

Plutarch's Hesiod: Tradition and Identity Formation in a Greco-Roman Context

By Peter Malisse*

In Plutarch's times Hesiod was still seen as the second founding father of Panhellenic culture and identity. For various reasons Plutarch held Hesiod in high esteem and played an important role in keeping the poet under the spotlight of paideia. In present article three Plutarchan sources are re-examined Hesiod's claim to have won a poetry contest: Schol. Hesiod WD 650-662 and references to the story in Table Talk and The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men. Starting point is a close reading of the Proclan scholion in the light of Plutarch's sympotic work. While the former introduces a Plutarch averse to mythopoeia, the latter shows just how important story-telling is to him in promoting and maintaining Panhellenic tradition and identity under a Roman rule.

Introduction

In the long tradition of Panhellenic identity formation,¹ Hesiod is second to Homer among the “founding fathers”. This is one reason why the reception history of *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (hereafter: *Erga*), the two works assigned consensually to him, is far less substantial than that of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Consequently, any ancient source that contributes to a better understanding of how Hesiod and his work have been cultivated as identity-defining in Greek and Roman antiquity, is treasured today with great care. Such source is an unexpectedly critical note by Plutarch to a supposedly autobiographical passage. The famous Proclan scholion² in which this criticism is handed down, serves as the starting point for some thoughts on the following two observations. First, the integration, critical or otherwise, of Hesiodic material in Plutarch's sympotic work appears to have, apart from its specific aims, a strong tradition-forming character. Second, Plutarch's contribution to the Hesiodic tradition formation prompts the question of how fiction and non-fiction “blended” in the ancient Greek self-identification with the past.

We start with our problem statement based on the passages discussed, which involves a textual and contextual presentation of the *Erga* passage in question in order to get a clear picture of the what, how and where of Plutarch's assessment through Proclus... or *vice versa*. In fact, the underlying problem is that

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1. Although taken from a study on child psychology, the following definition meets our idea of identity formation: “the complex manner in which human beings establish a unique view of self and is characterized by continuity and inner unity” (HERMAN 2011, s.v. Identity formation). In reference to ancient Greece, see PAPANIKOS 2024.

2. Schol. Hesiod WD 650-662: PERTUSI 1955, 205-206 (= Plut. fr. 84 Sandbach).

Proclus speaks in the name of Plutarch, while the discourse gives the impression that the scholiast is pushing through Plutarch at least in part his own judgment. Some mainly philological findings further invite a closer look at Plutarch's narrative integration of the Greek past in *Table Talk* and the *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* and his specific attitude toward the Hesiodic legacy. This discussion leads to a concluding reflection on the tension between fiction and non-fiction within tradition and identity formation with Plutarch in particular and in Greco-Roman reality in general.

Studies on this matter are focused on a specific (philosophical, historical, moral, educational...) aspect of Plutarch's multifaceted personality and work. Apart from its discourse analytical approach, this article also differs methodologically to the extent that, beyond these facets, we search for (mostly hidden) traces of tradition and identity formation. In doing so, we project our findings against a Greco-Roman horizon, which, in our case, needs not much specification to make our point. For the readers in search of more information on the latter, some specialized studies are included in the references below.

A Problematic Scholion to a Problematic Passage

The *Theogony* is the first ancient Greek work bearing its author's name, and *Erga* contains information long cherished as autobiographical. Besides testimony to Hesiod's Aetolian ancestry and his father's seafaring past, there is above all the following rather extensive account of a victory in a Euboean poetry contest:

650 οὐ γὰρ πώ ποτε νηί γ' ἐπέπλων εὐρέα πόντον,
 εἰ μὴ ἐς Εὐβοίαν ἐξ Αὐλίδος, ἧ ποτ' Ἀχαιοὶ
 μείναντες χειμῶνα πολὺν σὺν λαὸν ἄγειραν
 Ἑλλάδος ἐξ ἱερῆς Τροίην ἐς καλλιγύναυκα.
 ἔνθα δ' ἐγὼν ἐπ' ἄεθλα δαΐφρονος Ἀμφιδάμαντος
 655 Χαλκίδα τ' εἷς ἐπέρησα: τὰ δὲ προπεφραδμένα πολλὰ
 ἄεθλ' ἔθεσαν παῖδες μεγαλήτορος: ἔνθα μέ φημι
 ὕμνω νικήσαντα φέρειν τρίποδ' ὠπώεντα.
 τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ Μούσης Ἑλικωνιάδεσσι ἀνέθηκα,
 ἔνθα με τὸ πρῶτον λιγυρῆς ἐπέβησαν ἀοιδῆς.
 660 τόσσον τοι νηῶν γε πεπεύρημαι πολυγόμφων·
 ἀλλὰ καὶ ὡς ἐρέω Ζηνὸς νόον αἰγιόχοιο·
 Μοῦσαι γὰρ μ' ἐδίδαξαν ἀθέσφατον ὕμνον ἀεΐδειν. (*Erga* 650-662)

For never yet did I sail the broad sea in a boat,
 except to Euboea from Aulis, where once the Achaeans,
 waiting through the winter, gathered together a great host
 to sail from holy Greece to Troy with its beautiful women.
 There I myself crossed over into Chalcis for the games of valorous Amphidamas
 – that great-hearted man's sons had announced and established many prizes –

and there, I declare, I gained victory with a hymn,
and carried off a tripod with handles.
This I dedicated to the Heliconian Muses,
where they first set me upon the path of clear-sounding song.
This is as much experience of many-bolted ships as I have required;
yet even so I shall speak forth the mind of aegis-holding Zeus,
for the Muses taught me to sing an inconceivable hymn.³

For a long time these verses have been cherished as authentic because they provide a historical alibi to the plot of the *Ἀγών Ομήρου καὶ Ἡσιόδου/Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi/Contest of Homer and Hesiod* (second century CE). However, within a growing tendency to consider “Hesiod” as merely the historical-symbolical name of a literary and intellectual tradition, the passage has been increasingly contested.⁴ One argument is the critical voice of Plutarch in the following, most likely Proclan scholion:

Οὐ γὰρ πώποτε νηί γ' ἐπέπλων·
ταῦτα πάντα περὶ τῆς Χαλκίδος <καὶ> τοῦ Ἀμφιδάμαντος καὶ τοῦ ἄθλου καὶ τοῦ
τρίποδος ἐμβεβλήσθαι φησιν ὁ Πλούταρχος <ὡς> οὐδὲν ἔχοντα χρηστόν.
[ἀθετοῦνται δέκα στίχοι διὰ τὸ τῆς ἱστορίας νεώτερον.] τὸν μὲν οὖν
Ἀμφιδάμαντα ναυμαχοῦντα πρὸς Ἐριτρεῆς ὑπὲρ τοῦ Ληλάντου ἀποθανεῖν,
ἄθλα δὲ ἐπ' αὐτῶι καὶ ἀγῶνας θεῖναι τελευτήσαντι τοὺς παῖδας, νικῆσαι δὲ
ἀγωνιζόμενον τὸν Ἡσιόδον καὶ ἄθλον μουσικὸν τρίποδα λαβεῖν καὶ ἀναθεῖναι
τοῦτον ἐν τῶι Ἑλικῶνι – ὅπου καὶ κάτοχος ἐγεγόνει ταῖς Μούσαις – καὶ
ἐπίγραμμα ἐπὶ τούτῳι θουλοῦσι. πάντα οὖν ταῦτα ληρώδη λέγων ἐκεῖνος, ἀπ'
αὐτῶν ἄρχεται τῶν εἰς τὸν καιρὸν τοῦ πλοῦ συντεινόντων ἤματα πεντήκοντα.

For I have never sailed in a ship – Plutarch says that all this about Chalcis and Amphidamas and the contest and the tripod is an interpolation with nothing valid in it. [Ten verses are athetized on account of the story's being more recent.] For they babble on about the story that Amphidamas died fighting a naval battle against the Eritreans for the Lelantine plain, and that his children set up funeral games and prizes for him when he had died, and that Hesiod was victorious in the competition and won the musical prize and set it up on Helicon – where he also became

3. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes and translations are taken from *Loeb Classical Libraries*.

4. As can be seen from another scholion (Prolegomenon B 13-16, PERTUSI 1955, 3) it was already suggested in antiquity that the character of his brother Perses was fictional. However, a real debate on the historicity of Hesiod dates back to the late twentieth century. Lamberton calls the non-believers “Parryists” or “Nagyists” (LAMBERTON 1988, 493) after Milton Parry and Gregory Nagy. Both assume that Hesiod, like Homer, are invented names, but do not attach any significant consequences to this. Nagy also agrees with Parry's claim that “Hesiod” was a name used by several poets within the Hesiodic tradition, in which *Theogony* and *Erga* arose through “an on-going composition-in-performance” (NAGY 2009, 274). For other participants in the debate, see SCODEL 2009.

possessed by the Muses – and the epigram on this (tripod). So declaring all of this to be nonsense, he begins from those verses concerning the proper time for sailing: “for fifty days...”⁵

Textually, Hesiod's verses and Proclus' scholion speak for themselves; contextually, however, they are quite problematic. The *Erga* fragment narrativizes an important turning point in the poet's life, second to his so-called *Dichterweihe* or encounter with the Muses in *Theogony* 22-28: the victory in a non-Boeotian poetry contest convinces him that he is indeed gifted by the Muses. According to tradition (cf. infra: Pausanias' observation), Hesiod dedicated the trophy, a bronze tripod, to them in their sanctuary near his hometown Ascra. Proclus goes into detail about Plutarch's rejection of the passage as “οὐδὲν ἔχοντα χρηστόν – with nothing valid in it” and even “babble” (cf. ληρώδη – nonsense). This, he concludes, is why Plutarch rejects the lines between v. 649 (οὔτε τι ναυτιλῆς σεσοφισμένος οὔτε τι νηῶν – having no expertise at all-in either seafaring or boat) and v. 663 (ἥματα πεντήκοντα μετὰ τροπὰς ἡελίοιο – around fifty days after the solstice).⁶ Probably a later scholiast added an extra reason, labelling the passage as post-Hesiodic (νεώτερον – more recent).⁷

While the communication of both Hesiod and Proclus is in itself crystal clear, there is too much and too little context, respectively. As regards the contest story, while not the *parekbasis* per se (characteristic of epic verbiage) raises suspicion, its integration into the account of seafaring is all too clever yet again poorly motivated. The trigger for the digression is fine, but the conclusion is not. “Hymn/ῶμος” as a narrative motif (v. 657 ⇔ v. 662) contributes only to the internal coherence of the passage. Inwardly, it establishes the connection between the contest and the sanctuary of the Heliconian Muses, but, outwardly, not that with seafaring. Hence the resuming of this initial theme in v. 663 feels rather abrupt. As for Proclus, not only is it unclear which source he relied on, we do not know how he used that source either: which words are Plutarch's and which those of Proclus? Could it be that the opening sentence is quoted from Plutarch and then further elaborated by the scholiast? Or are we dealing with the summary of a more extensive argumentation by Plutarch, perhaps from his lost commentary on *Works and Days*? The reference to the epigram alone, not mentioned by Hesiod, makes these questions more than pertinent.

Whatever of it, before getting back to these issues, it bears reminding that our concern is not with the authenticity of the *Erga* passage or the historicity of its content, but with Plutarch's judgement as it has been handed down. The interpolation problem as such and the full or partial plausibility of the story are

5. Translation: BASSINO 2019, 12. The highlighted words and phrases are important for the discussion that follows.

6. The ‘δέκα στίχοι’ of the second scholiast represent only one voice in the discussion about the number of verses athetized by Plutarch; see LAMBERTON 1988, 500, n. 29.

7. About the addition, which only occurs in Pertusi, see LAMBERTON 1988, 501, n. 30.

not at issue here.⁸ Our focus is on why and how these autobiographical data were called into question.⁹ One of the triggers of the debate was the material link between the contest and the Hesiod cult¹⁰ at the Valley of the Muses nearby Thespiiai, namely the bronze tripod, which Pausanias mentions rather in passing.

On Helicon tripods have been dedicated, of which the oldest is the one which it is said Hesiod received for winning the prize for song at Chalcis on the Euripus. (*Description of Greece, Boeotia* 9.31.3)

In the *Certamen*, it is said that the tripod was inscribed with the following epigram:

Hesiod dedicated this to the Muses of Helicon,
having defeated in song at Chalcis the godly Homer. (*Certamen* 13)

According to Richard Lamberton the whole story is an aetiological fabrication, a “lore” to provide both the “hoax” of the tripod and the Thespian cult of Hesiod with an “aetion”.¹¹ We quote his conclusion regarding Plutarch's assessment of *Erga* 650-662 in its entirety because it makes an interesting starting point for our enquiry:

The obvious conclusion seems to be that Plutarch knew that the tripod on display in the grove of the Muses was not what it was claimed to be – that it was in fact an attempt on the part of the attendants of a Hellenistic shrine to fabricate archaic roots. By condemning the passage that described it as an ‘interpolation’, he was pulling the rug from under the prized exhibit, but still more important, he was tacitly indicating his own knowledge that the Hesiodic poems had been tampered with at some stage in their history, in order to accommodate them to the shrine and its artifacts. Without the slightest intention to undermine the personal, historic Hesiod, he was indicating how one element of that persona, one bit of pseudo-autobiographical information, entered the canon, in the service of the festival of the Muses.¹²

Proclus' Plutarch

Within the scope of his study on the institutionalized cult of the Muses and Hesiod at Thespiiai (cf. title), Lamberton's conclusion is more than satisfactory. However, when looking beyond that scope, it will not escape the reader's notice

8. Perhaps Plutarch was not even hinting at an athetesis, only pointing out that it is an interpolation. After all, in clear cases of athetization Proclus' word choice is far less ambiguous than the above “ἐμβεβλήθησθαί φησιν”. Cf. *infra*.

9. For a content-related discussion, see STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 534-538 (sqq.). Her conclusions as regards the why and how are dealt with later.

10. About the cult of Hesiod, see NAGY 2009, 304-308.

11. LAMBERTON 1988, 503-504.

12. *Ibid*, 504.

that, while his argument presupposes a great deal about Plutarch, it does not probe the *why* of his supposed (φησιν) athetization. Lamberton suggests that Plutarch knew the true facts of the tripod and wanted to debunk the legend attached to it. Thus, subtly showcasing his own expertise, Plutarch would have questioned the propaganda of the Mouseia but not the historicity of the poet. However plausible, these assumptions lack a clear motive for the elimination of the disputed passage. Neither Homer's name nor the problematic inscription on the tripod are mentioned by Hesiod. Why then label these verses an interpolation on the basis of later fabrications from Alcidas until the very *Certamen*?¹³

Whatever the reason,¹⁴ the implication of Proclus' argumentation *by proxy* is not minus. His choice of words gives the erroneous impression that Plutarch would have been a relentless Hesiod specialist who only accepts irrefutable historical evidence, thereby rejecting all that gives *Erga* a personal touch. Would Plutarch dismiss anything unsubstantiated as not only "of no valour" (cf. οὐδὲν χρηστόν) but also as "babble" (cf. θρουλοῦσι) and "nonsense" (cf. ληρώδη),¹⁵ even if this discredited a local tradition in the region where he was born, grew up and also lived for a considerable time? I'm not sure Proclus' wording suits the gentle and open-minded voice known from Plutarch's sympotic works and it is a discourse that certainly does not fit a historian who puts plausibility (πιθανότης) over certainty (cf. *infra*).

From the above, a friction comes to the fore between the scholiast's harsh tone and the object of criticism, viz the biographical anecdote that (later) became the foundation story of the Thespian cult of Hesiod. This leads us back to an

13. *Contest of Homer and Hesiod (Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi)* was arguably written sometime after Plutarch under Hadrian. Its basic idea either inspired or was inspired by Hesiod's (interpolated?) account of the contest in *Erga* 650-662. As is well known, Friedrich Nietzsche considered *Mouseion*, a lost and ill-documented work of the Gorgian sophist Alcidas, its direct source. According to Martin West, the plot was indeed an original idea of Alcidas (WEST 1978, 319, ad vv. 650-662. See further: GRAZIOSI 2002, 168-80, KONING 2010, 239-268 and BASSINO 2019. As regards the ages of Homer and Hesiod, the matter was already discussed even before Herodotus located both "not more than four hundred years before my own time" (*The Persian Wars*, 2.53.2-3). See, among others, KONING 2010, 40-43 and STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 542.

14. STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 537: "Plutarch did not only expel WD 654-662 from the poem but also dismissed the biographical story altogether. While the former rejection was due to a perceived inconsistency, the latter is likely to have been based on a different criterion, namely, Plutarch's views on the relative chronology of the ancient poets. Hesiod's dating in antiquity was often contingent on the assumption that his opponent at Chalcis was Homer, thus, ever since Wilamowitz, it has been thought that Plutarch's rejection of the contest derives from a critical tradition that views Homer and Hesiod as non-contemporaries."

15. LSJ provides the following basic explanations and translations for the three terms: χρηστός: "useful, good of its kind, serviceable"; θρουλεῖν: "make a confuse noise, chatter, babble", + acc.: "repeat over and over"; ληρώδης: "frivolous, silly".

earlier question about the scholion: is the choice of words by Plutarch, by Proclus or a mix of both? Richard Hunter took a closer look at similar cases and comes to the following conclusion:

Proclus often cites Plutarch by name, but it is also clear that much in these scholia will derive from the earlier scholar, even where he is not named. (...) There are no really objective criteria to help us in the attempt to decipher Plutarchan material within the Proclan scholia, and differences of judgement are inevitable. A common problem occurs when Proclus explicitly cites Plutarch at one point in an extended note: does this imply that the rest of the note is not in fact Plutarchan, or is it a rhetorical device precisely to create that impression, or is it the result of the process of compression which the Proclan scholia have suffered in the course of transmission? Parallels of subject-matter in the Plutarchan corpus can be helpful here, but never of course truly clinching.¹⁶

Although arguments can be put forward for all options, let us start from the hypothesis that only the first phrase, namely the matter-of-fact “ταῦτα πάντα περὶ τῆς Χαλκίδος <καὶ> τοῦ Ἀμφιδάμαντος καὶ τοῦ ἄθλου καὶ τοῦ τρίποδος ἐμβεβλήσθαι (...) <ὥς> οὐδὲν ἔχοντα χρηστόν” can be attributed to Plutarch with some certainty. The subsequent, equally factual addition (between brackets) may well confirm this. It could indicate that the latter’s author was able to distinguish the original source (the first sentence) from its elaboration (the rest of the scholion). Still other indications, when taken together, argue for attributing the remaining to Proclus. What follows the first statement is in fact a further specification of the key words Χαλκίς, Ἀμφιδάμας, ἄθλον and τρίπους. This would then be Proclus’ own interpretation or a reformulation of Plutarch’s original commentary. The closing character of “πάντα οὖν ταῦτα ληρώδη λέγων ἐκεῖνος” would finally reinforce this hypothesis which, if correct, exempts the supposedly ‘moderate’ and ‘mild’ Plutarch from such provocative terms as “babble” and “nonsense” vis-à-vis his beloved Hesiod.¹⁷

But, as mentioned above, valid arguments can also be put forward for the other two options: either the scholion is Plutarchan in its entirety and reworked by Proclus, or the first sentence is a summary by Proclus, supplemented by a later scholiast and followed by a further elaboration of his own or pieced together with selected phrases from a larger commentary by Plutarch. It should not be forgotten that the latter was an extremely well-read and erudite intellectual, who –

16. HUNTER 2014, 168.

17. With “supposedly” we hint at the longstanding image of a good, all too good-hearted Plutarch, “der liebenswürdige Bürger von Chaironeia, der uns immer noch in sein gastfreies Haus ladet”. (WILAMOWITZ 1926, 278). This resulted in polemical works like *Περὶ τῆς Ἡροδότου κακοηθείας / On the malice of Herodotus* (cf. infra) being mistaken either as Pseudo-Plutarchan or juvenile writings. Today, as will be seen further on, his critical open-mindedness is particularly highlighted. See, among others, HERSHBELL 1993, 143-144.

fortunately for us – loved to display his *polymatheia*. These hypotheses make two questions, already introduced, even more pressing: what source text of Plutarch has provided the space for such a harsh verdict and, why, eventually, did the historian-philosopher formulate his judgement so negatively?

Before tackling both issues, the problematic use of the terms, lexically explained in the above note, has to be examined more closely. The essence of the scholion is that the story of the contest and Hesiod's tripod is an interpolation because it has nothing that is *χρηστόν*, which implies a *relative* judgement: it is not useful/appropriate *in relation to something or someone (else)*. A review of its possible meanings leads one to conclude that the verses are either against Plutarch's image of Hesiod or lacking whatever justifies their inclusion in *Erga*. In the first case, it would then have been about its usefulness for the reader, in the second about its relevance in relation to seafaring. In this respect, the argument that the passage dates from a later time (...) is entirely acceptable. Being *ἄχρηστος*, however, is not the same as being *ληρώδης*, which implies an *absolute* judgement: it is nonsense or twaddle *by itself, as a whole and independent of any context*. This, as we shall see, is not consistent with the importance Plutarch attaches to such stories, albeit in a particular perspective.

Furthermore, the reader should be aware of the association by juxtaposition between *θουλοῦσι* and *ληρώδη*. Due to each other's proximity, the Loeb translation above creates the erroneous impression that, in this context, the former automatically means "to babble", which is more or less synonymous of "to twaddle".¹⁸ For the latter, the Greek language has the verb *ληρεῖν*, used for example by Isocrates where he would gladly want to "silence those who chant their verses and *prate* about these poets [sc. Homer and Hesiod] in the Lyceum – *παῦσαι τοὺς ἐν τῷ Λυκείῳ ῥαψωδοῦντας τὰ κείνων καὶ ληροῦντας περὶ αὐτῶν* [sc. *περὶ δὲ τῆς Ὀμήρου καὶ τῆς Ἡσιόδου*].¹⁹ While "to prate – *ληρεῖν*" implies "to talk stupidly, or about things that are not important, for a long time", the basic transitive meaning (+ acc.) of *θουλεῖν* is "to repeat over and over again", "to keep talking of" or "to ramble endlessly", whatever the content (cf. the LSJ explanations above). Therefore Stamatopoulou's translation "rehash" is preferable.²⁰ In sum, "οὐδὲν χρηστόν" relates rather to inappropriateness, "θουλοῦσι" rather to constant repetition and "ληρώδη" rather to silliness. This differentiation matters in our search for the scholion's possible source text.

18. *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. to babble: "to talk or say something in a quick, confused, excited, or silly way".

19. Isocrates, *Panathenaicus*, 12, 33.

20. STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 537, n. 18 included: "and people rehash [the] inscription on it". Her translation is a modification of Sandbach's.

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The harsh tone of the scholion is not invective, but Plutarch's attacks on the historian and, elsewhere, on the Epicurean Colotes or on the Stoics, prove that he can indeed come out more than sharply and edgy. Such choice is, it may be assumed, dictated by context, cause and purpose. In the light of our attempt to evaluate his criticism within the Hesiodic tradition formation and Panhellenic identity formation, our reference is also appropriate as Plutarch takes aim here at two established figures of Greek literature: Herodotus, the "father of history", and Hesiod, of whom Plutarch is said to be "arguably the greatest fan in antiquity".²¹ While, in the first case, he takes issue with the author of the *Historiae* and in the second with the text tradition of the *Erga*, i.e. the interpolation, in both cases Plutarch has subordinated this tradition and identity formation to his conviction as either a Greco-Roman historiographer or as a Platonist philosopher and teacher.

These observations allow us to focus more sharply on our question of the source text: has the tone of the scholion been adopted from a work that sets correct historical data as normative or from a work with a moral-educational programme? In the case of Plutarch, two obstacles prevent a satisfactory answer. First, tone is not an appropriate criterion to distinguish Plutarchan writings. As already noted, he does not assume his own rightness, but engages in dialogue with his sources, often in a discussion with fellow-πεπαιδευμένοι. While "there is no shortage of passages where he appears as a critical author displaying a sincere concern for the historical truth", Plutarch "attaches great importance to the plausibility (εὐκρίτης or πιθανόν) of his account."²² The same goes for the account of his sources, which presupposes a critical open-mindedness that is difficult to express in an either overly aggressive or overly flattering tone or style. Second, there is the lack of evidence. One theory says that the scholion goes back to a poem by Proclus which, in turn, was indebted to Plutarch's *Life of Hesiod* or his *Commentary on the Works and Days*. The formulations "(ἐμβεβλήσθαι) φησιν ὁ Πλούταρχος" and "ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἄρχεται", may suggest the latter work to the extent that they allude to philological exegetical judgements characteristic of text commentaries. Unfortunately, all three works are lost and the Proclan scholia are themselves marked by "a number of redactions and compressions".²³ Fortunately, *Erga* 650-662 comes up two times in Plutarch's sympotic work, more specifically *Table Talk* and *The Dinner (of the Seven Wise Men)*.²⁴

21. KONING 2010, 42 and 186.

22. ROSKAM 2021, 103 and *passim*.

23. For this quote and more details, see HUNTER 2014, 167, including the studies and text editions referenced in nn. 3 and 5.

24. Συμποσιακά/*Quaestionum convivialium* 674f-675b, and Συμπόσιον τῶν ἑπτὰ σοφῶν/*Septem sapientium convivium* 153f-154a.

The first passage is the most interesting in terms of wording. The central question of *Table Talk* 5.2 (= *Book 5, Question 2*) stems from a discussion at the Pythian Games: are the essentially musical contests still tenable in their current format, as poetry and prose are gaining ground? In the course of a second debate the Plutarchus character defends poetry contests by means of references to the literary tradition. In doing so, he explicitly takes care not to use the precedents his disciples would expect. By way of a *paralipsis*, he nevertheless manages to mention the (all too well-known) contest Hesiod won in Chalcis:

I made the point that poetry was not a late arrival nor a novelty at the religious festivals, but had in fact received the crown of victory in very ancient times. Some of my friends expected me to cite well-worn examples like the funeral ceremonies of Oeolycus of Thessaly and those of Amphidamas of Chalcis, at which it is said that Homer and Hesiod contended in epic verse. But I scorned all this hackneyed lore of the schoolroom_ (καταβαλὼν δὲ ταῦτα τῷ διατεθρυσθῆσθαι πάνθ' ὑπὸ τῶν γραμματικῶν), dismissing also the "speakers" (*rhemones*) in Homer, as read by some for "throwers" (*hemones*) at the funeral of Patroclus, as if Achilles had awarded a prize in speaking in addition to the other prizes. I merely mentioned that even Acastus at the funeral of his father Pelias held a contest of poetry at which the Sibyl won. I was immediately fastened on by many, who demanded my authority for so incredible and paradoxical a statement, etc. (*Table Talk* 5.2, 674f–675b)

Thereupon he challenges his intellectual audience to go and consult the hard-to-find source of Acesander's tale in the archives of the Delphian Treasuries.

The exegetical reason for this extended quotation will become clear at a later stage. For now, the primary focus is on διατεθρυσθῆσθαι, the substantiated perfect passive infinitive of διαθρυσθῆναι, in the Loeb edition translated as "hackneyed lore". However interpretive – the idea of "lore" is not inherent to the verb's basic meaning – this is a much better rendering than "babble" or "twaddle". After all, this time, the context leaves no doubt that it is not about *nonsense* but about *lack of inspiration and searching spirit*. First, the speaker, who may or may not be the historical Plutarch, explicitly says that he wants to surprise with never-heard trivia, and stresses this by referring to the story of Acastus and the Sibylle. Second, Acastus and his father Pelias are characters in the saga cycle of the Argonauts, Jason and Medea. Are these tales less "babble", then, than those about Oeolycus of Thessaly, Patroclus and Achilles?

The shared use of (δια)θρυσθῆναι does not necessarily indicate that the scholion goes back to this passage or that both trace back to a common text source. However, the excerpt from *Table Talk* 5.2 reveals two things. First, it introduces us to the open-minded discourse of sympotic conversation discourse from which the scholiast may have derived certain wordings. Further, the reference to Acesander's tale shows that, for both Plutarch the author and Plutarchus, his persona, 'lore' is not synonymous with ληρώδη or 'twaddle'. We insist on the translation of (δια)θρυσθῆναι as "to keep talking of" because, in our opinion, it points at Plutarch's

critical attitude towards the formation of tradition, i.e. around Hesiod and his work, and, implicitly, towards the identity formation of his Greco-Roman readership from, among others, their literary past. Whether the verb refers to the epigram or the whole story,²⁵ he takes the opportunity, be it somewhat pedantically, to lash out at the γραμματικοί (school teachers, scholars, grammarians?) as wretched “tradition-makers”.²⁶ Regurgitating uncritically and/or uninspired the same old repertoire over and over again, they neglect the real (for well-hidden and nearly forgotten) gems of a shared cultural memory.

Against this background, the scholion gives the erroneous impression that Plutarch is athetizing *Erga* 650-662 because he is annoyed by the passing from generation to generation of historically incorrect information or, put another way, a tradition that sells fiction as non-fiction. On the contrary, the second passage will prove that in certain contexts, traditional stories such as the one about the Chalcidian contest and Hesiod’s tripod can indeed be χρηστόν or “useful”. The only sure thing we can gather from the scholion is that for some reason this contest/tripod tale is felt as irrelevant either for Hesiod’s *Erga* as a whole or within its immediate context of the passage.

In *The Dinner* 153f–154a the seven sages and other interlocutors discuss, at some point, the usefulness of posing riddles when final decisions end in a deadlock.²⁷ After a concerted effort (or *syzetesis*, cf. *infra*) to answer a set of ten enigmatic questions, Cleodorus expresses his disinterest, arguing that “asking and answering such questions is (only) good for kings”. In doing so, he drops the word βάρβαρος (non-Greek).²⁸ This is a trigger for the tyrant Periander, the host

25. Cf. the translation in STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 534, in which the ἐπίγραμμα is seen as the subject of θουλοῦσι, with the result that the foregoing is interpreted as the object of an elliptic [They say that...].

26. However, it should be kept in mind that Plutarch shared the disdain towards them among the intellectual elite of the time. ESHLEMAN 2013, 148-149: “As teachers of language and literature, they occupied the pivot point between elementary and higher education. This gave them considerable influence as purveyors of the cultural capital of aristocratic society, especially the arts of correct speech. Yet while grammatical teaching was foundational to elite *paideia*, it was often scorned by members of the educated elite as merely elementary, childish, and banal, boring to everyone but grammarians.”

27. FERREIRA 2009, 481: “One of the most striking characteristics of the Banquet is the considerable disparity, in style and content, between the two halves of the text (1-12; 13-21)*. The Sages dominate the first half of the dialogue; the conversation is rapid, consisting of short, sententious opinions, and the topics broached relate to human activity, such as politics and the household. In the second half, however, the non-Sages come to the fore, expounding long speeches on subjects of a more divine and cosmic significance, familiar from Plutarch’s other dialogues.” *[146b-154f; 155a-164d]

28. The debate in question is centred on a riddle from Amasis, the king of Egypt to Bias of Priene, “the wisest of the Greeks”. The king of Ethiopia challenges him “to drink the ocean dry – ἐκπιεῖν τὴν θάλατταν”. At stake is the possession of certain cities and towns (*The Dinner*, 151b).

of the gathering, to point out that the Greeks too have a tradition of imposing determining riddles – τοῖς παλαιοῖς Ἑλλησιν ἔθος ἦν – for example at the end of the agon between Hesiod and Homer:

For we are told that also the most renowned (poets) among the wise men of that time came together in Chalcis for the funeral of Amphidamas. Now Amphidamas was a warrior who had given much trouble to the Eretrians, and had fallen in the battles for the possession of the Lelantine plain. Since the poems that the poets had prepared made the decision difficult and irksome because they were of matching quality, and the renown of the contestants (Homer and Hesiod) made the judges feel helpless and embarrassed, they turned to riddles of the following sort, etc. (*The Dinner*, 153f–154a)²⁹

To Periander's example of a useful riddle, Cleodorus counters that, all in all, it does not differ from the famous “conundrums for occasional entertainment” of Eumetis/Cleobulina, daughter of Cleobulus, also present (148d).

In terms of content, a detail pops up here, which also appears in the scholion: the battle against the Eretrians for the Lelantine plain and, above all the fact that Amphidamas fell during the fight. According to Bassino the latter information “is not found anywhere else”.³⁰ This may again point to a common source text but equally well to ready knowledge on the matter, gained through the ‘(δια)θρουλεῖν’ of the story since childhood. (Notice also the implicature: that it is about a poetry competition need not be made explicit; the names of the poets suffice as a hint.). More interesting, however, are the enactment, the impetus and the dynamics of the conversation. They reveal a lot about the use and utility of story-telling in Plutarch's intellectual discourse, c.q. its tradition-formative dimension.

‘Symptotic’ Hesiod

As regards the enactment and the impetus, *The Dinner* is in itself a carefully constructed story. Limiting ourselves to the prelude to the passage in question, this is evident in the way the proper ambience is created and the initial theme is foreshadowed.³¹ For instance, the walk to the location not only builds the necessary suspense, it also gives the opportunity for profiling some of the protagonists. Furthermore, the introduction of Eumetis, well-known for her αἰνίγματα (148c-e), is a clever anticipation of the theme, even before the letter with Amasis' challenge is unsealed. Most relevant to our argumentation, however, is the subtle

29. Thereupon Lesches, one of the contestants, formulates the crucial riddle. More about that storyline in BASSINO 2012.

30. BASSINO 2019, 18, n. 50.

31. *The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* is, of course, about much more. For a sketchy overview, see ROSKAM 2021, 44, notes 11 and 12 included.

way in which Plutarch creates situations or exploits the ploys of the symposium to draw on the predominantly ancient Greek, say Panhellenic heritage: views on policy, ethics and morals, philosophical reflections, literary quotes and historical facts, mythological trivia and funny anecdotes... Two examples of such inducements may suffice: Alexidemus' complaint about the table arrangement (148f-149a) and the girls playing flute during the libation (150d-151a). The references to the cultural past come in such quick succession that the reader gets the impression that the frame story (*The Dinner*) is not (only) at the service of Plutarch's Platonic dialectics (via *'the Seven Wise Men'*), but (also) intended to contribute to Greek identity formation by keeping alive a shared tradition.

The hypothesis that Panhellenic identity formation could well be the veiled perspective of this work is reinforced by the Greekness of the seven sages, the extras and the other participants, and by Plutarch's emulation of, among others, Plato's and Xenophon's *exempla*.³² Either way, the concept fully justifies these and other references to Hesiod,³³ as they contribute to the possible aim attached to this perspective: keeping the Greek tradition alive within Greco-Roman culture. Hesiod is often featured in these, which in itself can be seen as a confirmation of Koning's boutade (cf. supra).³⁴ Having reviewed those passages, however, Zoe Stamatopoulou comes to the following critical observation:

Throughout the dialogue, Hesiod is acknowledged and yet marginalized: although recognized as a man of exceptional *sophia* among his contemporaries, his impact on subsequent thinkers is minimized. Ultimately, the didactic poet functions as a foil that brings into relief, defines, and legitimizes the intellectual world of the Seven Sages. – The figure of Hesiod thus facilitates the self-definition of the Sages and their circle as an intellectual elite, a group that has appropriated and surpassed the great authoritative figures of the past in terms of its intellectual pursuits and accomplishments. Hesiod is still useful to many, but Periander's guests are above and beyond his admonition (...) Through the marginalization of Hesiodic wisdom,

32. STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 534, n. 3.

33. Beside that on the contest (153e-154a), the Hesiod passages and references are: 155c-d (about "the best home"), 156d-e (about the consumption of wine), 157e (on food), and 161c-e (about the death of Hesiod and the recovery of his corpse by dolphins).

34. Koning does not substantiate his claim in a single elaborated argumentation but with numerous source references throughout his book. We limit ourselves to Plutarch's extolling of Hesiod in the face of Homer on the one hand and philosophers on the other: the contrasting of "Hesiod's clarity and the blurriness of the other poet (Homer)" (171) in *On the Obsolence of Oracles* 415a-b; the mentioning of "Hesiod's ornament and smoothness" (354) in *Table Talk* 747e; the observation in *Moralia* 402e, 756f and 927e that Hesiod is on a par "with Parmenides, Xenophanes and Empedocles" (191) and even "demonstrates a better understanding than some philosophers" (KONING 2010, 191, n. 5) in *On the Obsolence of Oracles* 433e; and, in *Dialogue on Love* 756f, that he was "more scientific" than Parmenides (198). Finally, referring to Σ WD 130-1, Koning notes that "[n]owhere in antiquity, at least so far as I know, Hesiod is explicitly called a φιλόσοφος" (*Ibid*, 191, n. 5).

Plutarch circumscribes the advanced intellectual world inhabited by his fictional Thales and his cohort."³⁵

This conclusion is in line with the basic idea of *The Dinner* and not against our interpretation that 'lore' can at times be appropriate. It is not clear, however, whether Stamatopoulou sees the sages' self-glorifying use of Hesiod as a deliberate strategy or simply an attitude that follows logically from their profile as top intellectuals. In our opinion, she foregrounds something that threatens to escape the modern reader but is perceived by Plutarch's audience as obvious and evident within the "imaginative account of the dinner",³⁶ i.e. within the plot of the fictional dialogue. Therefore, we have to resist the temptation to extrapolate Stamatopoulou's argument to other equivalent sympotic works, in which Plutarch shares his reasoning and ideas through one or more interlocutors. In possibly semi-realistic cases like *Table Talk* 5.2,³⁷ this would imply that Plutarch/Plutarchus (mis)uses the contest story he reviled elsewhere to display his intellectual superiority. Given Plutarch's refined rhetoric, the pedantic way his namesake distils the story in a discussion of the Pythian Games rather feels like self-irony. Within this type of discourse community, the demand for erudition naturally creates an agonistic dynamic and it may be assumed that symposiasts recognize themselves in Plutarch(us)'s playful posturing. More so, taking into account the educational perspective of his sympotic work, his avatar's challenge to search for Acesander's tale in the archives of the Delphian Treasuries can be interpreted as a challenge by the real Plutarch to his Greco-Roman reader-students: I offer you a treasure trove of gradually forgotten traditional material from (y)our glorious Greek past; it is up to you to delve into the ἱστορία (story, account or inquiry, cf. infra) behind them. The brevity of Plutarch's references only increase curiosity, even today. In this view, to dare each other with know-it-all mainly reflects his ideal of erudition and inquisitiveness to which he aspires us and makes us strive. As Geert Roskam puts it: "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*."³⁸

The enactment and impetus of Plutarch's *Dinner* has shown how the concept of a symposium offers an ideal format for dwelling upon past and tradition through the exchanging of storylines. The *dynamics* of this exchange, in turn, show how the way of presenting these storylines together with other traditional

35. STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 534 and 555.

36. PLUTARCH, *Moralia*, vol. 3. *Loeb Classical Library* 222, 346.

37. There is a strong biographical connection between Plutarch and Delphi, of which he enjoyed citizenship. He was priest at the oracle and at some point possibly *agonothetes* (four-year mandate to superintend contests) at the Pythian Games. See ROSKAM 2021, 13-14, note 34 included. This gives the discussion a realistic touch, but that does not make *Table Talk* 5.2. some kind of meeting report or conference proceedings.

38. ROSKAM 2021, 60.

material displays a specific pattern and purpose: the solving of a problem by *zetesis*, more precisely *syzetesis*. Roskam describes this as a process of “seeking or searching”, whether or not in dialogue with educated men of diverse background, conviction or expertise, or “learned joint inquiry into the truth”. The conversation starts from a question which is sufficiently challenging to all. Successive, preferably divergent answers do not lead to a final all-overriding solution, but constitute a “friendly, respectful and open-minded” collaboration in “collecting as many pieces of the puzzle as possible”. This essentially Plutarchan practice of *syzetesis* manifests itself pre-eminently in philosophical debates, but also in the treatment of traditional material in *The Dinner*: “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.”³⁹

Transposed to the specific context of *The Dinner*, the mixed interchange of traditional material and historical facts can be seen as more than the joint mapping of inherited, perhaps even identity-defining practices, such as riddling. It can also be interpreted as the collectively puzzling together of a past and tradition which, however fragmented it may have become, must not be lost. In that perspective, the antithesis between ‘historical fact’ and ‘myth and legend’ and the difference between knowing and believing taken for granted today,⁴⁰ is not at hand in this process. Here, everything is *χρηστόν* that confirms or reinforces Panhellenic identity within the context of a Greco-Roman world. This also explains Plutarch’s receptivity to myth and legend when it comes to another biographical discussion, where the tension between fiction and non-fiction is, it may be assumed, non-existent: Hesiod’s posthumous fortunes.

In *The Dinner* 162c-e Aesop narrates how, after his violent death, Hesiod’s body was dumped into the sea and carried away by dolphins. This relocation of the corpse would have given rise to the regional dispute (between Boeotia and West-Locris) about the legitimate location of his grave and sanctuary. Remarkably for us but in the line of the debate, Plutarch does not focus on the possible *historical* (i.e., non-fictional) kernel of the legend but on the *fanciful* (i.e. fictional) intervention of the dolphins, their character, and from there, on the credibility c.q. cultural-historical relevance of fantastic *λόγοι*. Prior to the narration, Aesop already argued that, unlike tales about gods, Hesiod’s experiences in this time-honoured story (cf. *πλέον ἢ χίλι' ἔτη* (162c) – more than thousand years) are not over our heads (*ὑπὲρ ἡμᾶς*) but understandable to us humans (*ἀνθρώπινον δὲ καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς*).⁴¹ Subsequent to the story, the narrator elaborates on the ability of dolphins to help humans in real life and concludes that sharing stories about them is therefore more than justified: “*δίκαιός ἐστι περὶ τούτων διελεθῆναι*” (163a). This remark is, as can be inferred from the masculine *δίκαιος*, addressed

39. *Ibid*, 22 (first short quotes), 24 (last quote).

40. VEYNE 1983, 8.

41. *The Dinner*, 162c-e, quote: 162c.

to Pittacus as an invitation to tell yet another tale from the Lesbian tradition. In our view, δίκαιος may also have a deictic meaning, suggesting that myth and legend are still valuable, meaningful and, as can be gathered from the commentary, identity-defining for the seven sages and, by extension, all readers concerned with their own culture.⁴²

Plutarch's Hesiod and Panhellenic Identity Formation

Without being a distinct theme, the tension between fiction and non-fiction seems to run like a fine thread throughout *The Dinner*.⁴³ To begin with, the work itself is presented as a story that has not quite been handed down correctly. As may be expected with Plutarch, this inspires the narrator, who promises to give a truthful account of the meeting of the seven wise men, to an initial reflection about precisely the impact of time on the credibility of a story, even when the facts are recent:

It seems fairly certain, Nicarchus, that the lapse of time will bring about much obscurity and complete uncertainty regarding actual events, if at the present time, in the case of events so fresh and recent, false accounts that have been concocted obtain credence. (*The Dinner*, 146B)

This consideration could be seen as merely a literary procedure to place oneself in the generic tradition (cf. Plato and Xenophon) and to anticipate the tales of the non-sages dominating the second narrative-oriented part. Its basic idea, however, regularly recurs through peripheral comments⁴⁴ and, in our opinion, takes shape in the figure of Aesop, whose presence is not evident. As a fabulist, he is, as it were, an intermediary between the philosophizing sage and the narrating non-sages. Indeed, by revealing the deeper truth of reality (non-fiction), his fables (fiction) do indeed "obtain credence". The fable poet therefore cannot resist retaliating playfully in respect of the sages' receptivity to dolphin stories.⁴⁵

42. Hereafter, following a digression on the human-like abilities of dolphins and their consequently sacrosanct status in Greek culture, another related story is taken from, as said, the mythological tradition of Lesbos.

43. For this aspect of *The Dinner* as a whole and the *Seven Wise Men* in particular, see FERREIRA 2009.

44. We confine ourselves besides 163a (cf. supra) to following quote from quotes 151f: "It is certain, Diocles, that a good many things come to be believed quite contrary to fact, and most people take delight in fabricating out of their own minds unwarranted tales about wise men, and in readily accepting such tales from others."

45. From 162b: "Well! well!", said Aesop, "you all make fun of my jackdaws and crows if they talk with one another, and yet dolphins indulge in such pranks as this!"

According to Plutarch, ἱστορία, as either stories or records of historical research, may include mythical stories, legends and lore under certain preconditions.⁴⁶ Jackson P. Hershell distinguishes the following criteria: *aesthetically*, when tales and poetic fictions give “power and charm of elegance” to actions and experiences; *literarily*, when they are “subjected to reason and take on the semblance of history”, and, *philosophically*, when earlier inquiries into them “make [one’s] own opinions clearer”. He derives these conditions from the following passages, among others: “καὶ πλάσμασι καὶ ποιήμασι τοῦ πιστεύεσθαι μὴ προσόντος ἔνεστιν ὅμως τὸ πείθον – and the purest fabrications and poetic inventions, to which no belief is accorded, have none the less the winning grace of truth” (*Against Colotes* 1092f), and “λόγῳ τὸ μυθῶδες ὑπακούσαι καὶ λαβεῖν ἱστορίας ὄψιν – make [Fable] submit to reason and take on the semblance of History” (*Lives I. Theseus*, 1.3).⁴⁷ From what we learned in *The Dinner*, we venture to suggest a fourth, twofold criterium: tradition formation and identity formation.

In our opinion these objectives, these unspoken dynamics in Plutarch’s sympotic work also constitute at least one part of the answer to the two remaining questions: why delete Hesiod’s contest story in *Erga* and quote it twice in a sympotic work? Just by stating that an educated man (πεπαιδευμένος) is allowed (δίκαιός) to tell stories, Plutarch makes it clear that, in addition to the non-fiction of historical facts, the fiction of handed-down beliefs is, as already said, χρηστόν (appropriate) in some cases. More specifically, the fact that they are part of sympotic *zetesis* shows that, just like the lore about dolphins, the narrative behind the Hesiod cult has some value as well. It is therefore unlikely that Plutarch would have simply dismissed the tradition around Hesiod’s contest as nonsense on the basis of the age difference with Homer or the improbability of the epigram on what may have been at most a replica of the tripod trophy.⁴⁸ As for *Erga* 650-662, that may not even have been an underlying reason for the *athetesis*, as these historical anomalies do not appear in the passage. As we have already suggested, “οὐδὲν ἔχοντα χρηστόν” must have to do with the specificity of the immediate context, the concept of *Erga* as a whole, Plutarch’s appreciation of Hesiod, or all three.

The most obvious motive for the *athetization* is that the contest/tripod story contributes nothing to the instruction on seafaring, started in vv. 646-649 and continued in vv. 663-693. In this respect, “οὐδὲν χρηστόν – nothing useful” is consistent with Plutarch’s “utilitarian attitude towards literature”, as Roskam calls it.⁴⁹ In a Platonic spirit, he is always also concerned with “How the young man should study/listen to poetry – Πῶς δεῖ τὸν νέον ποιημάτων ἀκούειν”, as

46. This topic is strongly thematized in the prologue to *Life of Theseus and Romulus*, see most recently: ROSKAM 2023 (with further literature).

47. HERSHELL 1997, 230.

48. About the fact-oriented view on the matter of the Wilamowitz school, see STAMATOPOULOU 2014, 537-538, n. 20 included, and HUNTER 2014, 186-187, n. 44 included.

49. ROSKAM 2021, 56 (quote) – 58.

the title of one of his treatises reads. However, since his philosophical criteria to guide the reading youth are basically ethical and there is nothing immoral about the interpolation, it could be questioned whether Plutarch was insisting on rejecting these verses at all. After all, Proclus' choice of words is different from that in comparable scholia. Whereas elsewhere Proclus states unequivocally that "ὁ Πλούταρχος (...) διαγράφει – erases" or "ἐκβάλλει – deletes" certain verses,⁵⁰ the message here sounds more reserved: Plutarch *says* that the contest/tripod story *was inserted* (ἐμβεβλήσθαι), and that he is ignoring it in this context (ἀπ' αὐτῶν ἄρχεται). If there is more to this not-so-categorical formulation, then Plutarch may have appreciated the passage in itself as an uplifting piece of Hesiodic tradition sneaked into an established didactic poem, but out of place among instructions on seafaring.

We could easily stick to this utilitarian justification, were it not for visions that also seek answers outside the immediate context. Aurelio Pérez Jiménez examined Plutarch's philosophical criticism of Hesiod. He thereby points at two other athetizations (*Erga* 267-273 and 757-759), which are based on moral-educational objections. The first passage is about Hesiod going against his own glorification of Dike; in the second (about urinating in a river), the vulgarity is felt unworthy of the Muses' didactic function.⁵¹ Richard Hunter's approach is along the same ethical lines: the fact that Hesiod, without any training or effort, gets his verses whispered by the Muses, makes the passage inappropriate on moral-educational grounds. The reason reads as follows:

The denial of any sound basis for education, the idea that one needed no special skill or experience to teach a craft, would have been deeply inimical to Plutarch's Platonising convictions; 'the Muses taught me' (v. 662) may, in other contexts, have served as a poetic way of saying "I have been educated" or "I have read in books", but that clearly was not good enough for Plutarch, for it undermined the "didactic" value of the subsequent advice, particularly when seen against the general background of his defence of Hesiod's sound knowledge.⁵²

Our view is more in line with a consequence Hunter attaches to this reasoning: Plutarch does not want "his" Hesiod to be associated with the "[ignorant] poets and rhapsodes most famously set out in Plato's *Ion*". Perhaps the moralist also considered Hesiod's boasting of victory beneath the dignity of an *aidos* chosen by the Muses. Whatever the case, we already pointed out Plutarch's affection for the poet of *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, so the *Erga* passage may have been sensed as contrary to the profile he wanted to create of Hesiod. The question of whether

50. Schol. Hesiod WD 757-759, and Schol. Hesiod WD 353-354.

51. PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ 2011, 221.

52. HUNTER 2014, 187. He thus problematizes in particular the last verse of Plutarch's full athetesis: "Μοῦσαι γὰρ μ' ἐδίδαξαν ἀθέσφατον ὕμνον αἰδεῖν – for the Muses taught me to sing an inconceivable poem".

regional chauvinism is at play, we defer for a moment. For now, the fact that Hesiod appears fifteen times in *The Dinner* as opposed to Homer's eight times, surely indicates a conscious or unconscious urge to reinforce the tradition of Hesiod as a founding father of Panhellenic culture.⁵³ Hence our second question: from which viewpoint does Plutarch refer to that supposedly discredited *Erga* passage in *Table Talk* and *The Dinner*? From what has been written about Plutarch's dealings with (Hesiodic) tradition, three possible answers come to mind: *paideia*, ethics and patriotism. We already pointed out possible traces of identity formation in Plutarch's sympotic work, the all-Greek character of *The Dinner* in particular. From that perspective, it will now become clear why identity formation should be added to the list.

In the end, Hunter's motivation of Plutarch's athetizing is the idea(l) of education (*paideia*) towards erudition (*polymatheia*). This point-of-view is most evident from the smart ass manner in which the Plutarchus character introduces the contest story in *Table Talk* 5.2. This is corroborated by the following passage in *The Dinner* about the preparation and purpose of a symposium: just like a lady elaborately prepares for the occasion, the "man of sense – ὁ νοῦν ἔχων" must search for "the fitting adornment for character – ἥθει τὸν πρέποντα κόσμον". He should prepare himself well in terms of content, i.e. by thinking up issues appropriate for a particular gathering. Further, during the conversation, he should not be out "to fill himself up as though he were a sort of pot, but to take some part, be it serious or humorous, and to listen and to talk regarding this or that topic as the occasion suggests it to the company, if their association together is to be pleasant".⁵⁴

Paideia, *polymatheia* and *syzetesis* are indeed explicit goals of an intellectual symposium, but they say nothing about what is implicitly aimed at, nor about the role of Hesiod in reaching these goals. One such implicit motivation can be found – once again – in Plutarch's "moral approach of literature", a view which Roskam grounds as follows:

In so many of his works, Plutarch time and again emphasizes the importance of virtue, moral progress, a good and harmonious disposition, which are in his view the necessary conditions for happiness and the good life.⁵⁵

53. In the Greco-Roman reality of Plutarch's time, "Panhellenic" not only refers to the unity-in-diversity of all Greek regions, but also to the shared Greek identity that must, through self-assertion, hold its own within a Romanized world. About the latter see, for instance, STADTER 2013, 20-21, on Delphi and Rome. About the shifting criteria of Greek identity formation throughout national history, ancient (and modern), see PAPANIKOS 2024, in particular the shift from the criterion "common origin" towards that of "education, learning and virtue" (pp. 12sq.).

54. *The Dinner*, 147e-f.

55. ROSKAM 2017, 161 and 164.

This certainly helps to better understand the athetizing of several passages in *Erga*, cited above, but is *prima facie* less relevant to the contest story as such. Our full quotation, however, is motivated by Roskam's argument being partly directed against the thesis that patriotism was also an implicit motivation behind works that, in our view, show a penchant for identity formation. The patriotism thesis crops up in particular with regard to *On the Malice of Herodotus* especially where Plutarch feels obliged to “stand up for the cause of my ancestors and the cause of truth, since his principal victims are the Boeotians and the Corinthians, though he spares no one”.⁵⁶ This refers to *Histories* 9.15-17, where Herodotus elaborates on the fact that Thebes and other Boeotian cities sided with the Persians. Born in Chaeronea nearby Thebes, Plutarch has shown such local pride throughout his life.⁵⁷ Hence the popular thesis that patriotism incited his attack on the historian. For Roskam, however, *On the Malice* is characterized by an “awkward tension” between this patriotic spirit and “the moral reading of literature (...) typical of Plutarch, i.e. the examination of the “complex relation between the author's style, his character, and the content of his work”.⁵⁸ Ultimately, this approach comes down to the conclusion that the treatment of Boeotians and Corinthians in *Histories* should be evaluated primarily as a manifestation of Herodotus' malicious character.

Lamberton considers Plutarch's commentary on the *Works and Days* “an act of piety for his native Boeotia” and is convinced that *On the Malice of Herodotus* “served the same function”.⁵⁹ If so, both options (patriotism and “ethical-utilitarian approach towards literature”) are perhaps also applicable to the alleged tension between the Plutarch of *Table Talk* and *The Dinner*, and the Plutarch of Proclus' scholion. He would thus have found the contest story χρηστόν for helping to keep alive the immaterial heritage of his beloved Boeotia, yet ἄχρηστον in the direct context of seafaring.⁶⁰

In our view identity formation forms a perspective behind all three possible motives (*paideia*, ethics and patriotism). Roskam is reluctant to accept this idea, but this need not compromised his thesis that, like in most of Plutarch's work, ethics are at the centre.⁶¹ Conversely, identity formation does not necessarily have to be a topic or part of a programme. Here, as probably elsewhere, it operates in

56. *On the Malice of Herodotus*, 854f: “μάλιστα πρὸς τε Βοιωτοὺς καὶ Κορινθίους κέχρηται μηδὲ τῶν ἄλλων τινὸς ἀπεσχημένος, οἶμαι προσήκειν ἡμῖν, ἀμυνομένοις ὑπὲρ τῶν προγόνων ἅμα καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας.”

57. ROSKAM 2017, 167.

58. *Ibid*, 168, 166 and 163.

59. LAMBERTON 1988, 291; ROSKAM 2021, 57.

60. *Theseus*, 3: “Ἦν δὲ τῆς σοφίας ἐκείνης τοιαύτη τις, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἰδέα καὶ δύναμις, οἷα χρῆσάμενος Ἡσίοδος εὐδοκίμει μάλιστα περὶ τὰς ἐν τοῖς Ἔργοις γνωμολογίας – Now the wisdom of that day had some such form and force as that for which Hesiod was famous, especially in the sententious maxims of his ‘Works and Days’.”

61. ROSKAM 2017, 166, and ROSKAM 2021, 62sqg.

the background, half-consciously, half-unconsciously. The whole discussion concerning (the story in) *Erga* 650-662 may be conducted from the same point of view. For Plutarch the contest/tripod/epigram lore has no place among instructions in relation to archaic maritime practices, but it certainly does within the narrative tradition that keeps alive the memory of a shared past.

All of this leads to our concluding question is: why do myth, lore and fiction altogether manage to hold their own so strongly against the increasing importance of realism and objectivity in the contemporary *paideia*? In our view, sympotic works like *The Dinner* are more than a celebration of this shared past. Their wealth of traditional, mostly narrative material suggestively highlights that this past, with Hesiod as one of the most significant figures, must not be forgotten if the Panhellenic identity is to hold its own in a romanized world. According to Rebecca Preston, the construction of Greek identity at the time is no longer seen today in a pro- or anti-Roman perspective. For Plutarch, this was a major aspect of the *paideia*, which can be understood as “both the formal education of the elite and the wider culture shared by the Greek local elites”, concentrated, among others, on “the Greek past in their literary texts and their cultural activities”.⁶²

Thus, one possible answer to our question is that, within the Greco-Roman context of the time, Greek tradition formation simultaneously implied Greek identity formation. As a unity-in-diversity, the Panhellenic culture was increasingly at risk of either fading or being romanized. And, when identity is at stake, a culture places collective belief over individual knowledge. In *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths*, the French classical historian Paul Veyne thereto observes that, for his ancient predecessors, the antithesis between myth and reality, fiction and non-fiction, was not in question: “The ancient historian believes first; his doubts are reserved for details he can no longer believe.”⁶³

Conclusion

When seen in the perspective of Hesiodic tradition formation and Panhellenic identity formation, there is no contradiction in Plutarch’s use of the contest/tripod story in his sympotic work and his athetizing of the corresponding *Erga*-passage in the Proclan scholion. By philological means and discourse analysis, we gathered that the philosopher did not consider the story as such to be “nonsense” but rather out of place in that specific context. On the contrary, in *Table Talk* and *The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*, along with so much other traditional material, the tale contributes to the perpetuation of Hesiod’s memory. Besides the specific role in each of these works and Plutarch’s personal (didactic, moral and patriotic)

62. PRESTON 2001, Chapter 3 “Roman Questions, Greek answers: Plutarch and the construction of identity”, 89 and 90.

63. VEYNE 1983, 8.

motives, we also suspect a conscious or unconscious pursuit of Panhellenic identity formation within a Greco-Roman context. Fiction (myth and legend) and non-fiction (historical inquiry) did not stand in each other's way in the process. Identity as piety towards the past and its "tra-dition" (the way the past was passed down), *mythos* and *logos* blended seamlessly into "eternal truths that are our own". Veyne concludes that there is not much difference between Greek perceptions of the past in the second century CE and the fifth century BC. What he writes about these "old historians" also applies *mutatis mutandis* to Plutarch:

[They] did not, as our folklorists do, collect local traditions they did not believe, nor did they refrain from condemning them out of respect for foreign beliefs: they considered them to be truths, but truths that belonged to them no more than to anyone else. They belonged to the people of the country, for the natives are the best placed to know the truth about themselves (...).⁶⁴

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64. VEYNE 1983, 123 and 97.

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