III. LEARNING IN ABUNDANCE: THE RAMIFICATIONS OF PLUTARCH'S ERUDITION

The open-minded and penetrating search for the truth is the driving force of Plutarch's philosophy. Yet this search does not start from scratch: Plutarch knew very well that he was heir to an age-old tradition and it was never his ambition to re-invent the wheel. On the contrary, whether he was looking for the explanation of physical phenomena, discussing metaphysical questions, offering moral guidance, or dealing with history, he always tried to fall back on earlier insights. This, of course, does not imply that Plutarch was opposed to innovative answers (cf. *Quaest. conv.* 656D, where 'Plutarch' announces that he will 'stir up something of his own', ἴδιόν τι κινεῖν) but, for him, innovation should always be informed by a learned dialogue with the rich tradition. Sound philosophical *zetesis*, then, presupposes considerable erudition.

The importance of polymathy emerges from every page of Plutarch's work. It shines through in the enormous number of quotations from and allusions to other authors (not only famous but also minor ones).[1] It also comes to the fore in collections like the *Sayings of kings and commanders* or the *Spartan sayings*. These works contain a real treasury of *chreiai*, pithy sayings of famous statesmen that throw light upon their characters and thus help in developing our moral understanding. Many of them reappear in the *Parallel Lives*, which overflow with erudition as well.[2] And the treatise *On Isis and Osiris* contains an amazing quantity of references to Egyptian rites and myths (see below, Chapter VII, §6).

In this context, special mention must be made of the *Table Talk*. This is Plutarch's most extensive work after the *Parallel Lives* and it constitutes a major source for his thinking and writing.[3] It consists of

[1] A list of Plutarch's quotations can be found in Helmbold and O'Neil 1959 (although the list is not always reliable and notoriously incomplete on the Latin side). The abundance of quotations makes intertextuality an interesting hermeneutic tool for the interpretation of Plutarch's works; see, e.g., Gallo 2004; Sanz Morales *et al.* 2017; Schmidt *et al.* 2020.

[2] On the complicated relation between the *Apophthegmata* collections and the *Parallel Lives*, see Pelling 2002: 65–90, and Stadter 2008 and 2014; see also below, Chapter V, §5.

[3] And even, up to a certain extent, for his persona. On Plutarch's self-presentation in the *Table Talk*, see esp. Klotz 2007; J. König 2011; Vamvouri Ruffy 2012: 23–5; Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2013.

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nine books in which he gives an account of the many conversations he had with his friends over wine. Few would still regard these talks as the *ipsissima verba* that were uttered during these symposia, or again as a purely literary fiction. In all likelihood, they present an idealized and artistically embellished picture that nevertheless has some historical basis.[4] The *Table Talk* should be placed in the tradition of *Symposium* literature but Plutarch also combines it with other genres (such as *problemata* and miscellany) and fully integrates it into the overarching framework of his own philosophy.[5]

In what follows, let us participate in a few drinking parties and follow the animated conversations. They will introduce us to a fascinating world in which manifold erudition is coupled with *savoir vivre* and conviviality.

1. Talking philosophy over wine

The first dinner party brings us to Athens. There, the company discusses the question if and to what extent philosophical talk should have a place in discussions over wine.[6] Ariston immediately expresses his astonishment, wondering whether there really are people who refuse to allow philosophers to participate in their parties (*Quaest. conv.* 612F). This is a motif that often returns in the *Table Talk*: even before the discussion really starts, the relevance of the topic is called into question. We are clearly among critical men who do not take anything for granted. On some occasions, this indeed entails a reorientation of the discussion (e.g. 626F–627A; 720D). In this case, 'Plutarch' confirms that such people do exist and recalls some of their arguments: philosophy is like the mistress of the house, who remains absent from drinking parties. The Persians, moreover, got drunk and danced with their concubines rather than with their wives, and even Isocrates

[4] See Titchener 2011: 39: the *Table Talk* presents us with 'what might have happened, could have happened, and periodically had in fact happened'. On the problem of the historicity of the *Table Talk*, see above, Chapter I, §3, with the literature mentioned in n. 19 of that chapter.

[5] On Plutarch's place in *Symposium* literature, see Teodorsson 2009; Klotz and Oikonomopoulou 2011: 13–18; see also Roskam 2010 on Plutarch's reception of Plato's and Xenophon's *Symposia*. On the importance of the προβλήματα tradition for the *Quaest. conv.*, see Klotz and Oikonomopoulou 2011: 18–21 (and, more generally, Harrison 2000; Oikonomopoulou 2013); on that of the miscellany, see Morgan 2011. Every study of Plutarch's *Table Talk* should start from the commentary of Teodorsson 1989, 1990, and 1996. Much valuable material can also be found in Montes Cala *et al.* 1999 and Ribeiro Ferreira *et al.* 2009.

[6] The talk is discussed in Schenkeveld 1996 and Klotz 2014: 210–14.

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refused to speak at drinking parties because his expertise did not suit the occasion (καιρός) (612F–613A). The consistent use of the third person (εἰσίν, λέγουσι, φασι, ἀξιοῦσι) suggests that 'Plutarch' dissociates himself from this position, yet even this view is carefully argued by means of several elements borrowed from the tradition. Such convictions deserve to be mentioned and considered, and in fact challenge further reflection.

The challenge is accepted by Crato, who argues that philosophy, as the art of life (τέχνη περὶ βίον), regulates and orders all aspects of life and therefore also has its proper place at dinner parties. Thus the school doctrines about appropriate symposiastic conduct can be put into practice (613A–C). Crato's straightforward defence of philosophy may *prima facie* appear as the obvious answer for a circle of learned men like 'Plutarch' himself, yet it is not without bias: indeed, whereas Isocrates may have overemphasized the demands of the particular *kairos*, Crato risks neglecting them altogether, and it is no longer clear what the difference is between the philosopher's school and the banquet. Thus Crato, in spite of all his sympathetic enthusiasm for philosophy, cannot have the last word. Sosius Senecio intervenes and wonders about the precise limit and character of philosophical talk at such parties. This is a cleverly courteous reply, generously supporting the previous speaker (613C: 'it is not fitting to argue [with Crato] about this', οὐκ ἄξιον εἶναι… περὶ τούτων ἀντιλέγειν) while asking for further clarification.

Then, it is 'Plutarch''s turn to take up the gauntlet. He deals with the question from two angles. On the one hand, much depends on the character of the guests: if the majority of them are scholars, philosophical discussions should not be avoided, but if the company mainly consists of uncultivated men, the philosopher should adapt himself to their interests, try to philosophize without seeming to do so (φιλοσοφοῦντα μὴ δοκεῖν φιλοσοφεῖν), and accomplish the actions of the serious while jesting (614A). On the other hand, the topics of discussion should be adapted to the symposiastic atmosphere: 'The matters of enquiry (ζητήσεις) must be in themselves rather fluid (ὑγροτέρας), the topics (τὰ προβλήματα) familiar, the subjects for investigation suitably uncomplicated, so that the less intellectual guests may neither be stifled nor turned away' (614D).

'Plutarch' here mentions essential aspects that characterize many of the following table talks and it is surely no coincidence that this self-reflexive and programmatic discussion about the place of

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philosophy at dinner parties is placed at the very beginning of the work. First, the concern for conviviality and friendship (συμποτικὴ κοινωνία; 615A) is a leitmotif through the whole work. The scholarly but relaxed and entertaining conversations always promote socially acceptable, moderate behaviour and cultivate friendship.[7] Second, the company often consists of people with quite different kinds of expertise: philosophers, grammarians, rhetoricians, physicians, priests, local politicians, and so on. Yet they should all collaborate and examine the issue from their own point of view.[8] One answer is not necessarily better than another one. In fact, the juxtaposition of different perspectives, all put forward by specialists, adds to the erudite character of the discussion and yields the most substantial and profound investigation into the different aspects of the problem. Such a combination of complementary perspectives fits in very well with the symposiastic context[9] but no less with the dynamics of a philosophical *zetesis* and its essential openness to the value of every answer. Conviviality and philosophical search for the truth thus form a perfect match, which makes the accumulation of erudition in the *Table Talk* the result of a well-balanced συμποτικὴ συζήτησις, 'convivial co-enquiry'.

Third, this interaction between *zetesis* and conviviality also has implications for the topics to be discussed over wine, which should be 'fluid' (ὑγρός) – that is, they should easily spread over the whole company.[10] This excludes overtechnical issues and political matters that risk causing disruption and calls instead for intriguing subjects that cause wonder and thus stimulate philosophical reflection. Just a few examples of such questions that are raised at Plutarch's dinner parties:

Why do old men hold writing at a greater distance for reading? (625C–626E)
Why do men become hungrier in autumn? (635A–D)
Did the hen or the egg come first? (635E–638A)
Why does meat spoil more readily in moonlight than in sunlight? (657F–659D)
Why is hunger appeased by drinking but thirst increased by eating? (689A–690B)
What is the reason why alpha stands first in the alphabet? (737D–738C)

[7] These conversations also have a therapeutic dimension, as is shown by Vamvouri Ruffy 2011 and 2012.

[8] *Quaest. conv.* 614E; 643B; 644F; 660B; 664D; 679A–B; 694B; 697D; *Sept. sap. conv.* 154D and 155C. Collaboration, of course, strengthens the bonds of friendship between all those present. On friendship as the final goal of the dinner parties, see Van der Stockt 2000a: 94.

[9] Cf. J. König 2011: 195–202 and Oudot 2016: 13.

[10] Cf. Vamvouri Ruffy 2012: 67–75.

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All of these questions, and many more, illustrate what Plutarch means by 'fluid' matters of enquiry. They often concern observations taken from everyday life which are not self-evident as such and thus challenge our intellect and call for explanations. Plato may long since have explained the basic outlines of the structure of the world, but what about all these striking details which everybody recognizes but about which the doctrines of the Demiurge, the Ideas, and perfect virtue largely keep silent? All this leaves ample room for clever thinking that mobilizes all available insights from the past in order to throw light on such details. By thus integrating 'fluid' questions and tremendous erudition, Plutarch admirably succeeds in both having and eating both his philosophical and his symposiastic cake.

Alongside the *Table Talk*, Plutarch contributed to the *Symposium* literature with a second work: *The Banquet of the Seven Sages*. This is an account of a dinner in which the Seven Sages took part, together with other figures, at the house of the tyrant Periander.[11] Again, the company entertains itself by a vivid and pleasant conversation about sympotic issues and food, household management, and even politics.[12] The work, which is concluded by some remarkable stories about dolphins illustrating divine providence, resembles the *Table Talk* in more than one respect, yet there are also several differences that can at least partly be explained by the difference in setting. The dinner of the Seven Sages takes place in days long gone, at the very beginning of the intellectual tradition, which precludes the incorporation of later insights. Yet even this work contains a great amount of erudition: Homer and Hesiod,[13] apophthegms of the Sages, Aesop's fables, riddles – in short, an extremely rich collection of primeval wisdom, coupled with prefigurations of later views,[14] and incorporated in a polished literary dialogue. The erudition of the sages involved less theoretical sophistication, no doubt, yet the work shows that the germs of convivial *syzetesis* were present from the very beginning.

[11] In Plutarch's version, the Seven Sages are Anacharsis, Bias, Chilon, Cleobulus, Pittacus, Solon, and Thales. See Defradas 1954: 16–28 or Lo Cascio 1997: 39–65 for good overviews of all the characters of the dialogue. For Plutarch's creative and innovative reception of the tradition of the 'Seven Sages', see Leão 2008: 484–8 and 2009.

[12] Other topics include love (Mossman 1997b: 126–34) and death (Jazdzewska 2013). On the motif of laughter in *The Banquet of the Seven Sages*, see Jazdzewska 2016.

[13] Stamatopoulou 2014.

[14] See, e.g., Aalders 1977 on the political philosophy of *The Banquet of the Seven Sages*.

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2. Revealing the secrets of nature

Back to Plutarch's day. The next dinner party is hosted by L. Mestrius Florus, one of Plutarch's distinguished Roman friends (see above, Chapter I, §3). The point of departure for this conversation is a question of the grammarian Theon to Themistocles the Stoic (626E–F):

> When we were being entertained at the house of Mestrius Florus, Theon the grammarian raised the question with Themistocles the Stoic why Chrysippus never gave an explanation for any of the strange and extraordinary things he frequently mentions: for example, 'salted fish are fresher if wetted with brine'; 'fleeces of wool yield less easily if one tears them apart violently than if one parts them gently'; and 'people who have fasted eat more deliberately than those who have taken food beforehand.'

The topics which Theon mentions have everything to arouse the curiosity of those present and thus perfectly qualify as 'fluid' issues for discussion. Yet Theon also risks violating the rules of the symposiastic game,[15] for his question clearly has anti-Stoic polemical overtones and thus forces Themistocles onto the defensive. The friendly atmosphere is jeopardized and Themistocles' unimpressed reply does little to create a better atmosphere. He briefly reminds Theon of the context and scope of Chrysippus' remarks and then abruptly reorients the discussion. Such questions, he argues, are none of his business. If Theon is indeed interested in looking for causes, he should rather stick to what he knows and wonder why Homer has made Nausicaä do her washing in the river instead of the sea (626F–627A). Themistocles thus shrewdly parries the question and avoids a technical defence of Chrysippus, which would be ill-suited to the occasion. Instead, he raises another 'fluid' question: why should we wash clothes in rivers rather than in the sea? Again we deal with one of the everyday things of life, which Themistocles subtly connects with a passage from Homer (*Od.* 6.59). Thus he seems to push Theon back into the field of his own grammatical expertise. Yet appearances are deceptive, for upon closer inspection, Themistocles' reply is less fair than it seems, since the answer to his Homeric question cannot be derived from Homer but presupposes quite some familiarity with philosophy of nature.

[15] This is a recurrent motif in the *Table Talk*, where grammarians frequently appear as 'problem symposiasts'; see Eshleman 2013 (esp. 154–7 for an excellent discussion of the character of Theon in this talk).

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Nevertheless, Theon is able to cope with that and he claims that the problem has long been solved by Aristotle (fr. 217 Rose).[16] The latter has shown that sea water contains much earthy matter, whereas fresh water is pure and thus better soaks into clothes and dissolves stains (627A–B). For 'Plutarch', however, this explanation is 'plausible, not true' (πιθανῶς, οὐ μὴν ἀληθῶς). He prefers an alternative explanation, which he traces back to Aristotle's authority as well: sea water is oily and therefore does not clean efficiently (627B–D; cf. [Arist.] *Pr.* 932b4 and 18; 933a19; 935b18). Then, quite remarkably, 'Plutarch' adds yet another explanation (κατ' ἄλλον τρόπον): what dries quickest appears cleanest, and fresh water evaporates quicker than sea water (627D). At this moment, however, Theon interrupts: this explanation is undermined by Aristotle, who argues that people who bathe in the sea dry off more quickly than those who use fresh water (627D, with reference to *Pr.* 932b25). 'Plutarch' counters by referring to Homer, whose account of Odysseus' encounter with Nausicaä actually implies the opposite (627E–F, quoting *Od.* 6.137, 6.218–19, and 6.226).

This lively talk again illustrates the extraordinary cleverness and creativity in Plutarch's search for explanations. As usual, the different speakers avoid apodictic truth claims. Indeed, the phrase 'plausible, not true' suggests that 'Plutarch' does not come up with the definitive truth. Tellingly enough, he proposes two different explanations. Concerning such questions, plausibility is the best result we can obtain and 'Plutarch' can equally well question Theon's presuppositions and preferences as Theon does those of 'Plutarch'.

As a matter of fact, there is quite some competition in this conversation.[17] In particular, the competitiveness of the characters manifests itself in their eagerness to intrude into each other's domain of expertise. The grammarian Theon comments on the problems of Chrysippus' philosophy. The Stoic Themistocles raises a Homeric question. Theon refutes the philosopher 'Plutarch' by pointing to Aristotle. 'Plutarch' replies by referring to Homer, an authority that may especially appeal to the grammarian Theon (627E). They all wish to score points regarding problems that do not belong to their

[16] The question is not discussed at length in the surviving collection of *Problemata*, but for several aspects of Theon's explanation parallels can be found there; see Teodorsson 1989: 148–50.

[17] As elsewhere in the *Quaestiones convivales*: see Van der Stockt 2000a: 95; J. König 2011: 189; Stadter 2011: 245. On the many 'disruptive symposia' that appear in the *Lives*, see several contributions in Ribeiro Ferreira *et al.* 2009: 193–260.

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own expertise. This obviously illustrates their great erudition, but it also lends a certain charm to their conversation. For indeed, nothing suggests that the element of competition destroys the light-hearted atmosphere of sympotic friendship. It rather reflects an aspect that is part and parcel of an age-old sympotic tradition, namely the motif of the contest (ἀγών) between those present.[18] At the same time, such a contest directly contributes to a zetetic attitude: by intellectually challenging one another, the speakers all come closer to the truth.

Plutarch's interest in questions of natural philosophy can also be seen in several other works. In the *Natural questions*, for instance, he proposes alternative answers to forty-one questions regarding different natural phenomena. The work stands in the tradition of the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, and Plutarch frequently falls back on explanatory models that are derived from Aristotelian-Peripatetic philosophy (although other material is used as well).[19] The focus is primarily on natural causality and the divine cause is seldom alluded to.[20] As a result, Plutarch's explanations again aim at plausibility rather than certainty, since firm knowledge of the sensible phenomena of the sublunary realm is beyond human reach.[21] That does not mean, however, that all painstaking efforts to explain these phenomena are in vain and that Plutarch ends up with radical scepticism. His different explanations often clarify the general working and structure of our natural world and some of them may even be combined. Several times, indeed, alternative explanations are introduced by ἢ καί ('or is it also…'), with the copulative καί suggesting that these explanations do not exclude each other.[22] All answers have their relative value (see above, Chapter II, §2). None can lay claim to the full and definitive truth, but none is completely redundant either. Even solutions that are explicitly criticized by Plutarch still deserve mention and clarify at least a few aspects of the problem. It is clear, then, that the *Natural questions* are inspired by the spirit of Plutarch's zetetic philosophy. This is neither a dry classification of previous views nor the product

[18] See esp. J. Martin 1931: 127–39.
[19] Oikonomopoulou 2011; Meeusen 2016: 67–75 and *passim*; cf. Kechagia 2011a: 97–9.
[20] Meeusen 2013 and 2016: 264–74.
[21] Kechagia 2011a: 95–6 and 99–104; Meeusen 2014: 331–4 and 2016: 321–8.
[22] See *Quaest. nat.* 917C (two instances; the second one in particular is remarkable: ἢ καὶ τὸ λεγόμενον ὑπ' Ἀριστοτέλους ἀληθές ἐστιν ('or is what Aristotle says also true?'); cf. Meeusen 2016: 324); 919A; 919D. It also frequently appears in the *Roman questions*: 267E; 270B (ἢ καὶ τὸ τοῦ Θεμιστοκλέους ἔχει λόγον, 'or does Themistocles' saying make some sense too?'); 273E; 279E; 279F; 288B.

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of a 'secretary of nature',[23] but scrupulous *zetesis* that combines open-mindedness and erudition with philosophical love of the truth.

A similar conclusion holds true for *On the principle of cold*. In this treatise, dedicated to Favorinus, Plutarch argues that cold is not a privation of warmth but has its own principle (945F–948A). Then he examines what this principle might be: the arguments of the Stoics, who think it to be air (948D–949F), and of Empedocles and Strato, who attribute it to water (949F–952C), are critically evaluated, whereupon Plutarch elaborates alternative arguments in support of the thesis that earth is the principle and essence of coldness (952D–955C). The work ends with an emphatic disclaimer: Favorinus has to decide himself whether he regards Plutarch's arguments as more plausible or prefers to suspend judgement (955C). Again, this need not imply that Plutarch's last word on the matter is one of radical scepticism. It is not unlikely that he regarded his own view as the more plausible one,[24] yet he was intelligent and open-minded enough to recognize possible limitations of his view, and fair enough to leave the final evaluation to his reader.

In the dialogue *On the face that appears in the orb of the moon*, Plutarch turns his attention to the moon. In the first part of the work, Lamprias argues against the Stoic Pharnaces that the moon has an earthly character and explains that the face that can be seen in the moon is nothing other than great depths and clefts containing water or misty air (935C).[25] Theon then raises the question of the moon's habitability (937D) and thus of its purpose. This is a smooth transition towards the concluding myth (see also above, Chapter II, §2) where this issue is further developed. The dialogue thus shows a perfect thematic unity: first the physical causes are dealt with, then the higher ones.[26] The first section refers to technical theories about catoptrics, eclipses, and the place and substance of the moon. Once again, an impressive amount of erudition is used to arrive at a plausible view of the moon. In the second part, the previous survey is placed in a new perspective and all material is presented in the literary framework of a polished

[23] This is Atticus' characterization of Aristotle (fr. 7.46–7).
[24] Boys-Stones 1997a.
[25] The first part of the work is still understudied, although much valuable work has been done by Görgemanns 1970 and Donini 2011b.
[26] Donini 2011a: 327–39 and 2011b: 71–4 and *passim*; Opsomer 2017.

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dialogue that has everything necessary to arouse the admiration of Kepler himself.

We may finally point to Plutarch's works on animals.[27] In the introduction to the most extensive one, viz. *Are land or sea animals cleverer?*, Autobulus and Soclarus deal with the problem of hunting against the background of a Stoic and Peripatetic dilemma: if beasts are rational, we are either unjust to them if we kill them, or our life becomes impossible if we do not eat them (963F–964A).[28] If we are convinced that beasts have no share in reason whatsoever, the problem is solved of course, but Autobulus is willing to ascribe at least a certain degree of rationality to beasts. This calls for a more moderate and humane position (965A–B):

> Living is not abolished nor life terminated when a man has no more platters of fish or pâté de foie gras or mincemeat of beef or kids' flesh for his banquets – or when he no longer, idling in the theatre or hunting for fun, compels some beasts against their will to stand their ground and fight, while he destroys others which have not the instinct to fight back even in their own defence. For I think the man who plays and enjoys himself should use cheerful partners in his game, not the sort of which Bion spoke when he remarked that boys throw stones at frogs for fun, but the frogs no longer die for fun, but truly.

Then Aristotimus and Phaedimus engage in a kind of contest, the former arguing that land animals are cleverer (965E–975C), the latter advocating the case of sea animals (975C–985C). Both present many examples of conspicuous animal behaviour that suggest at least sparks of rationality. All these descriptions presuppose careful observation of nature, notably of animals, but this observation was probably not done by Plutarch himself. He rather falls back on earlier authors. The work, in other words, is the product of his reading.[29]

The contest between Aristotimus and Phaedimus ends in a draw: Soclarus concludes that the two should join forces against the Stoics (985C). This, surely, is a clever vote: Soclarus avoids making a difficult choice and thus takes care that neither youth has to taste defeat. Instead, both are encouraged to maintain their position and henceforth

[27] A topic that has especially been discussed by Newmyer (e.g. 2006 and 2014); see also Boulogne 2005 and Horky 2017.

[28] See Jazdzewska 2009–10, who argues that Plutarch's view of hunting in this work should be understood in the light of his criticism of Roman *venationes*.

[29] Newmyer 2014: 225. This holds true for Plutarch's philosophy of nature in general: see Meeusen 2014: 313–14 and Longo 1992: 229 (on *On the principle of cold*).

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collaborate – a nice sample of pedagogical subtlety and psychological refinement. Moreover, Soclarus lays bare the far-reaching philosophical implications of their arguments, viz. the problems which the Stoic view entails. At the same time, he keeps silent about more concrete consequences, such as vegetarianism or giving up hunting.

For such a position, we have to turn to *On the eating of flesh*, two short and mutilated speeches in which the eating of flesh is rejected with many rhetorical arguments that appeal no less to emotions than to reason. The thesis of the rationality of animals is also defended, in a particularly smart and original way, in *Gryllus*, an amusing dialogue between Odysseus and 'Grunter', a man who has been transformed by Circe into a pig.[30] Odysseus has asked Circe to turn all the Greek men whom she has changed into beasts back into their human shapes, but 'Grunter' sharply protests. He prefers to remain a pig, since he considers this condition far superior to that of a man. Indeed, he shows Odysseus how he, as a pig, easily surpasses humans in all virtues. 'Grunter' thus radicalizes the position of Aristotimus and Phaedimus regarding the rationality of the beasts.

It is clear that questions of natural philosophy occupy an important place in Plutarch's thinking. This is a field of wide learning, with ample opportunities for creative thinking, and of interest to every polyhistor. No wonder, then, that we began this section with a learned grammarian and conclude it with an erudite Boeotian pig.

3. Customs, rituals, institutions: antiquarian erudition

Our next dinner party gets us in a festive mood, for it is organized in order to celebrate the victory of Sarapion in a choral contest.[31] On this occasion, too, the topic for discussion is introduced by a grammarian. Marcus recalls the testimony of Neanthes of Cyzicus that the tribe (*phylē*) Aiantis had the honour of not having its chorus judged last. He adds, though, that Neanthes is not always reliable; however, if he is in this case, it might be an interesting opportunity for a combined investigation into the cause (628B). In any case, this is an intriguing subject that suits the occasion and perfectly qualifies

[30] On the dialogue, see, e.g., Indelli 1995; Herchenroeder 2008; Konstan 2010–11; Horky 2017: 121–30.

[31] See Teodorsson 1989: 155–6 for more details.

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as a 'fluid' topic of conversation. Moreover, Marcus' proposal to start a collective *zetesis* fosters the general goal of συμποτικὴ κοινωνία.[32]

The first reaction comes from Milo, who insists on the caveat that Marcus himself introduced: what if Neanthes cannot be trusted (628B)? Then the problem itself would be bogus. Again the question itself is scrutinized and, in fact, Milo's critical reaction is not unjustified, even though it risks blocking Marcus' plans for an interesting symposiastic conversation. Philopappus then intervenes (628B–D):

> It is not bad if the same thing will happen to us that happened to the wise Democritus because of love for learning. It seems that the juice of a cucumber he was eating appeared to have a honeylike taste, and he questioned his serving-woman about where she had bought it. When she indicated a certain garden, he got up and told her to take him and show him the place. The woman was astonished and asked what he had in mind. 'I must find,' he replied, 'the cause of the sweetness, and I shall find it if I see the place.' 'Sit down,' said the woman with a smile, 'the fact is I accidentally put the cucumber in a honey-jar.' 'That was very annoying of you,' said Democritus with pretended anger, 'and I shall apply myself not the less to the problem and seek the cause as if sweetness were proper and natural to the cucumber.'[33]

Philopappus concludes that Neanthes' unreliability should be no pretext for dismissing the question: even if the discussion were to yield no other use, it would at least serve as a good exercise (628D).

This is quite a remarkable use of a remarkable anecdote. Is Philopappus willing to cheat himself, just because he wants to keep the conversation alive? He is characterized at the beginning of the talk as a humane man and a lover of learning (διὰ φιλανθρωπίαν οὐχ ἧττον ἢ φιλομάθειαν; 628B). Now we see how far he is prepared to go in his eagerness for learning: Milo's pertinent caveat is brushed aside with the consideration that Marcus' question at least provides an opportunity for exercise. Here we come across another important aspect of the *Table Talk*: its educational dimension. During these dinner parties, existing knowledge about various topics is collected and shared. Younger students, who indeed repeatedly participate in these banquets, can assimilate all this ready-made learning and are introduced to the method of philosophical *zetesis*, whereas more mature speakers can welcome the discussions as interesting intellectual exercises.[34]

[32] See also Eshleman 2013: 157–8 and 163–4 on the character of Marcus in this talk.

[33] The anecdote is discussed in Meeusen 2016: 244–8.

[34] On the educational aspects of the *Table Talk*, see, e.g., Roskam 2009a and Kechagia 2011a: 81–104; cf. Titchener 2011: 45.

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And thus, Milo's caveat is bracketed and the company begins to look for causes that may explain the honour granted to Aiantis. Marathon is a deme of Aiantis and Harmodius belonged to it (628D). Glaucus adds a few other pieces of historical data (628D–E) and 'Plutarch' yet more (628E–F). This is a pregnant example of *syzetesis*, in that the different speakers all collaborate in developing one basic answer. Yet 'Plutarch' also points to an evident weakness of this explanation: other *phylae* possess many honours too, so it still remains unclear why Aiantis should deserve this particular honour (628F–629A).[35] 'Plutarch' then proposes a different explanation: the custom should be understood as an attempt to placate the eponym of the *phylē*, for Ajax the son of Telamon does not endure an inferior position (629A). This is an allusion to the well-known myth of the conflict between Odysseus and Ajax about the arms of Achilles. This explanation obviously better takes into account the specificity of the *phylē* Aiantis; yet here as well, every member of the company – and every reader, too – should decide for themself whether they indeed consider it to be more plausible (σκοπεῖτε δὴ, μὴ πιθανώτερον λέγεται; 629A).

This talk illustrates another facet of Plutarch's *polymatheia*, one that has to do with the domain of history, myth, and antiquarian topics. Again, traces of this interest can be found throughout his oeuvre. In the *Parallel Lives*, but also in many works of the *Moralia*, Plutarch displays his intimate knowledge of Greek and Roman history. His antiquarian interests are especially evident in the *Roman questions* and *Greek questions*.[36]

The *Greek questions* are a collection of fifty-nine questions concerning fairly obscure local customs and institutions, often focusing on strange words.[37] To give but a few examples: who was the 'woman that rode on a donkey' at Cumae (291E–292A); what is the 'sheep-escaper' (293A); what was 'the wooden dog' among the Locrians (294E–295A)? As a rule, the answers are fairly short and clear. Different alternatives are occasionally mentioned, but most often only one answer is given, usually derived from distant local history. The work, then, is a compilation of interesting pieces of knowledge, several of which left traces in

[35] Cf. Ammonius' criticism of Plutarch's praise of the number five in *De E* 391E–F.

[36] Plutarch also wrote *Barbarian questions* (Lamprias catalogue 139), but these have been lost; see Schmidt 2008 for a reconstruction.

[37] Jazdzewska 2018. This work is seriously understudied. The seminal commentary remains Halliday 1928; much useful information can also be found in Payen 1998. On the importance of space and of the Delphic shrine in the work, see Oikonomopoulou 2017.

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Plutarch's own day (293E; 297C; 297F; 299F; 301C). They are not just echoes of days long gone but are still relevant for contemporary readers.

In the *Roman questions*, Plutarch raises 113 questions regarding the causes of Roman customs, including: why women kiss their kinsmen on the lips (265B–E); why they adopt the month of January as the beginning of the year (267F–268D); and why they call the meat markets *macella* and *macellae* (277D–E).[38] Contrary to the *Greek questions*, the *Roman questions* as a rule contain more than one explanation, which suggests feelings of wonder if not captivation while also following Plutarch's general zetetic methodology. The overall structure of the work is not immediately clear, nor is its purpose.[39] Usually, the work is understood from the angle of Plutarch's interest in Greek and Roman identity. Boulogne interprets it as an attempt to surpass the differences between the two peoples and reach a shared identity.[40] Preston points to the differences between *Greek questions* and *Roman questions*: whereas Greek questions receive a simple answer, Roman questions are far less easy to solve. Both works thus reflect the cultural self-assurance of the *pepaideumenos* who considers and propagates his own identity.[41]

Such interpretations indeed reveal an important aspect of these works, for the question of what it meant to be Greek grew more and more important in Plutarch's day, and several passages from his works suggest that he was not indifferent to this issue.[42] Greek identity, for Plutarch, was very closely connected with *paideia*, and this can be observed in the *Greek questions* and *Roman questions* as well.[43] Yet this line of interpretation also has its limitations, for it remains true that questions of identity are hardly ever explicitly thematized in these two works. When we always have to read between the lines, we may wonder

[38] The *Roman questions* have received more scholarly attention; seminal studies are Rose 1924; Boulogne 1987, 1992, and 1994; see also Preston 2001; Mora 2007; Tatum 2014.

[39] According to Scheid 2012, the *Roman questions* reflect a promenade past monuments in the centre of Rome. Plutarch indeed adopted a similar approach in *That the Pythia now does not give her oracles in verse* (see below, Chapter VII, §5), but there the characters systematically follow the Sacred Way. The walker who visits ancient Rome with the *Roman questions* as his or her guide travels many unnecessary miles.

[40] Boulogne 1987: 472, 1992: 4707, and 1994.

[41] Preston 2001. Preston's view is discussed by Brenk 2019.

[42] In the *Comp. Lyc. et Num.* 1.10, Plutarch famously states that Numa was more Greek (ἑλληνικώτερον) than Lycurgus. For Plutarch's concern with Greek identity, see, e.g., Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001.

[43] Pelling 1989 and 2002: 339–47; Swain 1990 and 1996: 139–45.

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whether Greek identity was so important for Plutarch while writing them and whether the scholarly preoccupation with this problem of identity does not rather reflect our own postmodern obsession with it. That is not to say that it is completely irrelevant for a correct understanding of these works, yet there were other things on Plutarch's agenda that were more important to him.

Plutarch's main interest in the *Roman questions* is not in Roman (and Greek) identity but in a search for philosophical understanding. In several respects, indeed, the *Roman questions* resemble *On Isis and Osiris*. In both works, Plutarch examines the tradition of a foreign people as a source of deep philosophical truths (for *On Isis and Osiris*, see below, Chapter VII, §6). Roman customs contain many symbols of such philosophical insights, and have much to contribute to natural philosophy, ethics, and metaphysics.[44] In short, the *Roman questions* are primarily a zetetic examination of the many valuable germs of (Platonic) philosophical truths that can be found in the Roman *mos maiorum*.

4. The charms and usefulness of book learning

For our last dinner party, we are Ammonius' guests. At the festival of the Muses, Ammonius has invited several successful teachers to dinner. We are thus in the company of many scholars who put questions to one another. Let us join in the discussion at the moment when the orator Maximus asks the grammarian Zopyrio which of Aphrodite's hands Diomedes wounded (739B) – yet one more example of a 'fluid' question that arouses curiosity and stimulates thinking. Zopyrio asks a counter-question: which was Philip's lame leg (739B)? This reaction suggests that Zopyrio is baffled and considers the problem insoluble. Again, the question is itself questioned before the conversation really starts. Yet Zopyrio's attempt to escape is more than a simple *non liquet*. By alluding to Demosthenes' *On the crown* (67), he in fact most elegantly gives Maximus tit for tat. Whereas the latter confronts Zopyrio with a difficult question from his own field of expertise, Zopyrio counters by confronting the rhetorician with a problem

[44] Boulogne 1992: 4700; Darbo-Peschanski 1998: 25. We may add that, in the *Roman questions*, even more than in the *Greek questions*, the focus is on the present (Boulogne 1987: 471–2 and 1992: 4698–9; Payen 1998: 56–7 and 2014: 242).

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concerning one of the major texts of the rhetorical tradition. This, if anything, is a courteous exchange of disciplinary *aporiai*. Again, the conversation is not without a certain competitiveness.

But Maximus is not impressed: Demosthenes' speech does not contain any evidence at all, whereas Homer's verses, so he claims, contain some clues. When Zopyrio has no answer, the others insist that Maximus should show his hand (739B). This reaction again illustrates the 'fluid' character of Maximus' question, which has succeeded in arousing the interest of the whole company. Maximus then reveals his answer, which is based on two passages from Homer. The poet says that Diomedes, before wounding the goddess, 'leaped to the side' (μετάλμενος, Homer, *Il.* 5.336). This participle (and especially its prefix) contains the vital information: standing in front of Aphrodite, Diomedes had his right hand before her left. In order to strike the goddess's right hand, he thus needed to jump to the side. This hypothesis gains support from a second passage from the same book: Athena suggests that Aphrodite has injured her hand by caressing a Greek girl (*Il.* 5.424–5) and we may safely presume that she used her right hand for this (739C–D).

In this case, Maximus' solution goes unchallenged: it is apparently accepted by the company as plausible and does not trigger alternative hypotheses. Moreover it has a positive effect on everyone's humour (739E) and thus qualifies as a beautiful example of συμποτικωτάτη πολυμάθεια. Especially noteworthy is the great erudition on which Maximus' answer rests. The rhetorician knows his Homer by heart and succeeds in beating the grammarian on his own domain. He pays attention to the smallest details, lays bare their implications, and smartly and subtly takes full advantage of them in order to explain the precise meaning of the verses.

The fundamentals of such an interpretation of the poets are explained in *How the young man should listen to poetry*. There Plutarch likewise rejects allegorical interpretations[45] and gives preference instead to a very careful and detailed reading that takes into account all the indications which the poet himself provides. Some verses contain subtle hints that the poet disapproves of a particular statement or attitude (19A–21D; 35A–C). Other indications may be derived from the context (22B–C) or phraseology (22C–25B), and the words of several

[45] See esp. *De aud. poet.* 19E–20B; Babut 1969b: 370–88.

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poets can also be confronted with each other (21D–22A; cf. 35E–F). Such exegetical principles obviously require a meticulous reading of the poets, as is exemplified by Maximus in this talk.

In the context of Ammonius' dinner party, this careful interpretation is mainly a matter of symposiastic entertainment, a game of exegetical ingenuity, but the treatise *How the young man should listen to poetry* shows that there is much more at stake. There can be no doubt that the poets laid the foundations of the Greek intellectual tradition and that they thus received a central place in Greek education, but it is no less clear that their poems contained much material that is highly problematic from a philosophical point of view. On this point, Plutarch agrees with Plato's criticism, though he also realizes the enormous pedagogical potential of the poetic tradition. He therefore proposes using the poets as a kind of propaedeutic for philosophy. The careful exegetical method delineated in *How the young man should listen to poetry* serves this end: youths should be closely guarded (15A) and their reading should systematically be guided by philosophically justifiable criteria. This amounts to a basically utilitarian attitude towards literature that is fundamentally in line with Plutarch's Platonic outlook.[46]

Such an approach towards literature informs several other Plutarchan works. In the *Comparison of Aristophanes and Menander*, of which only a few pages survive, Plutarch explains why he prefers Menander to Aristophanes. The latter is coarse in language and subject matter, and his poetry is 'like a harlot who has passed her prime and then takes up the role of a wife' (854A). In contrast, Menander's humour and style is polished, refined, and cultivated, which obviously facilitates the philosophical appropriation of his poetry.

On the malice of Herodotus, finally, is a vitriolic polemic in which Plutarch accuses Herodotus of malice (κακοήθεια, literally a 'bad character'). The treatise opens with a list of general indications of such maliciousness,[47] and then deals with many passages from Herodotus' work where the 'father of history' gives evidence of his bad character. Plutarch shows how Herodotus time and again belittles

[46] The relation between Plutarch's position and that of Plato has often been discussed. Scholars have long underlined the differences between Plutarch (who was eager to benefit from what poetry had to offer) and Plato (who banishes the poets from his ideal state), but more recent discussions have shown the essential similarities between the views of both thinkers: see, e.g., Bréchet 1999; Zadorojnyi 2002; Hunter and Russell 2011: 3–9.

[47] The list is briefly discussed in Marincola 1994: 195–6.

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the brilliant achievements of the ancestors, and how he trifles with historical truth and thus propagates 'absurd and false opinions about the best and greatest cities and men of Greece' (874C). This sharp attack has found little sympathy among specialists in Herodotus and Plutarch alike.[48] Scholars have shown that Plutarch can himself be called malicious on the basis of his own criteria.[49] They presume that his attack was inspired by petty patriotism,[50] and reflects a naïve spirit that rigidly repudiates every single criticism of the great past.[51] This, however, oversimplifies matters: Plutarch may have been too severe with Herodotus, but scholars should not take an eye or tooth from Plutarch for one of Herodotus. The *Parallel Lives* unambiguously demonstrate that Plutarch was no naïve and uncritical *laudator temporis acti*. His attack on Herodotus in this work is motivated by moral concerns. Plutarch has detected traces of maliciousness in Herodotus' historical account and aims at a rectification. This is his agenda in *On the malice of Herodotus* and this is what determines both his heuristics and his arguments. In short, the work should primarily be understood in light of the principles of Plutarch's ethical-utilitarian approach towards literature.[52]

5. From dining hall to writer's desk

Different drinking parties have introduced us to several domains of Plutarch's multifaceted erudition. What still remains to be done is to briefly discuss the various ways in which Plutarch organizes and presents all this material.

Often, as we have seen, Plutarch juxtaposes alternative views in a *zetema* ('object of enquiry'; pl. *zetemata*) or *problema* ('problem', 'object of criticism'; pl. *problemata*). This literary genre provides him with a convenient vehicle to collect and discuss traditional material in a fairly economical way. The *zetemata* and *problemata* usually show an

[48] To the literature quoted in the next notes can be added, e.g., Russell 1972: 60; Wardman 1974: 191; Bowen 1992: 2; Marincola 1994: 191.

[49] Ingenkamp 2016. See also Wardman 1974: 192; Teodorsson 1997: 443–5; Pelling 2002: 150–2 and 2007: 157–64; Dognini 2007: 501–2.

[50] Ziegler 1951: 871; Swain 1997: 171–2; Teodorsson 1997: 440; Dognini 2007: 482.

[51] Ziegler 1951: 871; Barrow 1967: 157.

[52] I develop this further in Roskam 2017b. See also Ragogna 2002: 29–30. Hershbell 1993: 154–7 points to the importance of Plutarch's educational convictions and his view of imitation.

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ascending structure in which the most plausible alternatives are placed at the end of the list. But Plutarch also uses other methods of composition. He often employs the same combination of poetic quotations, imagery, references to earlier authors and ideas, concepts, and so on in different works and different contexts. In several articles, Van der Stockt has argued that such repetitive clusters of recurrent material can often be traced back to Plutarch's personal notebooks (his *hypomnemata*).[53] Plutarch informs us about the existence of these notebooks, in the celebrated introduction to *On tranquillity of mind*. There, he tells his dedicatee, Paccius, that he did not have the time to adequately meet his request for a new work on tranquillity of mind and therefore decided to collect a few ideas about such tranquillity from the notebooks he has made for himself (464F). These notebooks probably consisted of rough drafts, already written in full sentences, but without much literary embellishment.[54] The material which they contained could be recycled for the most diverse purposes and an analysis of such clusters highlights Plutarch's extraordinary versatility in creatively adapting traditional material to the demands of his argument.[55]

Moreover, Plutarch knew how to articulate his ideas. He was a particularly gifted writer who had perfectly mastered rhetorical theory and excelled in putting it into practice, as also appears from several epideictic speeches that have come down to us.[56] In *On the fortune of the Romans*, he deals with the question as to whether the Roman Empire is the product of virtue or fortune. His nuanced answer is that both are involved (316E–317C), yet in this work he especially zooms in on the role of fortune. An analogous question is raised concerning Alexander the Great in two speeches *On the fortune or virtue of Alexander*. Alexander is there praised as a dyed-in-the-wool philosopher who surpassed by his civilizing deeds distinguished

[53] See esp. Van der Stockt 1999a; other cases are discussed in Van der Stockt 1999b, 2002, 2004a, and 2004b. See also Van Meirvenne 1999 and 2001; Vicente Sánchez 2008; Verdegem 2010b: 141–9, 272–8, and 404–5. On Plutarch's use of his notebooks for the composition of his *Parallel Lives*, see Pelling 2002: 23–4 and 65–90; Stadter 2008 and 2014 (also Stadter 2015b: 128). The method of Van der Stockt can now be further developed by means of an algorithm-based analysis of Plutarch's corpus: see Schubert and Weiss 2015.

[54] Van der Stockt 1999a: 595.

[55] It is not always clear whether Plutarch directly reused his *hypomnemata* or drew inspiration from an earlier work (or just relied on his excellent memory); see Van der Stockt 1999a: 596–7 and esp. Xenophontos 2012; cf. Meeusen 2012.

[56] On Plutarch's general attitude towards rhetoric, see the classic study of Jeuckens 1907 and the collection of essays in Van der Stockt 2000b; see also Harrison 1987.

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philosophers like Zeno (329A–B) and even Plato and Socrates themselves (328B–E). This is quite a remarkable statement for a Platonist like Plutarch, and far less nuanced than what we can read in the *Life of Alexander*.[57] But these works have completely different purposes. In the epideictic speeches, Plutarch prefers to consider Alexander's career from one provocative point of view, which is systematically developed and underlined by all kinds of rhetorical tropes, imagery, comparisons, and so on. These speeches are a beautiful sample of virtuoso and thought-provoking rhetoric that succeeds in defying the listener.

The same holds true for *Were the Athenians more famous in war or in wisdom?*, yet another epideictic speech. There, Plutarch ventures that the fame of Athens rests more on its military accomplishments than on its cultural achievements. The latter, however, were not neglected either (349A):

> if we reckon up the cost of each tragedy, the Athenian people will be seen to have spent more on productions of *Bacchae*, *Phoenissae*, *Oedipuses*, and *Antigone*, and the woes of Medea and Electra, than they spent in fighting for their supremacy and for their liberty against the barbarians.

Yet the exploits of statesmen and generals outshine Athens' cultural merits. This is again a bold thesis, skilfully elaborated with rhetorical bravado. It is brilliant, entertaining, daring rhetoric, supported by considerable erudition and combining the panache of the orator with the talent of the philosopher to stimulate wonder by raising challenging questions. Even in such works, the zetetic approach is not far away.

Plutarch, then, was an outstanding philosopher, but he could also compete with every professional orator of his day. His works are written in a polished *koine* with a clear Attic stamp, but without the strictness of rigorous Atticism.[58] His smooth, flowing periods, heavily larded with images and quotations, and full of *amplificatio*, illustrate his conviction that *polylogia* is the natural consequence of *polymatheia* (*De cur.* 519C).[59] Prose rhythm is judiciously used, especially at the beginning

[57] On the relation between the two works, see, e.g., Wardman 1955; Hamilton 1969: xxiii–xxxiii.

[58] Studies of Plutarch's language include Giangrande 1992 and Torraca 1998. Weissenberger 1895 still remains relevant.

[59] Plutarch's periods are analysed in Yaginuma 1992. The classic study of his imagery is Fuhrmann 1964; for his philosophical view and use of images, see the ground-breaking monograph of Hirsch-Luipold 2002. On *amplificatio*, see Teodorsson 2000.

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and end of his works, or in key passages, in order to underscore essential ideas or arguments.[60] Plutarch, in short, was a master of Greek literary prose.

Yet rhetoric was never an end in itself for him: it is always the content, not the form that prevails.[61] Plutarch was open to the aesthetic value and the charms of an elegant and refined style, but he always made it clear that our primary focus should be on ideas and arguments rather than stylistic *floscula* (*De prof. in virt.* 79D):

> In the case, for example, of persons who make use of Plato and Xenophon for their language, and gather therefrom nothing else but the purity of the Attic style, like the dew and the down on the flower, what can you say of them, save that they are content themselves with the sweet odour and bouquet of medicines, but have no desire for their sedative and purgative virtues, nor the power to discern them?

6. Conclusion

This chapter has only dipped at random into the wealth of relevant material. There can be no doubt that erudition is one of the most important aspects of Plutarch's thinking and writing. Every passage of his voluminous oeuvre is a feast of *polymatheia*. This erudition impregnates his zetetic philosophy and determines its peculiar character. For Plutarch, *zetesis* is not an easy-going search that is quickly satisfied with obvious answers or rashly proposes new theories,[62] but a penetrating and painstaking search for the truth, a search that always rests on an impressive acquaintance with nearly every aspect of the rich intellectual tradition. Erudition, then, fuels *zetesis*, both by providing material for explanation and hypotheses[63] and by stimulating further investigation. Philosophical enquiry and

[60] The study of Plutarch's use of prose rhythm is still in its infancy. An important recent contribution is Hutchinson 2018; see also Baldassarri 2000; Biraud 2014; Minon 2015. This is a domain that will still repay further study, since euphony was a crucial quality for ancient texts that were read aloud. On Plutarch's dealing with the difficult relation between orality and written texts (an issue that can be traced back to Plato's *Phaedrus*), see esp. Zadorojnyi 2007 and 2011.

[61] On the tension between this position and Plutarch's own polished literary style, see Zadorojnyi 2014: 309–10. For Plutarch's view of literary language, see Van der Stockt 1992: 62–73.

[62] See Ammonius' critical evaluation of Lamprias in *De E* 386A (with Thum 2013: 105–9), or Plutarch's comments on the ingenuity (εὑρησιλογία) of the young men in *Quaest. conv.* 656A (with Roskam 2009a: 373).

[63] See *Quaest. conv.* 734D ('great learning provides many starting points', τὴν πολυμάθειαν πολλὰς ἀρχὰς ποιεῖν), with Vesperini 2012 and Meeusen 2016: 220–1.

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erudition, *zetesis* and *polymatheia*, are very closely connected for Plutarch, and it is their constant interplay that makes his works such an impressive ancient example of the human quest for wisdom and insight into the world and our place in it. The next chapters will show how the two interact in several important domains of his thinking.

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