

## Re-reading Plutarch with Pliny the Younger

[1000-word abstract of a work-in-progress paper delivered in January 2013 in St Andrews and April 2013 in Cornell. I would very much welcome suggestions for revision/expansion.]

### Introduction

I argue in this paper that the reign of Trajan was an important period for the formation of ancient images of the literary/intellectual network. More specifically, I argue that Pliny's *Letters* and Plutarch's *Sympotic Questions* (*Quaestiones convivales*) were important landmarks in that process: they offer us some of the most vivid and influential imaginings of elite interaction and literary community in the whole of ancient literature. The main aim of this paper is to draw out some of the striking similarities and differences between them.

### Similarities

I deal first with the connections and similarities, among others the following:

1. Dates, friendships etc.: there is no evidence that Pliny and Plutarch ever met, but they clearly had many friends in common--for example, Sosius Senecio (addressee of many of Plutarch's works, and son-in-law of Pliny's supporter Frontinus), or C. Minucius Fundanus, who was consul in 107 AD, Pliny's addressee in three letters; also a character in one of Plutarch's dialogues. Both works seem to have been published in several instalments in the first decade of the second century
2. Scale and geographical scope: both in 9 books (counting Pliny Book 10 as a postscript), occupying around 800 Loeb pages; 87 named guests in the *Sympotic Questions*, between 100 and 150 addressees in Pliny's *Letters*; both focused around a few key venues in mainland Greece and Italy respectively (Athens, Chaironeia and Delphi are the three commonest venues for the *Sympotic Questions*; Rome, Comum, Laurentum etc. for the *Letters*), but with constant reference further afield; both culturally inclusive, across the boundaries between Greek and Roman, but with a strong sense of the superiority of their own cultural traditions.
3. Structure: both share the standard miscellanistic motif of having ordered their material as it comes to mind (*Letters* 1.1; *Sympotic Questions* preface to Book 2); in both cases that is a rather disingenuous claim--both have clusters of thematic order which emerge as one reads. That motif of random organisation looks back to Plato, *Apology* 17b-c, but to my knowledge the only pre-Trajanic version of that claim in a miscellanistic context is by Pamphile, as paraphrased by Photius (*Bibliotheca* cod. 175), who makes an almost identical claim for himself in his own preface. The versions in Pliny and Plutarch seem to have been influential for the proliferation of that motif in the miscellanistic literature of the second century AD: e.g., see Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* preface 2-3, or Clement, *Stromateis* 6.2.1. The conventional solution is to see Plutarch responding to a strand of Greek miscellany writing and Pliny being influenced by the traditions of artfully random organisation of Latin poetry collections, and perhaps also the Latin letter collection tradition, especially

Cicero (although Pliny innovates by mixing together letters from different addressees). However, it may be that those two strands are not quite so firmly separated from each other as we usually assume. Could Pliny have in mind in addition the Greek miscellanistic tradition represented already by Pamphile and then by Plutarch? Could Plutarch be influenced by the traditions of Latin verse and letter collections, perhaps even Pliny's own?

Pliny and Plutarch are thus very close to each other in some respects: both attempt to conjure up a fantasy image of elite literary community in works of similar date and very similar scale, using similar structuring techniques.

## Differences

It is also striking, however, that they undertake that challenge in vastly different ways. The second half of the paper discusses some of those differences, focusing especially on their different attitudes to writing and book culture. Pliny's *Letters* are famously packed with mentions of literary activity, for example in frequent descriptions of writing in leisure time or the exchange of work between friends, or in his repeated references to the institution of the recitation (the *Letters* include 24 mentions of recitation). For Plutarch, by contrast (after his initial address to his Roman addressee Sosius Senecio in the preface to Book 1, where he explains that he is sending a copy of the first three books in response to Senecio's request), there is almost no mention of writing and reading; instead we are presented with a community founded on sympotic conversation, where the structuring institution of literary and philosophical exchange is the festival (in the style of Plato's *Symposium* and Xenophon's *Symposium*, which both have festival settings), rather than the recitation (13 of the 57 conversations in the *Sympotic Questions* are set at festivals, which are represented as occasions for interactions between elite colleagues from many different cities).

## Conclusions

How does this comparison extend our understanding of these two authors individually, and of Trajanic elite culture more generally?

Clearly it is impossible to prove any self-conscious interaction between Plutarch and Pliny, although it remains an intriguing possibility. But even if they did not know each other's work, the comparison between them is still, I suggest, a revealing one for both of these texts, in the sense that it helps to show what makes them so distinctive. Both of them respond to the new challenges and opportunities of the post-Domitianic elite culture in similar and similarly ambitious but also in some respects very unusual and original ways.

It also seems perfectly possible, however, that Plutarch may be responding to Roman elite literary culture, if not to Pliny in particular, in the *Sympotic Questions*. Certainly he had spent a considerable amount of his career in Rome under Domitian, so he must have been closely familiar with the conventions of Roman literary life that Pliny glamourises. And his claim at *Life of Demosthenes* 2 to have known very little Latin earlier in his career is surely disingenuous (overstating linguistic incompetence is a very common trope in imperial literature generally: the claim that someone isn't fluent in Greek or knows Latin rather than Greek usually means that they didn't have

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a scholarly specialism in Greek, and vice versa). Is it possible that Plutarch's determination to found his account of elite literary community on traditionally Greek, festive, oral, conversational, Platonic models is in itself a deliberate reaction against what he was familiar with in Rome, a deliberate exclusion of the kind of fashionable book culture and book-based literary community which Pliny describes in such detail?

The paper closes with an analysis of *Sympotic Questions* 7.8, in order to demonstrate that Plutarch and his fellow guests are very much aware of innovations in elite literary culture in Rome, and in some cases inclined to react against it: the conversation describes an anonymous Stoic guests being mocked for his recommendation of the custom of having the dramatic works of Plato performed by slaves over dinner.

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