

“Then Our Symposium Becomes a Grammar School”: Grammarians in Plutarch’s *Table Talk*

Book nine of Plutarch’s *Table Talk*, which records a single party at the house of his teacher Ammonius, opens with a series of increasingly prickly conversations involving grammarians. As these men go from inept to obstreperous to truculent, one begins to wonder why Ammonius invited grammarians to his symposium at all. Not everyone considered grammarians fit sympotic companions; Aulus Gellius never places a grammarian in a convivial setting. And in the *Table Talk* as a whole, the grammarian stands alongside the lay person and the sophist as an embodiment of what the cultured symposium should not be: pedantic, vulgar, and hyper-competitive. Yet grammarians do appear in Plutarch’s symposia, with surprising frequency. Men identified as grammarians or grammatists participate in no fewer than fifteen *talks* — more than sophists (five) or rhetors (eleven), and almost as many as doctors (sixteen). While the place of medicine and rhetoric in the *Table Talk* has received considerable attention in recent years, though, the portrait of grammarians in the work has been little studied. This paper will examine the depiction of grammarians in the *Table Talk*, to show how Plutarch uses scenes involving grammarians to probe, and ultimately affirm, the value and limits of grammatical expertise and its place in the hierarchy of elite *paideia*.

In some ways, Plutarch’s grammarians occupy the awkward liminal position diagnosed by Robert Kaster: over-assertive, under-socialized, gatekeepers of elite culture but not fully at ease within it. In other respects, though, his perspective is distinctive. For Plutarch, grammarians, like students, are often “problem guests” who require special care and handling, as book nine repeatedly illustrates. Like students, grammarians are better suited to answering than to initiating questions, which they do only twice, and the questions they receive are carefully tailored to what the other guests regard as their proper interests and aptitudes. A grammarian who attempts to

stray from that philological and antiquarian territory is quickly pushed back within its borders. When the *grammatikos* Theon begins quizzing a Stoic guest about Chrysippus in 1.9, he is firmly rebuffed: “What business do you have asking about that?” snaps the Stoic, before steering Theon back onto his own turf (τὰ ἴδια) with a Homeric question; Plutarch himself intervenes to stop further incursions. Yet Plutarch’s grammarians also seem to have their own self-image, as practitioners of a hard-nosed empirical discipline, with a healthy skepticism about more theoretical fields (philosophy, rhetoric, mathematics). And Plutarch tacitly insists that grammarians, like students, deserve a place at the learned table. Guests who rudely belittle grammatical expertise, like the young Caphisias (8.4) and Plutarch’s jovially insolent brother Lamprias (8.6), are quietly corrected: those talks are followed by others that model more tactful ways to respond to grammarians (8.8, 9.2-6); the latter sequence culminates with the good grammarian Marcus supplying a brilliant (and appropriately Homeric) solution to a philosophical problem that had confounded Lamprias (9.5). In short, while Plutarch confirms the traditional place of grammarians near the bottom of the paideutic hierarchy, he also affirms the value of grammatical contributions to learned discourse, and his composite portrait of grammarians themselves is remarkably nuanced and sympathetic.