CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SCIENCE AND AESTHETICS OF NAMES IN THE NATURAL HISTORY

AUDE DOODY

The Natural History is filled with names of animals, plants, minerals, places and people, some familiar, others unknown to all but the most expert of specialist readers. A great deal of scholarship over the years has depended on the correct identification of the things named in Pliny’s text, and Pliny’s importance to the practice of medicine in the West made the correct interpretation of Pliny’s names a pressing problem for scholars well into the sixteenth century. Pliny’s usefulness as a source of practical information depended on a proper understanding of the names he lists, on the ability of the reader to make the correct link between the name in the text and the object in the natural world. As we will see, the danger that names may become confused, that the reader may not be able to make the jump from name to object, text to world, is one that concerns Pliny throughout the Natural History. And yet, alongside a strong sense of the practical importance of understanding what is meant by a name, there is also what I would like to call an aesthetics of naming in the Natural History. Names are important within the text as structuring devices and as interesting facts in their own right, and Pliny chooses to list or exclude names for artistic and political as well as practical reasons. Pliny’s use of names illuminates his expectations of his readers and his efforts to produce a text that is both useful to the specialist and readable by the uninitiated.

The Natural History seems to anticipate readers with varying levels of expertise and different styles of reading. In the preface, Pliny sets it up as a text that can and should be used: it is promoted as a collection of useful information that can be redeployed by the diligent reader. Pliny contrasts his addressee, Titus, with the people whom he marks out as natural readers of his work: farmers, craftspeople and idle scholars (HN pref. 6). He dryly jokes that he has provided a list of contents for Titus, who is a busy man, thereby allowing his other readers to pinpoint information

1 Some of the material in this chapter is covered (in rather less detail) in Doody (2010).
without having to read the whole thing (HN pref. 33). As I have argued elsewhere, it would have been awkward in practice for Pliny’s first readers to answer specific questions by making use of the list of contents that Pliny provides in Book 1: the cumbersome book roll format and the likely absence of numbered divisions or running headings in the text limited its utility as a finding tool. Still, Pliny envisages an ideal reader who comes to the text with a specific question in mind: that reader is either a practical man or a curious scholar, but they are imagined as active readers, capable of using the tools Pliny provides to find the information that they require.

Although in his preface Pliny summons up the image of the expert reader who uses his text piecemeal, his assumption elsewhere is that the reader is reading for enjoyment and following the text sequentially. We see this assumption not just in his plentiful cross-references and the careful hierarchies of his text’s structure, but in the way Pliny goes about his project. As Gian Biagio Conte suggested, the Natural History finds its sense of unity in a shared sensibility between writer and reader: ‘the capacity to be astonished and the will to astonish.’ We see this sense of enjoyable astonishment clearly, for instance, in Pliny’s exuberant vade mecum at the beginning of his account of the strange customs of human beings in Book 7 (HN 7.7):

Naturae uero rerum uis atque maiestas in omnibus momentis fide caret, si quis modo partes eius ac non totam complectatur animo. Ne pauonis ac tigrium pantherarumque maculas et tot animalium picturas commemorem, parum dictu, sed immensum aestimatione, tot gentium sermones, tot linguae, tanta loquendi uarietas, ut externus alieno paene non sit hominis uice!

In every instance the power and majesty of the nature of things is unbelievable if your mind grasps only parts of it, and not the whole thing. I needn’t recall the spots on peacocks, tigers, and panthers or the markings of so many other animals, a small thing to mention but a huge thing to think about—or all the different types of speech and language and ways of talking, which make a foreigner seem hardly human to someone of another race!

Here Pliny encourages his readers to be open to the peculiar facts he is about to relate about bizarre types of humans, ranging from cannibals to one-legged peoples, by claiming that the power of nature is only revealed

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3 On Pliny’s cross-references, see Naas (2002) 197–199; on these and also narrative hierarchies, see Henderson (2011).