

⁹ See JONES and PUECH on the various historical personages in Plutarch's writings.

to accentuate the positive aspect of life in Chaeronea rather than deplore the negative aspects of hyperurban life. It is therefore inadequate to accept Plutarch's own descriptions of people and events without further scrutiny, and dangerous to construct evidentiary houses on sand¹⁰.

Yet the characterizations of Plutarch's relatives are vivid, and imply a certain familiarity on the part of his readers, a familiarity confirmed by details. Lamprias, Plutarch's brother or uncle, is said to have spoken up in his "customarily loud voice" (*QC* 1.2); his grandfather Lamprias "was his most ingenious and eloquent self when drinking, and it was his habit to say that, much as incense is volatilized by heat, so was he by wine" (*QC* 1.5). Later one Xenocles of Delphi "as usual" began to tease Plutarch's brother (*QC* 2.2). He refers to the festival Pithoigia, where the new wine is dedicated, saying that "My father had celebrated the ritual, as was his custom" (*QC* 3.7). Plutarch definitely emphasizes the repetitive and familiar, lulling us into participating as invited eavesdroppers. Are these relatives real? Yes. Is their speech and behavior in the *QC* typical? Yes. Did the dinner party conversation happen as reported? Maybe.

And in the end, does authenticity matter? If the characters of Plutarch's *QC* were anonymous, and the banquets declared to be fabrications, we would be dealing with Plutarch's candidly stated own thoughts and ideas, not a free-flowing, evolving, democratically-shaped discussion. But that is not the case. The *QC* are populated by known personages, and Plutarch's statement to Sossius Senecio that he is responding to Sossius' own suggestion in collecting the conversations cannot be complete invention. Plutarch certainly wants us to respond to real people and their real thoughts. To that extent, it matters that banquets certainly took place, and the symposiasts surely at times were together. But as intermediary, Plutarch himself is as much a part of the *QC* as the banquets and conversations spare from which they originated. His choice, organization, and presentation of anecdotes, individuals, and language, as well as some kind of very subtle structure, give us a greater, or enhanced reality than that of the actual banquets. He is in a way the editor of our experience of these banquets, and indispensable to that experience. The *QC* do not need to be authentic to be real and true.

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¹⁰ F. B. TITCHENER, 2002, pp. 140-41; see now ZADOROJNYI, A: "It will emerge from the argument that what we tend to look upon as staple facts about Plutarch's writing career are guarded moves in the game of identity-negotiation" (103).

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