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**SENECIO AND LARENSIS THE DINERS:  
TWO NON-GREEK INTELLECTUALS  
AT THE HEART OF A HELLENIC SYMPOSION**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper compares accounts of Senecio's actions in Plutarch's *Table Talk* with the relation of Larensis' comportment in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*. The results of the examination suggest that the extent of self-awareness of both characters is what should be understood as the symbolic accommodation between Greek and Roman in the High Empire times.

**KEY WORDS:** Plutarch's *Table Talk*, Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, literary symposium, Greek Imperial prose

Plutarch's *Table Talk* and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* take up the threads of the good Platonic tradition of convivially discussing topics appertaining to various fields of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Being a part of a time-honoured genre tradition they are also exemplary representatives of the historical and cultural reality of the Graeco-Roman society in the High Empire.<sup>2</sup> Both works provide comprehensive keys to our understanding of the leading elites' memory-based cultural communication,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Plutarch's sympotic literary models see the concise remarks made by Klotz, Oikonomopoulou 2011: 13-18. For Athenaeus' anchoring in the tradition of writing *symposia* see Bartol, Danielewicz 2010: 20-26.

<sup>2</sup> Klotz (2014: 209) rightly summarises: "With its quasi-autobiographical form, *Table Talk* mirrors Plutarch's contemporary environment in a way that the *Lives* do not"; the same as Jacob (2000: 110) who points out that "Athenaeus is also a major actor and witness of cultural practices and erudite techniques of the Second Sophistic".

<sup>3</sup> As König and Woolf call it in their recent book (König, Woolf 2013: 58).

which manifested itself in reading texts<sup>4</sup> as well as in discoursing about them.<sup>5</sup> The intellectual life of the Empire's citizens, focusing on assimilating and exhibiting knowledge,<sup>6</sup> besides the unique blossoming of ever-increasing interests in the Greek classical world of the past and its heritage, led to the springing up social circles that include Greeks and Romans alike.<sup>7</sup>

If one looks at Plutarch's and Athenaeus' literary works from the perspective of portraying the intellectual agenda of both authors' communities, it is telling that two of the important characters of their writings are Romans. Sosius Senecio and Larensis – as they are the persons in question – are featured in the role of interlocutors who attended the two banquets mentioned above. Senecio is also the addressee of the *Table Talk*<sup>8</sup> while the role of the host of the symposia presented in the *Deipnosophists*<sup>9</sup> is attributed to Larensis.

Although Senecio and Larensis are distinguished figures existing in historical time,<sup>10</sup> and there is no real doubt that they were close acquaintances respectively with Plutarch<sup>11</sup> and Athenaeus,<sup>12</sup> Senecio the

<sup>4</sup> Reading as a sociocultural phenomenon in the Graeco-Roman society has been recently examined by Johnson (2010) who stresses its importance for the construction of ideological notions of leading elites.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson (2010: 202) treats the 'text-centered discussions' in 'a variety of social context' as a cultural element shared by members of the Graeco-Roman society in the High Empire.

<sup>6</sup> For reading and performing texts as two key themes of the Second Sophistic culture see Schlapbach 2012: 150-160.

<sup>7</sup> See König's diagnosis of the culture of this time (König 2007: 63): "Rome can be made a part of this world".

<sup>8</sup> Also Plutarch's *Lives* and the essay *Progress in Virtue* from his *Moralia* are dedicated to Senecio. See Russell 1972: 10: "these complimentary dedications do not necessarily prove the degree of intimacy which they superficially imply".

<sup>9</sup> Also Senecio is presented as a host (635E) in Rome.

<sup>10</sup> For biographical information about Quintus Sosius Senecio, the imperial Roman consular, see Jones 1971: 55-57; Duff 1999: 288-289. His Western provenance must not be contested any longer, as Swain (1996: 426-427) has persuasively showed. For Publius Livius Larensis' activity see Braund 2000: 3-22. A critical survey of past scholarship on the issue see Bartol, Danielewicz 2010: 15-17.

<sup>11</sup> See Ziegler 1951: 688-689; Stadter 2014: 17.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob (2001: XXVI) describes the relationship between Athenaeus and Larensis as "rapporto di dipendenza sociale ed economica". Braund (2000: 18) suggests that the

diner in the *Table Talk* and Larensis the host in the *Deipnosophists* appear to be carefully shaped versions of these persons combining historicity and fiction,<sup>13</sup> in the same way in which both *oeuvres* purposely mix biographical tidbits with fictitious narratives. Scholars exploring the problem of the ‘authenticity’ of the participants at the described banquets mostly focus on revealing the level of the intellectual experiences of the particular Roman diners as presented by a Greek author and wonder why these authors decided to show their Roman friends in such and such a way<sup>14</sup>. They often miss a comparative approach which goes beyond the interpretation of some internal indications of the Roman diners' intellectual abilities. On the one hand, the emphasis on the similarity of socio-cultural contexts in which Senecio and Larensis displayed their skills,<sup>15</sup> and – on the other – highlighting in modern

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*Deipnosophists* is a work “created for the greater glory of Larensis and his friends at dinner”.

<sup>13</sup> See Dalby 1996: 169 on Athenaeus' diners: “the speakers must of course be treated as fictional, even though they have points of contact with the real [...] world”, and Klotz, Oikonomopoulou 2001: 12: “We can assume that he [Plutarch] did not document situations [...] as they occurred, and that in this presentation [...] he arranged and rearranged it, along with its main players”. See also Sinko 1951: 218, who labels the *Table Talk* “fikcja wspomnień z lat młodości autora”. But one should remember that there are scholars who accept the literal reality of the described banquets and diners' opinions (cf. Abramowiczówna (1960: 8), who mentions “fakty, które – moim zdaniem – przemawiają wyraźnie za realnością wspomnień przedstawionych przez Plutarcha” and *passim*, as well as Braund (2000: 11), who insists that “there can be no real doubt that the views of the character Larensis are indeed the views of the real Larensis”.

<sup>14</sup> The question of the portrait of the Plutarchan Senecio has long been a part of scholars' discussion. The most representative voice is here Swain's opinion who says about him: “his general presentation as a man of good average intelligence who is familiar with the major Greek poets and philosophers, and no more” (Swain 1990: 130). Against Swain's position Klotz has recently argued. She rightly pointed out that “Simon Swain has suggested that Sosius was an educated but not particularly brilliant figure, yet within *TT* there is no sign that he is an unsophisticated dinner guest” (Klotz 2014: 209). Athenaeus' intention in presenting Larensis as a rich admirer of books has been summarised by Mainguy's phrase “le statut d'un homme digne de respect” (Mainguy 2011: 126).

<sup>15</sup> See König 2012: 94 about the *Deipnosophists* and the *Table Talk*: “[both works] are held together by a unifying ideological and intellectual agenda. Like Plutarch, Athenaeus is interested in conjuring up a picture of an idealised and harmonious intellectual community”.

treatments of these two imperial prose pieces the difference between the levels of intellectual achievements of both *personae* presented in two works,<sup>16</sup> does not by any means sufficiently explore the broad problem of Plutarch's and Athenaeus' engagement in the construction of the image of the Romans among the Greeks. This paper compares accounts of Senecio's action during the feast given by the narrator<sup>17</sup> of the *Table Talk* with the narrator's relation of Larensis' comportment in the *Deipnosophists*. The results of the examination suggest, I think, that neither the quantity nor the range of quality of the material presented by either of diners, but the extent of self-awareness of both characters, expressed by them in the course of sympotic behaviour, is what should be understood as the symbolic accommodation between the Greek and the Roman in the High Empire times. This paper, which I dedicate to Kazimierz Korus, whose works on Greek imperial prose admirably show his sensitivity to the nuances of the cultural history of this period, is hoped to be a contribution to better understanding of Plutarch's and Athenaeus' structuring of their works' fictional setting which they employed to communicate with their readers, who were the real participants in Imperial culture.<sup>18</sup>

When one examines the descriptions of Senecio and Larensis exhibiting knowledge in front of their fellow symposiasts, one discerns that both characters – independently of how long their interventions are and what they are about – share the same or a very similar type of behaviour. As speakers both men initiate talks on a certain subject, join the discussion initiated by someone else, polemically or approvingly endorse others' statements exhibiting their own point of view, and judge other speakers.

<sup>16</sup> See König 2012: 96: “Like the Romans of the *Sympotic Questions*, Larensis makes regular and impressive contributions to discussion. [...] Plutarch, in contrast, makes it clear that [...] Sosius Senecio deserves praise primarily insofar as he embodies the Greek virtues Plutarch himself admires, rather than portraying him as a Larensis-style orchestrator and patron of Greek culture”.

<sup>17</sup> The narrator who also plays an important role in his own narrative.

<sup>18</sup> See Lambertson 2001: 74: “Nothing is simple in Plutarch [...]. Beyond this implied audience lie two more. The first was imposed by the social and literary conventions of Plutarch's moment in history”. The same can be said of Athenaeus.

In the *Table Talk* there are narrative moments which show Senecio initiating the learned discussions. A good example of his invitation to make a conversation devoted to a special topic is found in Question One of Book I and in the Question One of Book II. In the first one he was presented as the symposiast stressing the importance of making some inquiry into the nature of philosophical Talk. His encouraging to *zhten* (613C) this *problema* evokes a response from his fellows<sup>19</sup> and the erudite debate starts after Senecio's incentive (σοῦ δ' εἰπόντος ... καὶ παρακαλοῦντος ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὸν λόγον said Plutarch the diner). Similarly in the second instance, where he demonstrates his interest in the nature of jokes which offer pleasure and suggests he would be glad to learn (πυθέσθαι, 629F) about them, he in fact proposes the topic for the sympotic discussion.<sup>20</sup> In the *Deipnosophists* Larensis does the same when wondering (ἐξίτηι, IX 372d), if the ancient cooks knew the tricks to make cucumbers retain their freshness in winter, or when after having remarked that they all feed on questions (ζητήσεις ... σιτούμεθα, IX 398c) he suddenly puts a question to his companions: "What do you think the *tetrax* is?". Also the epitomator's presentation of Larensis includes the mention of his inclination to propose topics worth of inquiry<sup>21</sup> (τὰ ... προσβάλλων τῶν ἀξίων ζητήσεως, epit. I 2b), and it is said in the epitome that others admired the keen observation shown by his questions (τῶν ζητήσεων τὴν τήρησιν, epit. I 2c).

However, both characters are presented not only as taking the initiative in raising issues. They are also portrayed as participants pursuing topics and ideas proposed for the sympotic Talk by other diners. The best evidence for Senecio's role as a discussant is provided in the discussion presented in Quaestion 3 of Book II where he starts his *spermatikos logos* as the reaction against Firmus' treatment of the problem

<sup>19</sup> Senecio's asking questions contributes, of course, to forming the question-answer format of the work. See Kechagia 2011: 80, who points out that "the terms ζήτημα or πρόβλημα [...] evoke another type of philosophical prose, the literature of *problems*, which flourished within the Peripatetic tradition".

<sup>20</sup> The same can be said about his having raised (διηπόρησε, 666E) the question concerning the number of wedding guests. He himself also tries to find the answer to this question and gains others' acclaim (667B).

<sup>21</sup> The research is treated in Athenaeus as the food of the intellect, as Romeri (2000: 261) says: "note the curious and significant expression of Larensis, ζητήσεις γὰρ σιτούμεθα, 'we nourish ourselves on research'".

about what came first, the egg or the hen (636E). He proceeds to investigate this *problema* provoked – as it were – by the internal contradiction of the preceding speaker's arguments. He also delivers – after ironically praising other speakers<sup>22</sup> in Question 5 of Book I – a well-constructed speech devoted to the interpretation of some poetic verses about “love teaching a poet” (623A-D). Senecio the diner seems also to be referred to as one of sympotic ζητητικοί when his past critical view<sup>23</sup> on the Epicurean conception of the relationship between the soul and pleasure is mentioned in the preface of Book V (672D), although these words are directly addressed to the real person – Quintus Sossius Senecio, to whom the author dedicated the whole work. In the case of Larensis the *Deipnosophists* offers a lot of passages which mirror the exchanges between him and the guests. His replies to other speakers' words are often introduced by the phrase πρὸς ταῦτα ... ἔφη (as in II 160b and VI 272d) or by the ἀπαντήσαντος ... αὐτῷ τοῦ Λαρηνσίου καὶ εἰπόντος (XIV 648d). Sometimes when he joins the discussion or comments on what happens in the dining room, the narrator indicates it by the simple ἔφη, as it is at the moment of Larensis' starting a long speech on riddles (X 448c) and when he reacts to the cook's boastful address (IX 381f). Also in the light of the epitomator's presentation Larensis is a person prone to disclosing his own solutions of various questions (τῶν ἀξίων ζητήσεως τὰ ... ἀνευρίσκων, I 2b). His critical acumen is even called Socratic, although one must remember that the pervasive praise of Larensis in the epitome is likely to be a result of employing hyperbolic rhetorical devices in this evaluative statement.<sup>24</sup>

So it is that Senecio as well as Larensis, the characters of the two Imperial literary symposia, fit well into the pattern of a traditional sympotic speaker, practicing various intellectual activities in a convivial environment. This is an important similarity and the fact that the scope of their knowledge and the scale of the displays made by each at the

<sup>22</sup> See Abramowiczówna 1960: 73: “Pochwaliwszy, jak wypadło gospodarzowi, dyletanckie wywody swych poprzedników, zabiera się Senecio sam do naukowego uzasadnienia”.

<sup>23</sup> The πάλαι μὴν ἐδόκεις is opposed to the νῦν ἔχεις γνώμην (672D).

<sup>24</sup> See Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén 1998: 49, who believes that Larensis' portrait in the epitome “podría interpretarse como una *laudatio* adulatoria y excesiva”. Cf. also Bartol, Danielewicz 2010: 16.

narrated feasts are different does not prevent us from treating Senecio's and Larensis' conduct as almost parallel cases of intellectual behaviour. There is, however, a characteristic which makes Senecio's interventions differ very markedly from Larensis' contributions. If we look at Senecio's discourse throughout the work, it appears, perhaps surprisingly, that no reference to Roman people or Roman matters is put into his mouth.<sup>25</sup> In fact we should observe that in the *Table Talk* the characters acknowledging Roman issues are more often Greek than Roman. So Plutarch the diner turns his companions' attention to the sense of the Romans' ancient custom of not putting out the lamps after eating (703D), emphasises his knowledge of some Latin terms (727B), and comments on the Romans' liking for quoting witty and sociable persons (697C). He seems also to be the speaker who continues Lucanius' speech on the pine dedicated to Poseidon and Dionysus, and mentions with competence the Romans' estimation of various wines (676B-C). Lamprias the diner (represented as Plutarch's brother) provided the disputants with a kind of jester's speech when comparing Greek and Latin words for some sympotic matters (726E-727A). On the contrary, Larensis' speeches in the *Deipnosophists* show him obsessively focusing on Roman people and matters.<sup>26</sup> This comes to light most notably in the discussions devoted to *heuremata*<sup>27</sup> where Larensis' remarks show that Roman inventiveness also remains important to the practitioners of various professions. Athenaeus' Larensis also highlights the difference between himself and the Greeks saying: 'you Greeks' (ὁμεῖς οἱ Γραικοί, epit. II 50f), emphatically calling Varro 'my ancestor' (ὁ ἐμὸς προπάτωρ, IV 160c) and Roman poets and prose writers 'of my country' (πολλοὶ τῶν ἡμεδαπῶν ποιητὰ καὶ συγγραφεῖς, V 222a), or

<sup>25</sup> But see Abramowiczówna 1960: 75, who understands Senecio's negative attitude to dancing (623B) as a typically Roman opinion. Cf. Teodorsson 1996: 115.

<sup>26</sup> See Wilkins 2000: 24 on Larensis: "intervenes often, especially on Roman matters". Cf. also Danielewicz 2011: 62 and Zecchini's remark (1989: 20) on the importance of "le lunghe e ricche sezioni dedicate a Roma e all'Italia all'interno di vari temi successivamente affrontati [...] e confronti tra prodotti italiani e prodotti greci [...], lo sforzo di mostrarsi informato delle antichità romane [...], l'elogio degli antichi costumi repubblicani" (Zecchini 1989: 20) within Larensis' speeches.

<sup>27</sup> Larensis' remarks referred to the problem of the inventions of the Romans have been examined by Bartol 2006.

reminding of his own involvement in the Roman administrative duties in Moesia (IX 398e), but also searches for the similarities when comparing some Greek matters with Roman ones (as it is in VI 272e where he speaks about a number of slaves possessed by rich members of both nations). One can say that as these juxtapositions suggest a Roman self-awareness of Larensis within the Greek circle of intellectuals, so the similarities make him and – generally – the Romans fit into the Hellenic imperial culture.

The contrasting trait observable in both Roman speakers' approach towards their own culture and its achievements is significant. Senecio the diner seems to spare no effort to show himself as an erudite whose intellectual world is totally Greek. He cares about presenting himself as a part of his Greek fellow feasters' community. He tries to maintain the intellectual standards of his Greek interlocutors and is absolutely determined to prove his 'acquired Greekness'. His proselytising attitude towards the Greek culture makes him, indeed a tyro among the Greek learned gentlemen, purposely silent on Roman matters. Larensis the diner emerges as an erudite<sup>28</sup> who apart from sharing – with full conviction – Hellenic ideals with his Greek companions at table is also openly committed to his native cultural experiences and aware of their being worthy of remembrance by himself and also learning by the Greeks.<sup>29</sup>

The portraits of two Romans given by Plutarch and Athenaeus in their works have an exemplary quality and could be meant as guides as to how to reconstruct the Graeco-Roman cultural coexistence in both authors' contemporary societies. The *Table Talk* written sometime between 99 and 116 CE<sup>30</sup> represents the member of the Roman upper class attracted by the fascinating culture of Greeks, but still feeling – although socially superior – culturally inferior to his Greek friends,<sup>31</sup> and tries to exhibit more and more proofs of his excellence in Greek

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Danielewicz 2011: 65: "Larensius' remarks serve to create his own image as a polymath and an esteemed politician. He mentions his procuratorship in Moesia and emphasises the fact that even far away from Rome he conducted serious research".

<sup>29</sup> Larensis seems to point out the ignorance of some Greek matters to his Greek companions when he says ἀγνοεῖτε ... ὅτι Λεύκολλος ὁ Ῥωμαίων στρατηγός ... (II 51a).

<sup>30</sup> See Jones 1971: 137.

<sup>31</sup> Sinko (1951: 196) seems to suggest that this Greek superiority can be observed in Plutarch's attitude towards his Roman friends: „Wobec [...] Rzymian Cheronejczyk



matters. Athenaeus, writing later (for his *Deipnosophists*, the *terminus post quem* and *ante quem* have been stated respectively as 195 and 210 CE<sup>32</sup>), shows the Roman rich man moving in the circle of Greek friends, a fully qualified, almost professional, Hellenophile who does not, however, neglect Roman traditions. He treats himself as an equal of his Greek companions and appears to persuade them to begin to open to the Roman culture. His speeches reflect his familiarity with Greek matters and at the same time discreetly (or sometimes even ironically) demand the recognition of the importance of Roman cultural issues in the civilised world.

Both works, the *Table Talk* and the *Deipnosophists* deal with the paradigms of imperial intellectuals' identity.<sup>33</sup> Their authors explore the problem in different ways. While the Roman character in Plutarch's literary symposium proves that Greekness played a totally central role in the intellectual world of the time,<sup>34</sup> the Roman hero in Athenaeus' massive work adopts a different position, making the Roman tradition an important point of his multiple identity.<sup>35</sup> These two approaches towards the Romans' relationship to Greek intellectual domination, reflected in both authors' prose works, are not accidental. They mirror the crucial attitudes towards the idea of what was thought of as worthy of 'the Imperial intellectual circle' at two stages of the Imperial era. In the first century CE the characteristic flavour of intellectualism was definitively Greek. The Roman contribution to the intellectual life of the Empire and Romans' awareness of it seems to have been growing throughout the course of the second century CE. The former conceptualisation

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występuje jako doradca w sprawach etyki, nauczyciel, kaznodzieja, spowiednik, jako lekarz dusz”.

<sup>32</sup> See Bartol, Danielewicz 2010: 7-8.

<sup>33</sup> The general problem of a complex and multi-layered identity in the Imperial era has been thoroughly explored by Jones 2004: 13-21.

<sup>34</sup> Swain examining the problem of the coexistence of Greek and Roman culture in Plutarch's time says that for Plutarch it was worthwhile “to consider how well and with what benefit Romans absorb it [i.e. Greek culture]” (Swain 1990: 126). Senecio the diner seems to present himself as a Roman who has perfectly absorbed it.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Mainguy 2011: 124 on the *Deipnosophists*: „le texte laisse transparaître à première vue une attitude favorable à la romanité”.

of an intellectual is embodied in the Plutarchan Senecio, the latter one found its devotee in Larensis, the character featured by Athenaeus.

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