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A Most Amazing Conversation: The Social Contexts of Wonder-Telling and the Development of Paradoxography

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Abstract: Wonder-telling thrived as an abiding element in Greek and Roman convivial gatherings. The burgeoning book culture of the Hellenistic period witnessed the emergence of paradoxographical works—compilations of reports on “marvels”—that offered another medium through which to experience wonder. This study surveys evidence that situates wonder-telling in the social sphere and suggests that the new genre adapted one of the joys of sympotic discourse in order to delight the solitary reader.

In his *Attic Nights*, Aulus Gellius describes his first encounter with compilations now commonly referred to by scholars as paradoxographies. At a port in Brundisium, he recalls, he happened across a bookseller peddling bundles of filthy texts in Greek which he discovered were “filled with marvelous tales, things unheard of, incredible” (*miraculorum fabularumque pleni, res inauditae, incredulae*), and whose authors were “ancient and of no mean authority” (*scriptores veteres non parvae auctoritatis*, 9.4.3).¹ After purchasing the texts for a pittance, Gellius spent the next two nights perusing them and making notes of reports which drew his attention. Despite his initial interest, he claims that he was ultimately “seized by disgust for such pointless writings, which contribute nothing to the enrichment or profit of life” (*tenuit nos non idoneae scripturae taedium nihil ad ornandum iuvandumque usum vitae pertinentis*, 9.4.12). Gellius’s description of the intellectual indigestion he suffered has been often repeated by nineteenth and twentieth century scholars to support negative judgments of the value of paradoxographies both in terms of their form and content. A quintessentially bookish genre developed during the Hellenistic period, paradoxography is a compilatory form, connected to both the natural sciences

¹ Text and all translations of Gellius are provided by Rolfe (1927). All other translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Only two of the six authors Gellius goes on to name (Isigonus and Philostephanus, the likely reading for the manuscripts’ Polystephanos) wrote works that fall under the formal definition of paradoxography. The rest (e.g., Ctesias), as Delcroix (1996, p. 415) observed, nonetheless have interests or styles that can be understood under a broader definition of paradoxography. Scholars have noted that Gellius’s list of authorities replicates Pliny’s source acknowledgements in *HN* 7.9-26, though more names are included by the latter, on which see Delcroix (1996, pp. 419-424).

and Ionian historiography, that collects and arranges reports on “wonders” (παραδόξά, θαύματα, ἄπιστα, Latin *mirabilia* and *admiranda*) typically drawn from other texts.² The strange phenomena they record include such marvels as waters with inexplicable effects, idiosyncratic animal behaviors, stones with curious properties, and the surprising customs of foreign peoples,³ all simply described in discrete episodes and typically with no attempt at explanation for the phenomenon’s existence.⁴ So, for example, these reports from Antigonus’s Ἱστοριῶν παραδόξων συναγωγή (*Collection of Wonderful Tales*)⁵ and the anonymous collection known as the *Paradoxographus Florentinus*:

[Aristotle says]⁶ that whenever a tortoise eats a snake, it eats oregano afterwards. Once, after someone had watched closely and then stripped off the plant’s leaves, the tortoise died since it did not have oregano to eat. (*Antig. Mir.* c. 34)

Theopompus records that there is a spring among the Chropsi in Thrace; those who bathe in it immediately perish. (*Paradox. Flor.* c. 15)

Scholars have likened paradoxographies to Ripley’s *Believe it or Not* and tabloid pabulum,⁷ yet these comparisons, especially the latter, overlook the genre’s reliance on the fruits of serious scientific scholarship and historical inquiry. Perhaps a more appropriate modern analogue are online trivia compilations that mix science (with linked citations), anecdotes, and entertainment, e.g., “5 Animals that Casually Play Tricks with the Laws of Physics” or “The Five Most Spectacular Places on Earth (That Murder You).”⁸ Some may justifiably consider lists like these a frivolous sensationalism of real scholarship; certainly ancient critics leveled similar charges against *mirabilia* and, by extension, paradoxographic

² On the nature and development of paradoxography see Ziegler (1949); Giannini (1963) and (1964); Gabba (1981); Jacob (1983); Sassi (1993); Hansen (1996); Schepens (1996); and Delcroix (1996). Pajón Leyra (2011) offers the most complete and updated overview and analysis of the genre. On terms for the marvelous, see Schepens (1996, pp. 380-382) and Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 41-50). Giannini (1965) is currently the standard edition of all paradoxographic compilations and fragments. However, new critical editions, translations, and commentaries have recently been published or are forthcoming in Brill’s *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker IV* series (= *FGrHist*, ed. Stefan Schorn), which will be available both online and in print.

³ For the typical *topoi* of paradoxographies, see the index in Giannini’s 1965 edition.

⁴ Explanations could even be counterproductive, since rational explanation may destroy wonder, as noted by Schepens (1996, pp. 391-392).

⁵ The date of Antigonus’s compilation, as well as the identity of the author (= Antigonus of Carystus?), has been at issue since the 1970s, with Musso (1976; 1977, pp. 15-17) followed by Dorandi (1999, pp. xiv-xvi; xxiv) arguing for a Byzantine rather than Hellenistic date. Significant doubt has been cast upon this theory by the recent discovery of an as-yet unpublished second century CE papyrus that contains part of Antigonus’ compilation. Cf. Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 93-95, 110-113) on the collection and Antigonus’ identity.

⁶ This report is part of Antigonus’s long section of excerpts from Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium*.

⁷ Hansen (1996, pp. 12-15), though his comparison of Phlegon of Tralles to tabloids is more persuasive; Krevans (2005, p. 175).

⁸ http://www.cracked.com/article_20961_5-animals-that-casually-play-tricks-with-laws-physics.html; http://www.cracked.com/article_19705_the-5-most-spectacular-landscapes-earth-that-murder-you.html. A significant difference between such online collections and paradoxographic compilations is the humorous tone adopted by the former in contrast to the typically bland, descriptive tone of the latter.

compilations.⁹ Indeed, until the late twentieth century, paradoxography was regularly condemned by modern scholars as a degenerate subgenre of historiography that subsisted by pilfering historical and scientific source texts like those of Aristotle and Theopompus.¹⁰ To some modern devotees of more ‘serious’ specimens of ancient historiography, paradoxographies seemed to speak to a less discerning readership who delighted in such novelties.¹¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, the studies of Emilio Gabba, Christian Jacob, William Hansen, and the paired articles of Guido Schepens and Kris Delcroix did much to ignite scholarly interest in paradoxographies, and now one can find a number of studies of *paradoxa* and paradoxography, especially as they relate to more mainstream works like those of the Augustan poets and the ancient novel.¹²

While scholarly appreciation for the place of paradoxographies in Greek and Roman culture and literature has grown, Gellius’s claim against their utility is not entirely out of line, for the sort of knowledge they impart may well seem to convey nothing of substance beyond the simple fact that such wonders are claimed to exist. Can we truly say our lives or minds are improved by knowing that serpent-eating tortoises allegedly require an oregano dessert to survive? Yet despite his condemnation, the two nights Gellius spent devouring the compilations nonetheless bear silent testimony to their attraction as collections designed to fascinate. Indeed, just after his denunciation, Gellius confesses that “nevertheless, the fancy took me to add to this collection of marvels” (*libitum tamen est in loco hoc miraculorum notare id etiam* 9.4.13), and he goes on to describe Pliny’s accounts of spontaneous sex changes.¹³ In this case, the fact that paradoxographies provide private entertainment for the solitary reader and can inspire him to engage with the text by responding with his own contribution seems the very point of these “pointless writings” (9.4.12).

Gellius’s decision to describe a marvel found in Pliny also reflects paradoxographers’ dependence upon other texts and the process of excerption and addition that characterizes the genre.¹⁴ Paradoxography was born from and depended upon Hellenistic book culture,

⁹ For example, Polybius criticizes Timaeus for the proliferation in his work of “dreams, portents, unbelievable tales, sordid superstitions, and womanish wonders” (ἐνυπνίων καὶ τεράτων καὶ μύθων ἀπιθάνων καὶ συλλήβδην δεισιδαιμονίας ἀγεννοῦς καὶ τερατείας γυναικώδους, 12.24.5.1-5 = *FGrH* 566 T 19). Diodorus of Sicily, though milder in his view of *mirabilia* (cf. 3.30) admits that Herodotus and Egyptian authors were guilty of favoring pleasure over truth when “they spoke of wonders and invented tales” (παράδοξολογεῖν καὶ μύθους πλάττειν ψυχαγωγίας, 1.69.7 = *FGrH* 264 F 25; compare 10.23-24). Here Diodorus draws the same line between truth and entertainment that is later reflected in Lucian’s criticism of Iambulus for telling *paradoxa* in the famous opening of the *True Histories* (1.2-3). For Lucian’s characterization of *paradoxa* as it relates to paradoxography, see Jacob (1983, p. 138).

¹⁰ Schmid and Stählin (1920, p. 184), for example, denounced paradoxography as a “parasitic growth” on the tree of Greek literature, history, and natural science, while Giannini (1963) similarly viewed the genre as evidence of historiographical decay.

¹¹ See Gabba (1981) and Schepens (1996, pp. 377-379) on the history of modern critical reactions to the genre.

¹² E.g. Myers (1994, pp. 146-159) on Ovid; Morales (1995) on animal exotica in *Leucippe and Clitophon*; and the essays in Hardie (2009) on Augustan literature.

¹³ Cf. Delcroix (1996, pp. 411-425) for a thorough reading of this episode.

¹⁴ On paradoxography as a genre of extraction and arrangement, see Schepens (1996, pp. 389-398) and Jacob (1983, pp. 122-128).

as production of compilations required the availability of multiple texts from which the paradoxographer might cull his material. In this sense, these ‘Odysseuses of the Library,’ to borrow a phrase from Richard Hunter,¹⁵ engage in a natural history of the strange through the exploration of texts rather than travel and personal autopsy.¹⁶ Consequently, paradoxography is typically comprehended from the perspective of its relationships with other genres in terms of material, form, and methodology. Yet wonder-telling was itself a vibrant part of social intercourse during the same eras that witnessed the rise and continued production of paradoxographies. Although most now consider paradoxography a literature for popular consumption and entertainment,¹⁷ little has been said of how it relates to modes of and fora for popular discourse. In this study, I look to Hellenistic and later Roman-era representations of symposia and dinner parties that depict such social gatherings as the locus for wonder-telling, and I suggest in turn that the popular appeal of paradoxographies lay in their associations—deliberate or not—with symposia as environments culturally understood to be conducive to both entertainment and intellectual stimulation.

From its very beginnings, Greek literature locates wonder-telling within the semi-public social sphere as the wayward Odysseus spins his fantastic yarn for the Phaeacians. Later literature reinforces this early association with depictions of wonder-telling as a constituent element in sympotic contexts. In her recent monograph on paradoxography, Irena Pajón Leyra observes that Plutarch’s representation of symposia in his *Questiones Conviviales* (*Table Talk*), as well as Trimalchio’s indulgent soirée in the *Satyricon*, dramatize the incorporation of wonder-telling and paradoxographic material in sympotic discourse.¹⁸ The conversation at one dinner related by Plutarch, for example, begins with popular theories regarding thunder’s role in the generation of truffles, a phenomenon also recorded in both paradoxographies and scientific treatises:¹⁹

At a dinner in Elis, Agemachus served some giant truffles. Everyone present expressed their wonder (θαυμαζόντων δὲ τῶν παρόντων), and one of the guests said with a smile, “They certainly are worthy of the thunder that we’ve had lately,” obviously laughing at those who say that truffles are produced by thunder. Several of the company held that the ground splits open when struck by thunder,

¹⁵ Hunter (2008, pp. 730) remarks on Callimachus as being an “Odysseus without leaving the Library.”

¹⁶ Schepens (1996, p. 388): “...the guided tour around the wonders of the world offered to the reader of a paradoxographical work was essentially a tour effectuated within the walls of a great library, be it at Alexandria, Athens, or Pergamon.”

¹⁷ E.g., Giannini (1963, pp. 247-248); Gómez Espelosín (1996, pp. 10-13); and Schepens (1996, pp. 407-408), with reservations about our knowledge regarding ancient book trade, a point addressed by Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 74-80) in support of compilations as popular literature.

¹⁸ Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 56-82), to whom my readings of Plutarch are much indebted.

¹⁹ Apollon. *Mir.* 47 (= Theophrastus F 400B FHS&G); Theophr. *HP* 1.6.5; Plin. *HN* 19.36-37; Ath. 2.62b. On the versions of the phenomenon described in these reports see Sharples (1995, pp. 147-149); Fortenbaugh (2011, p. 14, n. 15). Cf. Teodorsson (1990, pp. 47-49) and Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 71-72) who focus principally on Plutarch’s relationship with the tradition.

the air serving as a spike, and that afterward the truffle-gatherers are guided by the cracks in the earth. This is the source, they continued, of the popular notion (δόξαν... τοῖς πολλοῖς) that thunder actually produces truffles, instead of merely bringing them to light... Agemachus, however, upheld the popular theory and advised us not to regard the miraculous (τὸ θαυμαστὸν) as unworthy of belief (ἄπιστον). “For indeed, many other marvelous effects (θαυμάσια ἔργα) are,” he said, “produced by thunder, lightning, and other meteoric phenomena, though the causes of these effects are difficult and completely impossible to discover... In general, it is simple minded to be surprised at such things when we observe directly the most incredible part of it all (καὶ ὅλως εὐηθές ἐστὶν ταῦτα θαυμάζειν τὸ πάντων ἀπιστότατον ἐν τοῖς πάθεσι τούτοις καθορῶντας), namely flashes of fire coming from moisture and rough, loud crashes from soft clouds. But I’m chattering on only as an invitation to search for a theory that will explain these things (ἀδολεσχῶ παρακαλῶν ὑμᾶς ἐπὶ τὴν ζήτησιν τῆς αἰτίας). I don’t mean to be bitter and exact a contribution from each man to pay for the truffles (664b-d).”²⁰

The discussion that follows is peppered with nods to scientific sources as well as cultural and anecdotal references. A few elements in the passage especially stand out. The presence of the prodigious truffles provides the occasion for a quip whose humor presupposes the other banqueters’ knowledge of the theory regarding their ‘marvelous’ origins. Although the marvel is initially met with some derision, Agemachus’s defense of popular theories about *paradoxa*—which incorporates the language of wonder in general and paradoxography in particular—encourages the banqueters to use the strange tale as the stimulus for a conversation both intellectual and entertaining that combines wonder, popular wisdom, and modern science.²¹ Indeed, throughout *Table Talk* Plutarch represents symposia as the natural meeting ground for various intellectual pursuits and types of cultural knowledge, as the symposiasts’ banter weaves together scientific theories, literary exegesis, antiquarian *nugae*, wonder-telling, and so on.²² The same holds true in other sympotic miscellanies. The learned repartee in Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophists* and Macrobius’s *Saturnalia* paint such sympotic gatherings as fora for the synthesis of a wide range of intellectual fields and

²⁰ Text and translation are those of Clement and Hoffleit (1969), with some modifications.

²¹ Compare the dialogue in *Table Talk* about the evil eye (680c-683b), wherein the host channels Aristotle (e.g., *Mete.* 982b11-15) when he upholds that the sort of wonders which occupy popular imagination can serve as the starting point for philosophy. On paradoxography and this passage, see Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 73-74). See Meeusen (2016, pp. 187-218) for remarks on the ways that Plutarch’s sympotic conversations balance convivial lightheartedness with intellectual discussion so that the banter not become too technical and thus endanger the spirit of the gathering. Cf. Klotz and Oikonomopoulou (2011, pp. 20-21), who note that “what the *Table Talk* especially underscores is the way that such knowledge can naturally spring up in the relaxed context of learned conversation, blending in with folk wisdom, oscillating between seriousness and play...”

²² On Plutarch’s representations of symposia see König (2012, pp. 60-89) and Klotz and Oikonomopoulou’s introduction to their 2011 edition of essays on *Table Talk*, as well as many of the essays in that volume.

popular knowledge that often begin with or incorporate wonders.²³

The question of these textual symposia's relationship with reality persists, however, and it remains unclear if the conversations they stage reflect actual practices. Jason König observes that authors of sympotic miscellanies may use the format of the symposium as a structuring strategy that facilitates the forging of links with other material under the guise of interlocutors, and ultimately renders their compilations more engaging for readers who themselves become drawn into the debates.²⁴ The use of the symposia as a literary framework, however, does not preclude a basis in reality, even if the historicity of the symposia depicted is dubious. The sympotic dialogues in *Table Talk* likely present idealized intellectual conversations that flow through topics and disciplines with an unrealistic elegance and erudition, but their idealization is not evidence of the literary fabrication of the symposium as the ideal milieu for such conversations.

We find some support for the symposium as the typical locus for wonder-telling in earlier literature. A passage in Xenophon's *Symposium* in which Socrates eschews discussion of wonders at sympotic gatherings offers an interesting counterpoint to Plutarch. At one point the philosopher criticizes the current entertainment, a dancing girl performing an audacious acrobatic feat involving knives, as something that hardly affords pleasure appropriate for the setting (ὁ συμποσίῳ οὐδὲν προσήκει, 7.3). Socrates appends his remarks with thoughts on the similar inability of conversation about wonders to align with the goal of the symposium:

“For it is, of course, hardly uncommon to encounter marvels, if that is what one's mind desires (καὶ γὰρ δὴ οὐδὲ πάνυ τι σπάνιον τό γε θαυμασίοις ἐντυχεῖν, εἴ τις τούτου δεῖται). A person may be amazed (ἔξεστιν...θαυμάζειν) at what he finds immediately at hand: why the lamp gives light owing to its having a bright flame, for example, while a bronze mirror, just as bright, does not produce light but instead reflects other things that appear on it... However, these questions fail to promote the same goal as wine does (ἀλλὰ γὰρ καὶ ταῦτα μὲν οὐκ εἰς ταῦτόν τῳ οἴνῳ ἐπισπεύδει). But if the young people were to have flute accompaniment and dance figures depicting the Graces, the Horae, and the Nymphs, I believe that they would be far less wearied themselves and that the charms of the banquet would be greatly enhanced (*Symp.* 7.4-5).”²⁵

²³ Cf., for example, part of a long conversation in *Deipnosophists* about wine and water-drinkers that centers on waters with strange effects (41e-45a) and incorporates Peripatetic science, paradoxography, poetry, and historical anecdotes; a discussion in the *Saturnalia* about the Sicilian cult of the Palikoi (*Sat.* 5.19.17-29) likewise combines science, paradoxography, citations of Aeschylus, and local historical information.

²⁴ König (2012, especially pp. 32-39).

²⁵ Translation based on that of Todd (1923), with some modifications.

The philosopher's rejection of everyday wonders as possible sympotic entertainment is striking for two reasons. First, he casts discussion of such marvels as the conversational equivalent of acrobatic spectacle, neither of which contributes to his vision of sympotic *hēdonē* (pleasure). As a counterpart to showy 'wonders' like the girl's daring performance, he implies that indulging in such a topic is likewise unbecoming a gathering of educated elites. On the other hand, Socrates's choice to use discussion of wonders as the analogue to acrobatic spectacle also indicates that wonder-telling, just like such performances, was an ordinary feature of symposia. His response constitutes a rejection of both not as alien to the convivial table, but simply as undesirable forms of sympotic entertainment.

Between Socrates' criticism of discussion of wonders and Plutarch's incorporation of it into literary sympotic discourse, Hellenistic poetry reflects the burgeoning popular interest in *paradoxa* both in the symposium and beyond. The growing taste for wonders can be attributed in part to the encouragement of the Ptolemies, whose court offered a premiere social context for the presentation of *mirabilia* as entertainment. We know from Antigonus that the poet Archelaus, who also seems to have written a prose paradoxography, composed and presumably performed paradoxographic "epigrams interpreting wonders for Ptolemy" (either Euergetes I or Philadelphus).²⁶ While Archelaus' epigrams serve as an example of the non-sympotic but still social performance of wonders at the highest level of Ptolemaic society, other poets, and especially other poets *cum* paradoxographers, represent wonder-telling as a sympotic delight enjoyed by the learned Hellenistic elite.

The evidence from Callimachus is especially valuable. Scholars have long considered him either the inventor of paradoxography or at least an early practitioner based upon Antigonus's long excerption from his work.²⁷ Although his compilation does not survive outside of Antigonus's citations, the *Aetia*, Callimachus's poem on the origins of distinctive cult practices, noteworthy city foundations, and other miscellanea of a similarly antiquarian bent, mirrors paradoxography as a collection of cultural rather than natural *mirabilia*.²⁸ One of the poem's fragments stages a scene that portrays the casual social exchange of these types of wonders and consequently tells us something of how one of the first

²⁶ Antig. *Mir.* c. 19.4: τις Ἀρχέλαος Αἰγύπτιος τῶν ἐν ἐπιγράμμασιν ἐξηγουμένων τὰ παράδοξα τῷ Πτολεμαίῳ; cf. Antig. *Mir.* c. 89, and Varro *RR* 3.16.4 (= *SH* 125-129). If Archelaus did, as seems likely, produce a written collection of these epigrams, it would form a bridge between the social enjoyment and display of wonders and paradoxographic compilations. See Schepens (1996, pp. 404-405) for discussion on which Ptolemy was the recipient of the collection. On Archelaus' epigrams and his prose compilation of reports regarding, it seems, strange births, see Fraser (1972, vol. 1, pp. 778-80; vol. 2, pp. 1086-1090) with Ath. 409c; D. L. 2.17; Schol. Nic. *Ther.* 823. Cf. Schepens (1996, pp. 405-407), who suggests that performances of such poems constitute the literary counterpart to the courtly display of exotic animals as described by Agatharchides, whose report is preserved by Diodorus (3.36.3-4; 3.37.7). Compare Bing (2005, *passim*) for further remarks on the Ptolemies' accumulation and display of 'wonders' and foreign exotica as symbolic statements of their political power.

²⁷ E.g., Ziegler (1949, p. 1140); Giannini (1964, p. 105); Pfeiffer (1968, pp. 134-135); Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 103-104).

²⁸ Krevans (2005, pp. 175-176). Compare Acosta-Hughes and Stephens (2012, p. 17): "If the *Marvels* [of Callimachus] catalogues violations of nature's norms, many of the *Aetia* catalogue phenomena that violate social norms or expectations ..."

paradoxographers envisioned the role of his material beyond the confines of the library. In fr. 178, the Callimachean narrator recounts a discussion that took place during a likely fictional banquet in Alexandria about the bewildering origins of a cult practice on the island Icus. After discovering that another guest, the Ician Theogenes, likewise prefers to delight in conversation rather than excessive drinking, the Callimachean narrator queries his new acquaintance about his homeland’s unexpected worship of Peleus:

“The word is very true indeed, that wine needs not only a share of water, but also of conversation (ἀλλ’ ἔτι καὶ λέσσης οἴνος ἔχειν ἐθέλει). Let us throw this into the difficult drink as an antidote— because it is not served round in ladles and you will not ask for it, looking at the unbending eyebrows of the cup-bearers, at a time when the free fawn on slaves—and, Theogenes, as much as my heart longs to hear from you, (ὄσσ[α] δ’ ἐμεῖο σ[έ]θεν πάρα θυμὸς ἀκοῦσαι ἰχναίνει) you must tell me in answer to my questions: why do you have [on Icus] the tradition of worshipping Peleus, the king of the Myrmidons; how are Thessalian matters connected with Icus? ...pricking up my ears for one wanting to tell a story (*Aet.* 178.15-25, 30).”²⁹

This scene has been of interest to scholars for a number of reasons,³⁰ but for my purposes the Callimachean narrator’s conversation stands out as a literary enactment of the sympotic application of the *mirabilia* that the poet gathers from his source texts and collects in the poem. Simple intellectual curiosity (“my heart longs to hear”) impels the narrator to embark on discussion of a fascinating but relatively insignificant nugget of trivia with his couchmate, and he casts their conversation as the ideal complement to the sympotic setting. Indeed, while most of the remaining fragments of the *Aetia* betray no connections to symposia,³¹ in the first two books Callimachus’s adaptation of the Hesiodic conceit of the poet’s meeting with the Muses into an exchange driven at times by the poetic narrator’s “wonder” at cultural *curiosa*³² nonetheless underscores the social and especially conversational aspect of wonder-telling.

²⁹ All translations of the *Aetia* are by Harder (2012, vol. 1), with minor modifications. I use the enumeration of Harder for all references to the *Aetia*.

³⁰ Scholars highlight its metapoetic dimensions, representation of cross-cultural interactions, and links to the Odyssean banquet of Alcinous. On these aspects, see the commentary of Harder (2012, vol. 2) *ad loc* with bibliography.

³¹ At fr. 43.12-17, the Callimachean narrator remarks that the only lasting pleasure he took from a symposium is the knowledge he gained there. It is unclear how the rest of fr. 43 (his catalogue of Sicilian city foundations) relates to a sympotic context, though many argue that the unplaced fr. 178 should be placed before fr. 43, on which see Harder (2012, vol. 2, pp. 956-957).

³² The poetic narrator’s wonder is used to transition between episodes at least one other time. After Cleo concludes a story about Zancle, the narrator remarks that “I also wanted to learn this—for my wonder grew (ἦ γάρ μοι θάμβος ὑπετρέφ[ε]το)—why the Cadmean city Haliartus celebrates the Theodaesia...” (fr. 43.84-87). Cf. fr. 31b, where the narrator’s θυμὸς urges him to ask another question.

Other examples further link poetry, *paradoxa*, and the symposium. Most of Posidippus's epigrams about stones ('*lithika*', A-B 1-20) are set within the context of symposia, as they describe noteworthy stones worn by women (presumably hetaerae) or sympotic accoutrements, often in terms characteristic of both wonder-telling in general and paradoxography in particular.³³ The majority of these focus on the stones as examples of amazing craftsmanship, itself a *topos* at home in paradoxographical compilations.³⁴ So, for example, one epigram remarks on a carved ruby (A-B 3):

This shining [ruby], in which [the engraver carved] a wine bowl (φιάλην),
draws at once the eye's swimming glance
towards [the golden flowers] with their triple tendril. And you, [lover of novelty
= καίν' ἀγαπῶσα]
[graciously receive it] in the banquet (δαίτη), lady.³⁵

Here the symposium itself is involved in the wonder, with the image graven on the stone reflecting the occasion of its display. Other epigrams in the collection describe stones that are marvels because of their natural properties, such as A-B 17 on a stone with inexplicable magnetic effects:

Consider the nature of this stone uprooted by Mysian Olympus:
its double power makes it a marvel (θαυμάσιον).
On the one hand it easily attracts iron that stands in the way,
just like a magnet. On the other hand it drives it afar,
causing, with its side, an opposite effect. It's quite a prodigy (τέρας), how on its own
it can imitate two stones in their forward projections.

Included alongside³⁶ overtly sympotic epigrams and with a conversational second-person address, this poem reads like a snapshot of a party's banter, as if the stone in question were actually present and might be used as the stimulus for an impromptu discussion in much the same way as Plutarch's giant truffles. Given that the Hellenistic elite actively engaged in the collection and exhibitions of 'wonders',³⁷ the pretense is not so unrealistic, and we may

³³ E.g., θαῦμ' ἀπάης ("a deceptive wonder"), A-B 13.2; θαῦμα...μέγα ("a great wonder"), A-B 15.7. Krevans (2005, pp. 88-92) notes the paradoxographical vocabulary and highlights that Posidippus and paradoxographers share the same "aesthetic of wonder" that seeks to amaze but not explain. Cf. Bing (2005, pp. 119-139) on the geo-political dimensions of Posidippus' presentation of the stones as wonders; Guichard (2006, pp. 121-133) for paradoxographic elements throughout Posidippus' collection; and Priestley (2014, pp. 99-104) on the epigrams' connections to Herodotus and Herodotean wonder.

³⁴ Cf. Giannini's 1965 index for 'wonders of artifice.'

³⁵ Text and all translations of Posidippus by Austin and Bastianini (2002) = A-B.

³⁶ On the third century collection of Posidippus' epigrams (P.Mil.Vogl. VIII 309) as an organized poetry book, see Gutzwiller (2004, pp. 84-93).

³⁷ Schepens (1996, pp. 404-407).

well imagine that the display of objects like the graven ruby or magnet was part of their social gatherings just as art displayed in dining rooms, particularly in the Roman period, could serve as conversation pieces.³⁸

Hellenistic poets also capitalized on the potential of *mirabilia* for the sort of play associated with symposia. Antigonus includes a report (*Mir.* 8) on the soundlessness of some deer bones that quotes a couplet of Philitas of Cos:

Something no less marvelous than this, but more familiar (οὐχ ἥττον δὲ τούτου θαυμαστόν, καθωμιλημένον δὲ μᾶλλον), is a fact concerning a thorn in Sicily called a κάκτος (= ‘cardo’): whenever a deer treads on it and is injured, its bones are soundless and useless as *auloi* (flutes), which Philitas also has interpreted when he says:

‘The fawn will sing on its departure from life
if it has guarded itself from the prick of the sharp cardoon.’

The couplet plays on the image of the dead fawn’s voice continuing after its death, and it becomes intelligible only for those who have knowledge of the Sicilian plant. Reitzenstein first identified the epigram as a riddle (γρῖφος) and in light of this suggested that the couplet belongs to Philitas’s *Paignia*, a collection of playful or ‘lighter’ poems which included the sort of epigrammatic riddles and perhaps erotic pieces that were regular features of sympotic entertainment.³⁹ Although some subsequent scholars have argued that the lines belong to the poet’s *Demeter*, their readings nonetheless situate the couplet within sympotic discourse, whether through an allusion to the sympotic exchange of riddles⁴⁰ or as a verse example of sympotic paraenesis.⁴¹ Regardless of its provenance, the couplet demonstrates the union of erudition and literary finesse characteristic of Hellenistic poetry while also translating an apparently popular *paradoxon* (as emphasized by Antigonus’s καθωμιλημένον δὲ μᾶλλον) into a moment of interactive sympotic entertainment.

Other poetic *paradoxa* similarly rely on this combination of learnedness and playfulness, even if they are not anchored in an explicitly sympotic context. Philostephanus, a poet and paradoxographer much like his senior colleague and possible mentor Callimachus, adapted into verse a Sicilian marvel that was likely also included in his own prose compilation on marvelous waters (Περὶ παραδόξων ποταμῶν):⁴²

³⁸ Compare Hedylus’ epigram on a marvelous rhyton in the form of the Egyptian god Bes (4 G-P). In its sympotic context, the rhyton serves not only as a functional necessity for the party but also as a wonder of artifice to be displayed and discussed; cf. Netz (1996, pp. 291-293).

³⁹ Reitzenstein (1893, pp. 178-179).

⁴⁰ On which see Spanoudakis (2002, pp. 209-213).

⁴¹ Sbardella (2000, p. 147).

⁴² On Philostephanus as a paradoxographer and his compilation, see Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 105-106), with bibliography.

γαίη δ' ἐν Σικελῶν Τρινακρίδι χεῦμα λέλειπται⁴³
 αινότατον, λίμνη καίπερ εὐδῶσ' ὀλίγη,
 ἰσχυρόν δίναις, ὄπερ ἦν ποσὶ παῦρα τινάξις
 ἠλιθίως ξηρὴν σ' ἤλασεν ἐς ψάμαθον.⁴⁴

And in the Trinacrian land of Sicily there is a water most terrible, even though it is a small lake, it is strong with its whirlpools, which, if you foolishly shake your foot in it even a little, drives you back to dry land. (*SH* 691)

The Sicilian lake that ejects all those who attempt to enter it is a fairly popular aquatic *paradoxon* which appears in other paradoxographies.⁴⁵ The appeal of this fragment⁴⁶ lies both in its subject matter as well as the possible acrostic γ-α-ι-η, which apes the lake's effect by literally returning the audience back onto the γαίη with which the description began.⁴⁷ Although nothing in the piece speaks to a sympotic context, the second person address again casts the verses as part of a conversational exchange. Acrostics, clever puns, and other types of associated wordplay, moreover, were standard fare in sympotic entertainment and literature,⁴⁸ and thus Philostephanus's verses could easily find a place in a convivial setting.

We may draw a few conclusions from these examples of Hellenistic poetry's treatment of wonder-telling. First, the activity of describing marvels is regularly figured as a social one that takes place in casual conversation in general or sympotic conversation in particular. Socrates' objection apparently has been overruled, as wonders enjoy a place as part of sympotic *hedone*, be they subjects for discussion or opportunities for clever poetic play. Moreover, the pleasure of Hellenistic wonder-telling is rooted in the erudition for which the period is famous. The well-read Callimachean narrator has knowledge of an obscure cult, while Philitas' riddle depends upon knowledge of a particular Sicilian plant, and Philostephanus adapts a local legend into a moment of poetic fun. Paradoxographies, with their obvious dependence upon a variety of source texts from different genres, reflect a similar erudition. Some reports even engage in a union of disparate types of knowledge akin to what we find in the wide-ranging conversations of the learned *dramatis personae* of sympotic miscellanies. For example, in his report (*Mir.* c. 115) on *hippomania*, the term for a mare's heat, Antigonus follows his source Aristotle (*HA* 572a9-13) in connecting

⁴³ On issues with this term, see Page (1982, p. 21).

⁴⁴ *Tz. H.* 8.144.670-675 (= *SH* 691), with the emendations made by Hermann for Westermann's edition of paradoxographic compilations (1839) that were accepted by Page (1982, p. 21); Lloyd-Jones and Parsons rejected the emendations, as does Capel Badino (2010, pp. 192-194).

⁴⁵ *Ps. Arist. Mir.* c. 112 with the forthcoming commentary of Pajón Leyra (*FGrHist* 1658); *Paradox. Flor.* c. 30 (*FGrHist* 1680) with the commentary of Greene (2018).

⁴⁶ The δε in the first line indicates that this is part of a longer epigram or elegy; cf. Page (1982, p. 21).

⁴⁷ The beginnings of the final two lines are contested; see Capel Badino (2010, pp. 192-194) for arguments against the readings that allow for the acrostic.

⁴⁸ On which see the essays in Kwapisz, Petrain, and Szymanski (2013).

the zoological phenomenon with modern slang insults for promiscuous women. He then independently continues to use these connections to advance an interpretation of related lines in Aeschylus' *Toxotides*, thus uniting science, popular idiom, and literary exegesis.⁴⁹

Although some ancient and modern critics have painted *paradoxa* and paradoxography as a crasser form of entertainment that catered to the tastes of the *hoi polloi*, these examples attest that *mirabilia* were circulated, enjoyed, and adapted by the intelligentsia. Pajón Leyra stresses the similarly learned quality of sympotic wonder-telling in Plutarch, and she makes the attractive suggestion that paradoxographies served as a crutch that helped hosts and guests prepare interesting fodder to chew on during banquets and symposia.⁵⁰ She notes that such aids in stimulating conversation would be of great value to members of the Hellenistic elite who boasted the standing to be invited to the dinner parties of the upper echelons but who might have lacked the erudition to independently generate and respond to such fascinating topics of conversation.⁵¹

While I suspect that enterprising symposiasts made use of paradoxographies in the way Pajón Leyra describes, the evidence recommends that the genre's development was also linked with the symposium in a less direct but more fundamental way. As we have seen, prior to and during the development of paradoxography the discussion of marvels like those found in paradoxographic compilations was already firmly situated in the realm of sympotic entertainment. This is the basis that informs Pajón Leyra's theory: symposiasts might look to paradoxographies for inspiration because wonder-telling was already a regular feature in symposia. Consequently, the pleasure of indulging in tales of the marvelous is one which an ancient audience could naturally associate with sympotic *hedone*. In fact, two of the earliest paradoxographers, Callimachus and Philostephanus, both highlight the conversational aspect of wonder-telling in their poetry and either stress that it brings the sort of pleasure appropriate to the symposium (Callimachus) or present it in such a way as to delight even as it fascinates (Philostephanus). Their poetry, in other words, stages the application of the material they collect in their compilations and affirms that they were fully cognizant of the entertainment value of *mirabilia* in casual social intercourse. Paradoxography thus offers an example of the adaptation of social and especially sympotic discourse into a textual form that affords solitary readers like Aulus Gellius the opportunity to indulge privately in a pleasure once principally enjoyed in the social sphere. The pleasant conversational fodder of the banquet becomes pleasures that

⁴⁹ Other prime examples of paradoxographers merging different genres and types of knowledge in their descriptions include Ps. Aristotle's reports on the phenomena located in the area of the Electridae Islands (c. 81) and places associated with the voyage of Jason (c. 105), on which see the forthcoming commentary of Pajón Leyra (*FGrHist* 1658).

⁵⁰ Pajón Leyra (2011, pp. 77-80), who further considers representations of paradoxography in later prose representations of convivial scenes. Cf. Schepens (1996, pp. 403-404), who instead proposed that paradoxographies, particularly Callimachus', may have originally served as reference texts.

⁵¹ Compare the proposal of Goldhill (2009, p. 109) that the discrete episodes in *Table Talk* "seem to have been designed for use in a symposium of one's own."

one may enjoy in his or her own solitary leisure time. This is not meant to imply that Callimachus and other early paradoxographers consciously considered their compilations prose catalogues of the delights of the convivial table. On the contrary, there is no evidence of this sort of intentionality. Instead, in creating a new kind of entertainment literature, early paradoxographers took their cues from one of the traditional social fora for casual entertainment. The result is a new type of literature that combines the fruits of serious scholarship and the Hellenistic devotion to compiling information with fare associated with social gatherings to satisfy the popular appetite for wonders, an appetite shared by the masses and the intelligentsia alike.⁵²

⁵² I would like to thank the *NECJ* editors and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions. Many thanks also to the attendees of the Classical Association of New England's 2017 meeting, where I presented an early form of this paper. Their helpful comments and suggestions were very much appreciated.

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