

BOOK REVIEW

Saints and Symposiasts: the Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture. By JASON KÖNIG. Greek Culture in the Roman World. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xii + 417. Hardcover, £70.00/\$115.00. ISBN 978-0-521-88685-7.

This book explores how “telling stories about eating and drinking ... was a way of conjuring up idealized images of community and identity (or in some cases images of aberrant or transgressive community)” (6). The specific focus is the literature of the Roman period. For despite recent work on Plutarch and Athenaeus, further progress needs to be made “with reference not only to the philosophical table-talk tradition, the main aim of Part I, but also to the novelistic and satirical prose literature of the Roman empire,” which is the focus of Part II. A good part of this focus and undoubtedly a strength of the book is the inclusion of Christian texts and their “function as narratives” and the “ideals and provocations” they dangle before their readers (14–15).

König turns to texts in Ch. 2, starting with Plutarch’s interesting prefaces in the *Symposiaka* and then does what he can to dignify Athenaeus. As he notes, Athenaeus has suffered from a feeling that he is not very good. One can counter this by suggesting that his miscellanist/encyclopedist skills were “highly prestigious” to contemporaries (but that does not answer the objection). Miscellanism certainly has “dynamic potential,” but we might ask what proportion of literature did it form and how far did major authors go in for it (cf. p. 227: “these were not necessarily texts with an enormously wide readership”)? König theorizes his discussion in two ways. First, that the shuffling of quotations is a mode of engaging directly with dead authors. This is all overdone. Next Bakhtin and Todorov are invoked; but as he admits, for symposiac-miscellanist literature (as opposed to the novel) there isn’t much to this. With Bakhtin’s “carnival” König is on safer ground which features profitably later.

So to Plutarch (Ch. 3). König’s focuses on how Plutarch establishes “ideals of coherence and community,” noting that the “chaotic, miscellaneous” material makes it difficult to sum up the *Symposiaka*. The main point is the freedom of conversations to compete with one another. He draws on Books 2–3 as exam-

ples. He follows this with a useful discussion of the vocabulary used to engage with texts and authors. Ongoing civic commitment to banquets attested through inscriptions is nicely related to Plutarch's own information on the occasions of his dinners.

Ch. 4 moves to the *Deipnosophists*, "a difficult text to generalise about." Recourse is had to Bakhtin—and not persuasively because the "tension between monologic authority and unfinalisable multiplicity of perspective" takes us way beyond Athenaeus.

"Studying early Christian feasting is a difficult business": so begins Ch. 5. Some may find surprising the suggestion of "a very specific engagement with Greco-Roman sympotic writing" in Luke; indeed Luke's Jesus is a "sympotic sage, philosophising in Platonic manner." The *Letter of Aristeas* and its banquetting scene is cited, but this is a different, Hellenizing beast. The Gospels, like any text, have conversation near food—but might one say, So what? Clement of Alexandria is taken as an example of someone who shows Christian aversion to symposiac literature while being very much aware of eating in company. Given his well-heeled audience, one might conclude that his presentation of what constitutes good taste and conversation at dinner is more typical than what we find in *symposiaka*. Ch. 6 bravely tackles Methodius' *Peri hagneias* and indeed has some interesting discussion of Platonic and other literary reflexes in the text. Ch. 7 moves forward to the 4th c. Christians who were not tempted into exploring their differences through symposium literature. Here as elsewhere in the book we get into meals in the absence of literature. Unluckily Julian's *Symposium (Caesars)* does not deliver for König's purposes and is more or less ignored. By contrast Macrobius (rightly) merits a whole chapter (8). He is "difficult to summarise"; but König does a good job exploring the nostalgic "performance of Roman identity" in the *Saturnalia* and the author's distaste for "competitive and speculative speech."

Part II looks at transgressive texts on eating and the way they "blur boundaries between high and low culture," beginning with a selection of items from the Tavern of the Seven Sages at Ostia to the figure of the parasite in Lucian and Alciphron, who according to König "offers us self-reflexive images of our own literary desire." Ch. 10 takes us to dining in the Greek and Roman novels, with many observations on the deformation of food and eating in these texts, especially Apuleius. König is here a little over-dependent on somewhat humorless theoretical perspectives. Ch. 11 on the "apocryphal acts of the apostles" contains important readings of material alien to most classicists, including comparison with

the Greek novels. But to say ascetic apostles advertise “the transgressive, shocking quality of the new Christian faith” pushes things too far, for these works were written when Christianity was well established or official and its shock-value had largely worn off. Ch. 12 takes the discussion forward to the hagiographical writings of the 4th and 5th centuries.

In sum König’s book is impressively scholarly with a massive and read bibliography. It is impressively wide-ranging at the cost of being in some ways a book of two parts between symposiac literature and literature that mentions food or its rejection.

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