

Frieda KLOTZ, Katerina OIKONOMOPOULOU (eds.), *The Philosopher's Banquet. Plutarch's "Table Talk" in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, XX + 279 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-958895-4, £ 58.00.

This collection of nine essays on Plutarch's *Table Talk*, the result of a colloquium held at the Institute of Classical Studies in London, in March 2007, is a judicious and balanced contribution to the criticism of the *Quaestiones Convivales*, stressing the correlation between this work, modelled on the in Greek well established genre of the symposium, and its context of the Graeco-Roman culture of the High Empire. This series of studies on Plutarch's work raises issues concerning philosophical and literary problems by exploring four angles, Traditions (Part I, pp. 35–73), Topics and Themes (Part II, pp. 77–157), Voice and Authority (Part III, pp. 161–203), and Contradictions (Part IV, pp. 207–237). These few tags produced by the contributors of the volume share one important feature: they approach Plutarch's sympotic dialogue as a product of a communicative intention on the part of its author. With new research and fresh perspective *The Philosopher's Banquet* tells the story of how the *pepaideumenos* of Roman Greece is reading from the archive – as Tim WHITMARSH calls it<sup>1</sup>, “a set of cultural institution, including historical records, libraries and collective memories” accessible to the educated of the Imperial era – to become an important authority for readers in the shaping of their cultural imagination and engagement with the idea of cultural identity.

One of the main aims in this book has been to bring Plutarch's programmatic instability of content and form much more into the foreground than it has been in previous scholarship on the *Table Talk*. The perpetual struggle of opposed ideas (such as that of *spoude* and *geloion*, fiction and authenticity, education and pleasure, order and disorder), the mixing of pre-existent generic matrices, aesthetic perspectives and literary strategies, bind – in Plutarch's attitude towards the world's complexity – past, present and future together in a continuum, in which a backward-looking orientation tends to be dominant. This interdisciplinary view of the *Table Talk* promoted by the contributors of the volume must be called a solid achievement in Plutarchan studies. It is to be hoped that the book will appear as influential in further exploration, both detailed and general, of Plutarchan literary output.

The four above-mentioned parts of the book are preceded with an *Introduction* (pp. 1–31). The stress of the remarks presented here was laid on the correlation between literary-historical analysis and more theoretically oriented models of the interpretation of Plutarch's writing and the importance of the ambiguities regarding numerous issues of the *Table Talk*. The *Introduction* gives the reader a good idea of what the next chapters of the book are like, encapsulating the book's real contribution to Plutarchan criticism.

Part I consists of two valuable productions focused on the tradition. The central issue of the first one (Frances B. TITCHENER, *Plutarch's "Table Talk": Sampling a Rich Blend. A Survey of Scholarly Appraisal*, pp. 35–48) is the presentation of some views of the *Table Talk* in the modern scholarship. In the second paper (Teresa MORGAN, *The Miscellany and Plutarch*, pp. 49–73) a number of essential problems concerning the relationship of Plutarch's literary output to the ancient tradition of writing miscellaneous works has been taken up, and the old dispute whether the miscellany as a genre existed at all has been revisited. TITCHENER's contribution clearly shows how the shifting of scholars' assessments, from descriptive to analytic, and the employment of new conceptual tools in recent works on the *Table Talk* contribute to detect the processes by which Plutarch's text works its effects on its readers. MORGAN's reconsideration of the existence of the genre of miscellany clearly distinguishes modern classicists' use of the term ‘miscellany’ (denoting, as she says

<sup>1</sup> T. WHITMARSH, *Ancient Greek Literature*, Malden 2004, p. VIII.

on p. 54, “a genre composed of technical treatises, literary quotations, or flowers of culture culled by a collector from other authors”) from the wider definition of it comprising (p. 50) “works in any form, by one author or more, on one theme or more, brought together to form a larger work” which includes “works of poetry, history, natural history, geography, mythography, medicine, theology, grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, popular ethics, letters, *belles-lettres* and many more”. By trying to determine the narrow and the wider sense of miscellanies MORGAN prepares the way for reconceptualisation of the genre. She argues that in the period of composition of the *Table Talk* the concept of *enkyklios paideia* gradually developed the significance of “a range of writing, from undoubtedly great literature to works that we might not call literature at all” (p. 60), significant for communicating Greek identity. Morgan links the invention of classicists’ definition of miscellany with the process of establishing the canon which answered the demands of educational purposes in nineteenth-century universities, which dismissed as ‘subliterary’ and unworthy of study a certain kind of literature. Although MORGAN’S account of the difficulties concerning generic definition of ‘miscellany’ seems carefully constructed, her approach must be considered somewhat extreme. The question of the limits of the genre of the miscellany still needs further investigation, as does the issue of the cross-breeding of genres in the Greek literature of the High Empire.

Part II has surveyed a number of essential questions in the scholarship on the philosophic ‘performance’ of wisdom in the *Table Talk*. The opening chapter of this part (Eleni KECHAGIA, *Philosophy in Plutarch’s “Table Talk”. In Jest or in Earnest?*, pp. 77–104) explores the suggestion that “Plutarch constructs and presents the work in such a way that philosophy becomes prominent not just as a topic of discussion, but also (and perhaps more importantly) as a method of approach, whatever the subject matter or question at issue may be” (p. 78). The author of the second chapter of Part II (Katerina OIKONOMOPOULOU, *Peripatetic Knowledge in Plutarch’s “Table Talk”*, pp. 107–130) engages directly with features of transmission of ancient knowledge reflected in the *Quaestiones Convivales*, while the crucial point in the third chapter of this part of the book (Maria VAMVOURI RUFFY, *Symposium, Physical and Social Health in Plutarch’s “Table Talk”*, pp. 131–157) is the presentation of the symposium as a cultural institution creating a paradigm for the *paideia* and healthy life in society.

KECHAGIA’S rediscovery of Plutarch’s taking on the well-established tradition of the literary-philosophical symposium, best represented by Plato’s and Xenophon’s *Symposia*, is in fact nothing more than a repetition of others’ thoroughgoing treatment of the problem. Much more interesting and innovative is her analysis of Plutarch’s programmatic statements: she sensibly provides a contrast to TEODORSSON’S<sup>2</sup> and his followers’ view who treat the proems only as summaries reflecting the content of the books and believe that they were written after the books themselves were composed. A counterweight to this naïve consideration is her examination of the proems as passages aspiring to offer some kind of metatextual instruction. The proems have here been persuasively argued to be programmatic passages with the help of which Plutarch “seems to conceive of and presents the *Table Talk* as a text with an educational agenda and a Platonist philosophical framework” (p. 90). KECHAGIA also shows, in my view conclusively, that the *Table Talk* presents the two-tier sympotic philosophy and provides instruction for “beginners” in philosophical inquiry as well as for the philosophically-versed readers.

OIKONOMOPOULOU presents the essential information concerning the recollection of Peripatetic knowledge in the *Table Talk*. She does not do it in *Quellenforschung*-like fashion, but tries to establish the place of Peripateticism within an oral framework, primarily – as she wrote on p. 107 – “in the *scenarios* of oral reception and transmission of Peripatetic knowledge”. Her discussion of the role of self-reflexivity in Plutarch’s work offers the readers a good preliminary overview of

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<sup>2</sup> S.-T. TEODORSSON, *Principles of Composition in the “Quaestiones Convivales”*, in: J.A. FERNÁNDEZ DELGADO, F. PARDOMINGO PARDO (eds.), *Estudios sobre Plutarco: Aspectos Formales. Actas del IV Simposio Español sobre Plutarco*, Madrid 1996, pp. 39–48.

the areas that attract Jason KÖNIG's greatest attention in the chapter in Part III of the book. Being comparable, in methodology and scope, to others' modern approaches to memory as the key factor that helps people of the Imperial era to reactivate their knowledge, OIKONOMOPOULOU radically reevaluates the role of the performance of cultural memories in Plutarch's conception of education.

VAMVOURI RUFFY's main interest lies in medicine as an integral element of sympotic discourse. Her study contains useful observations concerning the therapeutic effects of philosophy as practised at the symposium. From the presentation of various aspects of 'being healthy' in the *Table Talk* the integration emerges which reveals Plutarch's vision of life in society.

It is worth saying that all three papers in this part of the book demonstrate beyond any doubt Plutarch's contribution to the discussion of the function of the symposium for obtaining well-being both in body and in soul. Plutarch's *Table Talk*, marked by a tasteful balance between entertainment and instruction, takes its place in the tradition of philosophical and rhetoric concern with the opposition *spoude/paidia*. Let us add in this place that it is very tempting to consider Plutarch's voice emerging from the *Table Talk* as the affirmation of a similar idea which has been expressed by an anonymous author of a progymnastic composition dated to the second half of the first century CE, probably connected with a Second Sophistic context<sup>3</sup>, that presents a physical origin of laughter/play and suggests another (probably intellectual) origin of *spoude*<sup>4</sup>. Convivial events are – in Plutarch's view – the best occasion for establishing a link between physical and mental training, showing that psychic and somatic affection, although different in their origins, are interrelated.

Two studies included in Part III (Frieda KLOTZ, *Imagining the Past. Plutarch's Play with Time*, pp. 161–178, and Jason KÖNIG, *Self-Promotion and Self-Effacement in Plutarch's "Table Talk"*, pp. 179–203) concentrate on particular points concerning the *Table Talk* as an engaging and eloquent work in which the auctorial voice is self-consciously constructed to reflect its implicit poetics. KLOTZ reprises themes from her article entitled *Portraits of the Philosopher: Plutarch's Self-Representation in the "Quaestiones Convivales"*, published in CQ LVII 2007, where she set out her view of Plutarch's paideutic logic and traced the paradigm of the philosopher-teacher. Here, as the title promises, she modified her earlier text to stress the importance of the achronological structure of self-presentation in the course of Plutarch's sympotic discourse, suggesting that such a play with time is an element encouraging the reader to detect consistency in the figure of the philosopher, despite the diversity of the character 'Plutarch'. KLOTZ's paper displays interpretative acumen and sensitivity to the nuances of a multi-faceted portrayal of Plutarch himself.

KÖNIG's chapter is one of the collection's highlights. It explores the problem of the use and avoidance of the first person in some scientific, miscellanistic and sympotic texts of the Imperial prose and situates Plutarch's practice in this respect against the background of his contemporaries' literary strategies. It also deals with the force of quotation, which in such works as the *Table Talk* is not a static ornament, but an important element through which the author builds "the tension [...] between the personal and the communal, between the personal ingenuity of the symposiast and the words of his long-dead predecessors" (p. 203). Citation, KÖNIG shows, is in Plutarch's hands not only a device used to advertise his own erudition, but a principal way of playing with cultural reference and an important tool with help of which he stresses the community with the Greek past. KÖNIG is well versed in modern approaches towards the problem of Plutarch's literary ego and convincingly presents himself as a scholar who brings renewed vitality and a fresh look to the traditional concerns.

<sup>3</sup> *P. Oxy.* 5093 published by D. COLOMO, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* XCVII 2011, pp. 94 f.

<sup>4</sup> A part of the witty argumentation is: "In (our) bodies there are some origins of laughter – indeed by touching and palpating some parts (of the body) we produce laughter – but there is no origin of seriousness, since there is no part in us by touching which we will produce seriousness" (transl. by COLOMO). For the whole surviving text and commentary see COLOMO, *op. cit.* (n. 3), pp. 84–96.

In the last part of the collection, Christopher PELLING's succinct contribution (*Putting -viv- into 'Convivial': The "Table Talk" and the "Lives"*, pp. 207–231) is directly concerned with Plutarch's method of work. The search for this involves looking at the phenomenon of 'cross-fertilization', i.e. cases where works read 'for' a particular *Life* can be seen to provide material for the *Table Talk* or vice versa. Although the chapter focuses narrowly on the small amount of evidence which proves that the *Lives*-material has been also elaborated in the *Table Talk*, it also paints a larger picture of Plutarch the writer, who does not routinely recycle material once used in his work. PELLING's point of view presented in this chapter, anticipated by his earlier papers published in the 1970s, instructively and clearly demonstrates how Plutarch uses his learning and puts his skill at the service of readers' pleasure.

The book ends with the *Conclusion* in which one aspect of the wide field of the *Table Talk's* *Nachleben* has been taken up, namely the presence of this work in Aulus Gellius' miscellanistic text (*Reading (from) the "Table Talk" in Aulus Gellius' "Attic Nights"*, pp. 233–237). The authors of this final part of the book develop further the recent general discussion of the nature of the process of cultural translation in the Imperial era. Concentrating their attention on the practice of evaluating by Plutarch's near-contemporary, they would agree, I dare say, that as for Taurus, the philosopher from Gellius's work, who calls the writer from Chaeronea "Plutarchus noster, vir doctissimus ac prudentissimus" (*NA* I 26), also for other members of Imperial elite Plutarch has already become a classic.

The reader who starts reading this important book from the very beginning finds its *Preface* (pp. V–VIII) very instructive. Therein, the illustration on the book's dust-jacket is described. It shows a detail from the mosaic from the House of Dionysus in Paphos on Cyprus which depicts the god of wine and two figures, named by the inscription above them as Acme and Icarus. The illustration does not only adorn the book, but is additionally intended to function as a visual motto for the book. It namely offers, as the authors explain, paradigms for understanding the activities the figures in the mosaic are engaged in, paradigms relevant to Plutarch's convivial pedagogy. It is a pity that some important elements of the mosaic have not been shown (the authors limited themselves only to the verbal description of them in the *Preface*) so that the reader must only imagine the figures of *hoi protoi oinon piontes*, the first drinkers, i.e. Icarus' neighbours who are representative of excessive drinking juxtaposed with Dionysus' and Acme's civilised way of tasting wine. It would be more convenient to have the illustration representing the figures from both ends of the panels inside the book itself, not on the dust-jacket, which in the libraries is usually removed from the book on open shelves (to whose, library staff's or readers', convenience?). By the way, the authors unquestioningly follow the mosaic's interpretation proposed by KONDOLÉON<sup>5</sup> who seems not entirely right to treat Acme only as the personification of temperance<sup>6</sup>, in the Greek sense 'nothing in excess'. It is upsetting not to find references to other important scholarly texts on the subject, for instance Wiktor DASZEWSKI's significant contribution<sup>7</sup> which makes us aware of the ambiguity of Acme's significance and her occasional appearance in ancient myth and literature.

The book provides the reader with valuable discussion of a large amount of topics. They can be easily located by the use of indexes. The Greek quotations are given in the majority of cases in the original and in English translation which makes the passages from the ancient texts understandable also for those inexperienced in Greek. The authors aim the chapters of the book at scholars, but also hope "they will be read by students, just as we would like to think the *Table Talk* itself was read or heard by Plutarch's own students" (p. 31). They seem, however, sometimes to underrate

<sup>5</sup> C. KONDOLÉON, *Domestic and Divine: Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysos*, Ithaca–London 1995, p. 183.

<sup>6</sup> On p. VI the authors explicitly say: "the name signifies 'temperance'".

<sup>7</sup> W.A. DASZEWSKI, *Figural Mosaic from Paphos: Subjects, Style, and Significance*, in: W.A. DASZEWSKI, D. MICHAELIDES (eds.), *Mosaic Floors in Cyprus*, Ravenna 1988, p. 171.

students' skill when they explain elementary things such as "Dionysus – the ancient Greek god of wine" (p. V) or – when speaking of an aetiological myth – they add: "from the Greek word *aition* or *aetion* in Latin form, meaning 'cause'" (p. VI).

To conclude, the *Philosopher's Banquet* is a book in which one can find convincing answers to many questions in the field of Plutarchan studies and that wider field of the culture-specific poetics of Graeco-Roman times. It will serve scholars for years.

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