

Howley, J.A. 2018. *Aulus Gellius and Roman Reading Culture: Text, Presence, and Imperial Knowledge in the Noctes Atticae*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xx + 282pp. ISBN 9781316510124. £75.00.

When Leofranc Holford-Strevens's *Aulus Gellius* appeared in late 1988 (Duckworth; republished by Oxford University Press in 2004 as *Aulus Gellius: An Antonine Scholar and His Achievement*), it was the first comprehensive study of this author in English. Composed with wide-ranging erudition in a relentlessly compressed style, it left one in doubt whether another 'definitive' book on Gellius would ever be written. As it happened, however, Holford-Strevens initiated a many-sided re-appraisal of the *Noctes Atticae* (hereafter, *NA*) and its somewhat elusive author. Thirty years later, we may welcome another seminal contribution to Gellian scholarship, which grapples with its central problem: 'What kind of a thing is the *NA*' (p. 4), at least in the mind of its author? Joseph Howley suggests that the key to Gellius is to read him as a reader who can teach us about reading.

In a prefatory chapter (pp. 1-18), Howley announces his intention to help scholars and students understand the *NA* 'as a *text*, rather than merely as a source' (p. 4). He is particularly concerned with the 'dark matter' of Gellius' work, 'the frames and rhetorics and discursive modes that introduce, coordinate, evaluate, and condition' the 'primary' material for which the *NA* has traditionally been mined (p. 5). To appreciate these framing devices, modern readers must re-train themselves to see the literary text 'that is hiding in plain sight' (*ibid.*). To this end, a detachable first chapter, entitled 'How to read the *Noctes Atticae*' (pp. 19-65), offers three case studies in Gellius' literary method. The reader who can penetrate the veil of the *NA* will perceive that it is not a disorganized and mechanical work of reference, but a literary artifact with a definite program and surprising affinities with classical poetry and philosophy. The second chapter ('Gellius in the history of writing about reading', pp. 66-111) locates the *NA* within the genre of books about reading, distinguishing Gellius' practices from those of Plutarch, Quintilian, and the elder Pliny. The last author, celebrated for his sleepless hoarding of knowledge, appears in Chapter Three ('Gellius on Pliny: fashioning the miscellanist and his readerly lifestyle', pp. 112-56) as a foil for Gellius, the discriminating collector who knows when to step away from his books. In the fourth chapter ('Encounters with tradition in Gellian research', pp. 157-203), we see how Gellius grappled with the complexity of the classical tradition, in which familiar texts were mediated by now-forgotten commentaries and works of erudition. To exemplify the shortcomings of these *subsidia*, Gellius examines Marcus Tullius Tiro, the freedman who punched above his weight by 'censuring' the elder Cato (p. 184; *NA* 6.3). In contrast, Gellius' essay on pregnancy (*NA* 3.16) is appreciated as a *tour de force* in the critical use of sources, weaving its way through medical, philosophical, literary, and legal evidence to reach a satisfactory, if provisional, conclusion. The fifth chapter ('Favorinus, fiction, and dialogue at the limits of expertise', pp. 204-52) deals with Gellius' anecdotes and dialogues involving grammarians, jurists, rhetors, and philosophers. Every profession has its comic failures and impressive authorities, but Gellius inclines to the more inclusive perspective, consummately represented by the idiosyncratic – and to some extent, artificially reconstructed – Favorinus of Arles. Nevertheless, ideal readers of the *NA* must, like the author, endeavor to free themselves from the seduction (*inlecebra*) of over-hyped books and spell-binding teachers; critical autonomy is the essence of intellectual maturity (p. 248).

Howley's book contains so many original and thought-provoking insights that it is impossible to do it justice. Suffice it to say that he not only advances the project initiated by Holford-Strevens, but arguably solves some of its recurrent difficulties. How, for example, does one account for the moralizing tone of the *NA*, which has favorably impressed some interpreters, but to others has not seemed entirely sincere? In Howley's account, Gellius's project is to promote an ethics – one might even say, asceticism – of reading and knowing. He naturally borrows topics from his academic lineage, which he can trace through his Athenian professor, Lucius Calvenus Taurus, to Plutarch, who was both a polymath and an enemy of *polypragmosynē*. By the same token, one could hardly write on philosophy in the Antonine era – much less a collection of memoirs with its own table of contents – without the occasional nod to Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetus*. A related problem is the apparent conflict between Gellius's policy of transmitting only useful knowledge and the recondite information found in his work. Howley encourages us to focus on Gellius's reading strategy and the critical acumen he applies to his sources; the discipline of active reading is obviously more helpful to the man of affairs than a passive addiction to knowledge.

Next, there is the issue of Gellius's self-presentation (or, in the current style, 'self-fashioning'), which appears to swing between self-abasement and self-promotion. This difficulty stems from viewing the author as a kind of demiurge who projects finished versions of himself into the narrative flux. Instead, we might read the *NA*

as a nonlinear journal of relationships – with books as well as people – that guided Gellius's evolution from a 'little rhetorician' (*rhetoriscus*, *NA* 17.20.4) into a discreet and discerning man of letters (p. 43). Seeing the author himself as a work in progress helps us to understand the open-ended organization of individual essays, and it suits the life-long research plan indicated at the beginning of the *NA* (*praefatio* 23-24). Howley also suggests a more plausible way of understanding the cultural relationship between Greeks and Romans in the *NA*. We need not think of them as engaged in a zero-sum competition for authority; rather, we can imagine them figuratively rubbing shoulders, like the young men ('Greek and Roman, in the same ship') with whom Gellius was 'translated' to Athens and back again (p. 259; cf. *NA* 2.21.1). The title notwithstanding, the *NA* suggests that the real action was not to be found in the schools and salons of charming, atticizing Athens, but in the streets and libraries of bilingual, cosmopolitan Rome.

Thus, diligent readers of Howley's book will be rewarded with many useful insights. *More Gelliano*, however, he offers us a pathway through the *NA* without tying up all the loose ends. One may indeed quibble, for example, with his reading of *NA* 9.4 and 10.12, which would have Gellius not only challenging Pliny's authority, but also challenging his own challenge with deliberately misleading representations (pp. 130-42). Again, a few essays will remain thorns in the side of any scholar seeking to justify Gellius' project, such as the encounter between Favorinus and Domitius 'Insanus', who exclaims: 'There's absolutely no hope left for good things when even you, most illustrious of philosophers, don't care for anything except *words* and their *authorities*' (*NA* 18.7.3; Howley's translation, p. 248). Here Domitius may have put his finger on the question that haunts not only the *NA* and Howley's interpretation of it, but the modern discipline of Classics, as well. Even if there is a right way to read ancient texts, what is the *point* of all this reading? Is 'knowing virtuously' an end in itself? The answer to this question may require a more radical kind of insight than Gellius himself possessed. In the brief conclusion to his book (pp. 253-63), however, Howley instructively compares the *NA* to Montaigne's *Essays*, which were similarly criticized on the grounds of inconsistency of ideas and overall plan (*consilium*). What we have in the *NA* is not a tidy program, but the man himself, such as nature and a life spent with books have made him.

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