

Plutarch's *Banquet of the Seven Sages* is something of an anomaly in his corpus; it is one of only two dialogues (along with *On Socrates' Daimonion*) set in the distant past, and its artificiality, meandering tendencies, and lack of unity set it apart from the rest of his works; some scholars have even declared the text spurious (Wilamowitz, *Hermes* 25, 1890; Hirzel, 1895, 132-48). While recent work has attempted qualified recuperation (e.g., Mossman 1997, in *Plutarch and his Intellectual World*, 119-140; Busine 2002, *Les sept sages de la Grèce antique*, 93-102), no one is claiming it as an example of Plutarch at his best. In this paper, however, I want to take a closer look at the *Banquet* as an attempt to imagine and recreate the world of the sixth century BCE in fictional form.

Plutarch, naturally, was familiar with the history of this period as evidenced, for example, in his *Solon*, where he mentions the Sages' gathering at the house of Periander in Corinth fictionalized in the *Banquet* (*Sol.* 4). But the *Banquet* is also written in the tradition of symposiastic literature, framed (in Platonic fashion) as a narrative told by a certain Diocles, who was actually present at the dinner. Part of the reason for its awkwardness, however, is that the Sages are not symposiasts; their well-known pithy remarks always occur in a particular context—they “perform” wisdom (R. Martin 1993, in *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece*, 108-28)—and after delivering their *bon mots* they retreat immediately from the stage (e.g., Solon's meeting with Croesus; Bias' advice to the Ionians). Plutarch has brought all of these figures, scattered throughout Herodotus, together, but the sages' *brachulogia* is ill suited to the extended conversation required by their presence together at a dinner.

But if the choice of depicting a single symposiastic event lends the Sages a slightly artificial character, its temporal fixity allows Plutarch to exploit his audience's knowledge of his characters' future. Despite its considerable anachronisms (many of the characters could not actually have ever met each other), the work gains much of its power from hints of events to come. Thales, for instance, remarks that Periander is making a good recovery from despotism (147C), but his ominous “at least up till now” (along with the portentous birth of a centaur) surely reminds us of what lies on the horizon: the tyrant's murder of his wife Melissa (present at the symposium) and the tragic death of their son (Herodotus 3.50-3). The same goes for the other guests: Solon's sad last days in Athens, Anacharsis' brutal death in Scythia, and Aesop's ignoble execution at Samos loom over the proceedings.

When the symposium is interrupted by the sudden arrival of Periander's brother, who tells the banqueters about the marvelous events that he has just witnessed, Plutarch performs a remarkable narrative *coup*. The story is that of Arion and the dolphin, another famous historical event linked with this time period; but now instead of acting as background or intertextual reference, history intrudes directly into the text; it is witnessed in the very act of occurring. The tale and the discussion to which it gives rise are clearly the climax of the dialogue; here Plutarch, by collapsing the distinction between reader and banqueter, who both experience the narrative from the same perspective, manages to draw his audience directly into the world of Archaic Greece.