

Pruning the Vine of the Muses:
Instructive Metaphor in Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis*

In his treatise *De audiendis poetis*, Plutarch makes a striking claim that belies his Platonic roots: he argues for the role of poetry in the philosophical education of the young. He insists that the judicious “mixing” of philosophy and poetry is desirable on two grounds. Firstly, poetry prefigures philosophical reasoning, sharpening the intellect and teaching one to seek out the utility in what is pleasurable (16a). Secondly, since poetry appeals to the nascent intellectual sensibilities of the young, it makes philosophy more accessible and attractive (14e). In order to underscore this claim, Plutarch compares this phenomenon to coaxing the young to eat nutritious food by administering a savory relish (14f). Garnishing piquant philosophy with poetic “relish,” then, better suits their unaccustomed palates: it draws them into philosophical discourse and hones their critical faculties.

Poetic devices, as in the passage above, play a significant role in Plutarch's philosophical essay. Metaphorical language that evokes the senses, especially taste, has a particularly strong presence in the text. Sensory metaphor infuses Plutarch's essay on the philosophical instruction of the young with vividness and immediacy, but its function, I submit, is not merely ornamental. Rather, it serves as an important link between the form of the text and its content.

In this paper, I argue that metaphor and simile illustrate Plutarch's claim that poetry may facilitate philosophical instruction in *De audiendis poetis*. That is to say, metaphor—as literary “relish”—makes the substance of his prose more pleasing for his readers to entertain and so eases their ingestion of his philosophical discourse. What is more, the extended metaphors of the treatise all stand in reference to its central proposition, the utility of poetry to philosophical instruction. Each figure acts as the “vehicle” for a different facet of Plutarch's argument, thus lending his prose charm and requiring the reader to exercise his interpretive faculties. Plutarch's

use of metaphor thus aligns precisely with his argument that poetry can serve philosophic aims. Several scholars have made valuable contributions to our understanding of this argument and its philosophical context (Eden, 1997; Konstan, 2004). However, there are comparatively few treatments of Plutarch's rhetorical style (Hunter and Russell, 2011). To my knowledge, there has been no previous systematic study of the compelling interplay of form and content through figuration in Plutarch's text.

In order to advance this claim, I analyze the three most striking metaphors in Plutarch's text. In the first case, Plutarch compares indulging in the poetic arts to consuming cuttlefish: both can be salutary if handled properly, but both can also induce delusions (15c). The cuttlefish acts as a surrogate for the act of reading poetry, representing it in somatic terms that naturalize and familiarize Plutarch's literary philosophy. This figure thus underscores the necessity of judiciously exposing the youth to poetry and properly calibrating his critical response, all the while eliciting aesthetic pleasure from the reader.

In the second example that I discuss, Plutarch alludes to Odysseus' encounter with the sirens in *Odyssey* 12. Through metaphoric imagery, he weighs the virtues of his view of the relationship between poetry and philosophical instruction ("binding" the young to the mast of reason) and Plato's model of contrariety (stopping their ears with wax). By casting this philosophical dilemma in reified form, he makes it more accessible to the untrained ear. So too the vivid image and invocation of familiarizing *mythos* entice the reader and appeal to those sensibilities that attract him to poetry.

The final striking example of this relationship between figural imagery and philosophical content is in Plutarch's comparison of his proposed method of philosophical advancement with vintage and grafting. "So let us not uproot or destroy the poetic vinery of the Muses," he writes,

“... but ... let us then introduce philosophy and blend it with poetry” (15e-f). Thus, by selectively “pruning” poetry with a discerning eye, one can reap its benefits without being overcome by a riotous overgrowth of baroque style and beguiling imagery. Here, too, the metaphor facilitates a deeper understanding of Plutarch’s argument.

As these examples suggest, metaphor and simile illustrate Plutarch’s claim that poetry is propaedeutic to philosophy and act as the “relish” that makes his prose more palatable. Plutarch’s self-conscious poeticism thus helps his reader navigate and enjoy his philosophical discourse, a discourse on precisely this virtue of poetry. This mirroring of form and content is a unique feature of Plutarch’s style, one that merits scholarly attention.

References Cited

- Eden, Kathy. *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Hunter, Richard and Donald Russell. “Introduction.” In *How to Study Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 (1- 26).
- Konstan, David. “‘The Birth of the Reader’: Plutarch as a Literary Critic.” *Scholias* Vol. 13 (2004), 3-27.