

RICHARD HUNTER – DONALD RUSSELL, *Plutarch. How to Study Poetry (De audiendis poetis)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. ix + 222, ISBN 9780521173605.

Plutarch's works have received so much attention in the last decades that even a guileless and open-minded critic might be inclined to wonder whether we still need new commentaries in this field. Richard Hunter and Donald Russell (henceforth RH and DR) nowhere try to justify their project¹, and to my mind, they are right in doing so, for several reasons. First of all, it should be obvious that good commentaries are always a very welcome addition to the existing scholarly literature. Secondly, the chosen essay (*De audiendis poetis*) is of particular interest, not least because it informs us about Plutarch's own exegetical criteria and about the way he himself reads literature. Finally, the outstanding quality of the present commentary will soon silence even a malicious critic.

The excellent introduction (pp. 1-26) is brief but particularly rich. After some very short comments on Plutarch's life and works, the authors discuss Plutarch's essay against the background of the previous age-old tradition. Much attention is thereby given to three particular sources of inspiration (which often occur in the commentary as well): Plato, Homeric exegesis, and Stoicism. The introduction is completed by three shorter sections on the essay's structure, on Plutarch's language and style, and on the text.

The text (pp. 31-69) offered by RH and DR does not rest on a new collation of the manuscripts but is presented as 'eclectic'. This is perfectly justifiable in the case of a text such as *De audiendis poetis*, which in fact has been carefully edited several times². A clear disadvantage of this edition, however, is its limited and vague *apparatus criticus*, which often conceals more information than it reveals. The names of modern authors disappear behind the general *siglum* "c", there is no differentiation between majority and minority readings, and so on. This is probably a deliberate choice of the editors, but the result is that scholars will have to turn to other editions for more precise information about textual criticism.

1 Although the opening sentence of their preface gives some information about their purpose: "we hope that this edition will not only make this work better known and more accessible, but that it will also encourage modern readers to reflect upon the presuppositions which they themselves bring to their reading, and upon the history of those presuppositions."

2 The most recent edition is that of P.D. Bernardakis – H.G. Ingenkamp, *Plutarchi Chaeronensis Moralia*, vol. I, Athens 2008.

The commentary itself (pp. 70-209) is an impressive piece of scholarship. It contains all the information one needs about Plutarch's interpretative and philosophical position, about parallels in his own works and in other authors, and about all kinds of *realia* (usually including helpful references to relevant recent literature), and moreover it provides an accurate and fluent translation of the greatest part of the essay. Among the many strengths of the commentary are the painstaking and subtle observations on matters of detail and the rich comments on the quotations from different poets, where RH and DR do not confine themselves to Plutarch's interpretation but also include interesting information about the ancient exegetical tradition (e.g. the scholia on Homer) and about recent insights. Furthermore, attention is given to matters of style and literary embellishment, and even to morphological and syntactic analysis and to metrical comments on the many verses that are quoted. Problems of the reconstruction of the text are often raised, and in many of the cases, the editors do not conceal their hesitation (cf. p. 25), which shows their intellectual honesty. Sometimes, their conjectures have been adopted into their text, sometimes they are merely mentioned in the apparatus, and sometimes they are only discussed in the commentary. Nearly all of their proposals are, to my mind, speculative and on balance unnecessary, yet they are usually intelligent and in any case help in reminding the reader that he often deals with an uncertain text.

The following remarks on specific passages primarily aim at giving additional information and/or adding a few relevant studies that are ignored by RH and DR. Only on a few minor points, I more strongly disagree with their interpretations and/or suggestions.

14F: The reading ἀπ' αὐτοῦ “suggests that the benefit of poetry is to be sought in the pleasurable element itself (cf. 16a)” (p. 74). This observation is correct indeed, but the reference to 16A is not without problem. There, we in fact read that we should seek what is useful *in* what gives pleasure (ἐν τῷ τέροντι τὸ χρήσιμον ζητεῖν). The idea of looking useful things in (ἐν) pleasant literature is slightly different from the suggestion to derive what is useful directly from (ἀπό) what is pleasant. In other terms, the connection between usefulness and pleasure seems much closer in the latter case (ἀπό) than in the former (ἐν). The problem now is that this stronger link between usefulness and pleasure interferes with the immediately preceding comparison, where the pleasant element is considered to be a kind of ὄψον: a food that “is a bit extra or special (and specially pleasant), but not strictly necessary” (p. 74). The typical function of ὄψον, then, is *not* to be useful but to provide pleasure, and beneficial elements should be derived from the real stuff, not from ὄψον³. This would be an additional argument in support

3 Cf. E. Valgiglio, *Plutarco. De audiendis poetis. Introduzione, testo, commento,*

of Bernardakis' reading ἀπ' αὐτῶν. Cf. also *De prof. in virt.* 79D: οὐκ ἀπὸ λόγων μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ θεαμάτων καὶ πραγμάτων πάντων ὠφελεῖσθαι.

15C: Plutarch's point with the anecdote about Simonides seems to be that the Thessalians are too stupid to submit themselves to the poetic illusion (hence the element of ἐξαπατᾶσθαι) created by the poet⁴.

15D: While referring to the famous scene of Odysseus and the Sirens (*Odyssey* 12), Plutarch suddenly introduces Epicurus' notorious aversion to all παιδεία, if only to contrast it with a better alternative. It may be noted that the associative connection between the *Odyssey* and Epicurus' position should in all likelihood be traced back to Epicurus himself and that Plutarch's (rhetorical) question thus tellingly illustrates his erudition⁵.

15D: "The proper use (and mixing) of wine, no less than the proper attitude to literary *paideia*, are crucial hallmarks of élite culture" (p. 80). This is definitely true, and is well in line with the broader context of this passage from *De audiendis poetis*, although one may well add that the *Corpus Plutarcheum* also contains several passages where Plutarch seems quite indulgent to excessive wine drinking (*Life of Cimon* 4 and 15; *Life of Cato the Younger* 6). And according to Ingenkamp, this indulgence precisely rests on traditional aristocratic values which influence Plutarch's philosophical position⁶.

16C: The phrase ἀληθείας ἀγωνιστής ('striver for truth') is not only important for Plutarch's general interpretation of Socrates (cf. 17E) but also for his own self-definition as a Platonist⁷.

18B: An additional argument in support of the authors' view that ἀληθές "refers not so much to the lies which poetry tells, but rather to moral truths" (p. 101) may be found in *De prof. in virt.* 80Esqq., where τὸ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν in the domain of actions is regarded as an indication of moral progress.

20B: Plutarch argues that philosophers use examples 'from situations that exist' (ἐξ ὑποκειμένων) for their admonition and instruction (νοουθετοῦντες καὶ παιδεύοντες). According to RH and DR, "Socrates' constant recourse to

traduzione, Torino 1973, 65: "Il vero nutrimento è nel cibo comune (nell'utile), non nel companatico (dilettevole); ora, il cibo comune si usa indipendentemente dal companatico, non si trae da esso."

⁴ To the literature mentioned by RH and DR may be added L. Van der Stockt, "L'expérience esthétique de la mimésis selon Plutarque", *QUCC* 36, 1990, 23-31.

⁵ An important contribution on this topic that was overlooked by RH and DR is D. Clay, "Vergil's Farewell to Education (*Catalepton* 5) and Epicurus' Letter to Pythocles", in D. Armstrong et al. (eds.), *Vergil, Philodemus, and the Augustans*, Austin 2004, 25-36.

⁶ H.G. Ingenkamp, "Οὐ φέγεται τὸ πίνειν. Wie Plutarch den übermäßigen Weingenuß beurteilt", in J.G. Montes Cala - M. Sánchez Ortiz de Landaluce - R.J. Gallé Cejudo (eds.), *Plutarcho, Dioniso y el vino. Actas del VI Simposio Español sobre Plutarcho. Cádiz, 14-16 de Mayo de 1998*, Madrid 1999, 277-90.

⁷ See J. Opsomer, *In Search of the Truth. Academic Tendencies in Middle Platonism*, Brussel 1998, esp. 189-90.

‘down to earth’ examples to explain moral issues is the kind of thing which P. has in mind here” (p. 114). This is possible, of course, even more so since Socrates was, in Plutarch’s view, “the first to show that life at all times and in all parts, in all experiences and activities, universally admits philosophy” (*An seni* 796E; transl. *LCL*). Yet it is far from obvious whether Plutarch here only alludes to Socrates’ well-known approach. After all, he himself endorses the traditional view of philosophy as a τέχνη περὶ βίον (*Quaest. conv.* 613B) and he also likes illustrating his own philosophical arguments through all kinds of concrete examples from everyday life and experience. The fairly rare phrase ἐξ ὑποκειμένων may even refer to examples from the past⁸, the famous deeds and sayings of the great statesmen that time and again return in so many of Plutarch’s works and that perfectly qualify as interesting means for νοουθεσία and παιδεία.

24C: The idea that virtue not merely renders men sensible, just and good [‘courageous’, as suggested by RH and DR, is an unnecessary overtranslation of ἀγαθούς] but also procures repute and influence may at first sight seem quite remarkable for a Platonist such as Plutarch, who is convinced of the self-sufficiency of virtue and in many of his writings advocates an inner-directed approach, paying much more attention to the development of a virtuous disposition than to the importance of outward advantages such as wealth, repute or power⁹. Yet the observation that virtue indeed often entails such external advantages can be illustrated with many examples taken from the *Lives*. Many statesmen indeed succeeded in influencing their people not on the basis of popular measures such as large donations but through their reputation for virtue and incorruptibility; see, e.g., *Life of Cato the Elder* 16.4-8; *Life of Aemilius* 10.1, 38.2 and 38.6; *Life of Phocion* 8.2-3; *Life of Eumenes* 14.1-11; cf. also *Political precepts* 823C-E; *Life of Nicias* 12.4-6; *Comparison of Nicias and Crassus* 3.6. And in his *Political Precepts*, Plutarch advises the young Menemachus to begin his political career by putting his own character in order, since the people knows its leaders and ultimately puts its confidence in good men (800B-1C).

24E: RH and DR oppose Plutarch’s quotation from Hesiod’s *Erga* (313) to a passage from Plato’s *Apology* (30b2-4), but their understanding of the latter is inaccurate¹⁰. The passage from the *Apology* is actually more relevant for *De aud. poet.* 36E (where it indeed returns in the commentary of RH and DR).

⁸ Thus G. von Reutern, *Plutarchs Stellung zur Dichtkunst. Interpretation der Schrift “De audiendis poetis”*, Kiel 1933, 62.

⁹ Typically, this triad is discussed in the second chapter of *Maxime cum principibus* (777D-778B), where Plutarch shows that none of them qualifies as a good motivation for the politician. I discuss this in *Plutarch’s Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum. An Interpretation with Commentary*, Leuven 2009, 105-19.

¹⁰ See therefore M.F. Burnyeat, “Apology 30B 2-4: Socrates, Money, and the Grammar of γίγνεσθαι”, *JHS* 123, 2003, 1-25.

27E: The phrase τῶν βελτιόνων ζῆλον καὶ προαίρεσιν “has a philosophical flavour” (p. 156), indeed. More specifically, it points to an essential aspect of Plutarch’s ethical thinking. Careful and consistent imitation of the good moral examples can be regarded as an indication of moral progress (*De prof. in virt.* 84B–5B), and works such as the *Regum et imperatorum apothegmata*, the *Mulierum virtutes* and the *Lives* may even directly contribute to this end by providing these *exempla*. The term προαίρεσις, for its part, is extremely important in Plutarch’s ethical and political thinking, as it points to the basic foundation on which all moral behaviour should rest¹¹.

29BC: A charming anecdote about Socrates and Plato, related in *De ad. et am.* 70F, may throw further light on Plutarch’s appreciation of Diomedes’ behaviour in this passage: frankness (παρρησία – it is significant that the term is used in this passage from *De aud. poet.* too) is useful but should be used carefully and while taking into account the occasion (καίρος, another concept that occurs here, in the next sentence on Calchas).

31E: The concept of εὐρησιλογία (which also occurs at 28A) is an important catch word in the *Corpus Plutarcheum*. It is repeatedly associated with the Stoics, usually in a pejorative sense (cf. also *De Stoic. rep.* 1033B; *De comm. not.* 1070E and 1072F). In the *Table Talks*, however, Plutarch’s use of the term is less negative. According to Oikonomopoulou, the term is even “emblematic of the *Table Talk*’s overall emphasis on independent intellectual endeavour, which actively engages with tradition, but with a view to decisively enrich and further it.”¹²

33A: Plutarch’s interpretation of Achilles’ conduct is quite remarkable, to say the least. “Achilles is certainly ‘busy with actions’ in Books 20–2, though P. glides silently over some very questionable behaviour” (p. 185). This is a charitable way of putting it. A more straightforward view is that Plutarch’s reading of Homer is here rather forced and artificial¹³. It would be difficult to characterize Achilles’ conduct in books 20–2 as καθήκον, certainly given that “the philosophical flavour of τὰ καθήκοντα is important here” (p. 185). Even more problematic is to regard Achilles’ actions as indications of his ἐγκράτεια. If he indeed does not consort with Briseïs, the reason is obviously

11 See esp. A. Wardman, *Plutarch’s Lives*, London 1974, 107–15; cf. also G. Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue. The Stoic Doctrine of Moral Progress and its Reception in (Middle-) Platonism*, Leuven 2005, 350–1.

12 K. Oikonomopoulou, “Peripatetic Knowledge in Plutarch’s *Table Talk*”, in F. Klotz – K. Oikonomopoulou (eds.), *The Philosopher’s Banquet. Plutarch’s Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*, Oxford 2011, 121. Yet even in the *Table Talks*, the concept of εὐρησιλογία is somewhat ambivalent; cf. G. Roskam, “Educating the Young ... over Wine? Plutarch, Calvenus Taurus, and Favorinus as Convivial Teachers”, in J. Ribeiro Ferreira – D. Leão – M. Tröster – P. Barata Dias (eds.), *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*, Coimbra 2009, 373.

13 It may be compared to Socrates’ moral interpretation of Achilles’ conduct in *Apol.* 28c1–d4. For a completely different view, see Valgiglio, *Plutarco. De audiendis poetis*, 217.

not his philosophical moderation but his excessive passions (anger and grief), and only when these have finally come to rest and he has reached, in the confrontation with Priamus, a deeper insight into the *condition humaine*, he will be ready to return to Briseïs (*Il.* 24,676).

34A: The verb μεταιακίζόμενος is a *hapax legomenon*, but its meaning is perfectly clear, and it is probably no coincidence that it is connected with the word ἀβέβαιος. An interesting parallel can be found in Seneca's works, more precisely in his repeated remarks about the *volutatio* or *fluctuatio* of the *proficiens* (as opposed to the sage's *stabilitas*)¹⁴.

35E: It may be true that Paton's conjecture ἀνοήτως "makes an important point which is lost in the transmitted ἀνοήτως" (p. 200), yet there is no need to change the text. The term ἀνοήτως makes perfect sense in this context and the adjectives κενός and ἀνόητος are often paired in the *Corpus Plutarcheum: Life of Philopoimen* 13.9; *Life of Lycurgus* 19.3; *Life of Alcibiades* 4.3; *De se ipsum laud.* 541B; *De exilio* 599C (κενώς καὶ ἀνοήτως); cf. also *Life of Pelopidas* 14.3. Moreover, the adjective ἀνόητος is nowhere paired with κενός, but rather with adjectives such as ἀνωφελής (*De aud. poet.* 36D; *De aud.* 46E; *De virt. mor.* 450B), ἀχρεῖος (*De aud.* 40A), ἄκαρπος (*Mul. virt.* 248A), and περιττός (*fr.* 87 Sandbach).

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¹⁴ Cf. Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue*, 71-72.