

In this paper I focus on Plutarch's longest text on animals, *De sollertia animalium*, and propose to consider more closely its cultural and political context by reassessing the significance of the theme of hunting. The issue of Plutarch's evaluation of hunting in *De sollertia* has been discussed by scholars for at least a century without reaching a consensus, with the debate focusing on whether in this dialogue Plutarch commended hunting or denounced it. In my approach I accept the fact that there is a considerable lack of coherence in Plutarch's treatment of hunting and make an attempt to explain it through close reading of the text.

In my examination of the opening conversation of Autoboulos and Soklaros I will focus on the sudden change of tone of Autoboulos, whose initial moderate and ironic criticism of hunting soon gives place to its passionate denunciation. I will argue that this change is a result of Soklaros' praise of art of hunting, which refers to *venationes*, Roman staged beast shows, as the use of the word θέα ("spectacle") and the association of hunting and gladiator shows indicate. Keeping the *venationes* in mind I will proceed to analyze Autoboulos' response to Soklaros and the argument he develops against hunting. Autoboulos' outline of the decline of human nature which started with the first hunting trips is to be read as a model for the similar decline of the individual human soul occurring within the temporal limits of a single human life, as his reference to the power of συνήθεια ("habituation") indicate. Although his criticism is general enough to encompass both pastime hunting and *venationes*, there are some indications that Plutarch indeed had the latter in mind. I will point out the striking verbal similarity between Autoboulos' response to Soklaros and the passage in Plutarch's *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* (821f-822c) which condemns politicians who gain the favor of the *demos* by means of theatrical performances, distributions of money and gladiator shows, suggesting that Autoboulos' words contain a veiled criticism of the *venationes*. To confirm my reading, I will bring up the evidence of Porphyry, who made extensive use of *De sollertia animalium* in his *De abstinentia*, and who explicitly refers to theatre, i.e. the arena, in his paraphrase of Autoboulos' criticism (3.20).

In the second part of my paper, I will examine a few references to the spectacles in the dialogue which confirm my suggestion that their criticism constitutes a vital element of the text. The *venationes* are presented as a cultural practice of Roman provenance and Rome is repeatedly mentioned as a source of stories about animals. When read together with the *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae*, Plutarch's *De sollertia animalium* offers evidence that the statesman from Chaeronea was concerned about the fact that Roman spectacles were spreading over the Greek world and were used by Greek politicians as a way of expressing their power and ensuring their popularity. Read in this way, *De sollertia animalium* is not just a moral exercise of a detached Greek intellectual, but provides evidence of Plutarch's uneasiness in accepting certain features of life in Greece within the Roman empire.