Scott DiGiulio: Reading Miscellany in the Roman Empire. Aulus Gellius and the Imperial Prose Collection. New York: Oxford University Press 2024. XIII, 340 p. £ 78.00/$ 120.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-768826-7.

I do not always understand the language in which this book is written: such sentences as (p. 15), "[Gellius'] subsumption of texts from different genres, each with their [*sic*] own presuppositions about the reading process, into a single work encourages his readers to investigate their interactions", or (p. 68) "His reworking of [Plin.] *Ep.* 1.20 serves as a form of one-upmanship, recasting Pliny's own refashioning of Quintilian's works into a meta-commentary on miscellanism and its aesthetic value," convey very little to me. Again (p. 187), "At the conclusion of Book 2, Gellius creates an interrelated network of citations to challenge his reader to reflect upon the different valences of each in their singular context"; I do not know what "valences" are outside chemistry and linguistics.

Yet perhaps it is more important that the reader who simply takes each chapter as it comes may well not even notice the challenge, let alone pick up the glove. DiGiulio has a thesis, that Gellius aims above all at inculcating a reading practice, so that (for example) the survey of sumptuary laws in *Noctes Atticae* 2.24, with poetic illustrations, principally affords a lesson in "how to read and apply knowledge" (p. 182), the content of that knowledge being secondary; I have no idea who might have been need of such a lesson, whereas even to an educated Roman reader some at least of the facts stated in the survey might well have been unfamiliar.

DiGiulio reads with an inventive imagination that we may applaud, but however valid and even valuable his reactions to the text may be, they are his reactions and should be ascribed to him and not to Gellius.

In his preface, Gellius, having assigned the *Noctes Atticae* work to a broad category of useful works, defends the difficult matter he has included as being no more abstruse than an educated person ought to understand, but rather such as to stimulate the intellect and encourage further research, which may entail comparing his own information with that found elsewhere; naturally he would hope to be vindicated, but he cannot guarantee the outcome in advance. Such a reader will look outwards; but DiGiulio seems to construct the *Noctes Atticae* as a world unto itself, beyond whose walls there

is no gazing, and reading as an end in itself, without regard to the content of what is read.

On p. 12, DiGiulio asserts, "As a miscellany, the *NA* is a labyrinthine work, through which a reader may follow any number of diverging paths". Whereas in visual art, the Cretan Labyrinth is for the most part drawn unicursally, with only one path to take, literature presents the multicursal maze in which Theseus requires Ariadne's thread to save him from dead ends. Yet although one may happily lose oneself in such a maze as that at Hampton Court, following dead ends with pleasure, there is a correct path to the centre (or in other mazes to the exit), whereas in a miscellany there need be none; the reader is free to read and even reflect chapter by chapter, reacting to it according to individual predilection, without seeking out a whole in which every part should fit at however long a distance with every other part. Of course connections can be found, but so they can even between texts chosen at random by different people; finding, or rather inventing, connections is the art practised by countless preachers in want of a theme for their weekly sermons.

On the same page, DiGiulio pronounces from on high that the *Noctes Atticae*'s "lack of unity is jarring", as if the Horatian *simplex dumtaxat et unum* had been binding on Gellius, or the modern reader were not free to judge his work (to quote a later critic) "With the same Spirit as its Author writ". Are we still in the days when critics worried whether a play whose main character dies halfway through could be called a unity, or readers expected grand narratives? Apparently so, for DiGiulio can ask (still on p. 12), "Is there a narrative in the *NA*?", without explaining why there should be one; but narratives he will have, even though not "in a traditional sense" (p. 13); instead he speaks of "cognitive narratives" spread throughout the work, whereby we may "follow the development of different concepts, methods, citations, and the like" as new items are introduced for comparison to earlier material. These narratives appear to be relations between chapters, both connected and remote chapters, as when the topic of ἀντιστρέφοντα is explained in 5.10–11 and revisited in 9.16, where it is attached to a problematic *controuersia* of a different kind (wrongly called insoluble) in the preceding chapter; but there is no need for every chapter to be linked to every other.

An individual's reading may be either absorptive, taking in whatever is verbally present in the text but adding nothing else, or reflective, subjecting it to his or her own thoughts and considerations whether or not they might or

even could have occurred to the author; if we adopt the second method, ought we then to credit him with our own ideas, as if we were Socrates playing midwife? Moreover, since in the ancient world much reading was not individual but collective, a text being read aloud (perhaps by a professional *lector*, whose function was to put it into play) and then discussed in company, interpretation escaped from either the author's or any one reader's control. We may observe that process in *Noctes Atticae* 3.1, where the discussion of a Sallustian passage (one of eight texts in Gellius' work introduced by the passive *legebatur*) remains inconclusive just like the debate in early Platonic dialogues.

Besides these modes of reading, there is another that consists of taking pleasure in style and language, enjoying, like Augustine and others since, Gellius' blend of the archaic and the new, its easy flow, and its abundant synonymy, even as he himself relishes earlier writers' language in several places, for example 9.13.4, 13.27.3, 15.7.3; there is scant sign of relish in DiGiulio, for whom Gellius might as well be writing in English.

This is a book for aficionados of literary theory, who can understand such sentences as (p. 18) "Meaning(s) emerge out of reading between the various points of tension that are produced when *commentarii* are placed into dialogue; those tensions should be understood as inherent parts of the *NA*'s composition, rather than by-products of the random compilation." It is hardly news that the random compilation is fictitious, but that does not require us to posit an overarching plan into which every last detail must fit. Still on p. 18, we are promised chronotopical readings *à la* Mikhail Bakhtin, because Gellius' title refers to time and place; for example, on pp. 86–88 DiGiulio considers the consecutive chapters 17.19–21, in which Gellius reports respectively a lecture by Favorinus on the teachings of Epictetus, a translation from Plato by his younger self, and his own chronological researches. What does the concept of chronotopy add?

This discussion is followed by a disquisition on tables of contents (pp. 88–108), in which discrepancies between Gellius' list of chapter-summaries and the actual contents are put down not as elsewhere to a careless reliance on memory but to a plan of forcing the reader to reconcile the two; in DiGiulio's world there must be Providence in the fall of every sparrow.

Turning from theory to practice, I do not agree that Gellius regards his translation from the *Symposium* as a youthful folly; why then does he quote it? For

all the apparatus of false modesty, he is manifestly proud of it; and much as it seemed to confirm Taurus' opinion of him as a mere *rhetoriscus*, other chapters show him as one of the philosopher's intimates despite his superficial understanding of the discipline (one would not have learnt from Gellius that his preceptor had written an extensive commentary on the *Timaeus*).

A serious point of method arises on p. 36. In *Noctes Atticae* 10.12 assertions taken by Pliny from a purported work of Democritus are reported without belief concerning the chamaeleon, whose ability to camouflage itself is taken to evoke Gellius' own authorial practice (p. 36), even though not a word is said in the whole chapter about that behaviour. To be sure other writers relate it; but does importing their information into Gellius count as reading him or as overreading him? Must any mention of Cicero or Vergil carry with it everything said by anyone about him? Must every use of a word recall (or even anticipate) every other use of it?

Furthermore, DiGiulio takes a strange view of literary history. Reviewing on p. 1 the authors whom Gellius deems worth of mention, he makes no distinction between authors cited for their use of Latin, who are indeed no later than the Augustan era, and those cited only for content, who may be recent. In the latter class Gellius is far more conscientious than many others in mentioning his sources; in the former, like Greeks making use of Latin writers, he might have forborne to name them in a culture that had turned against Silver and neo-classical authors, but DiGiulio's attempt to demonstrate use of the neo-classicists Quintilian, the younger Pliny, and the Tacitus of the *Dialogus* fails to convince, nor does he seem aware of the revolution in taste that had dethroned them in favour of pre-Ciceronian authors (not merely added the latter to the canon). To be sure Gellius shares Quintilian's distaste for Seneca, but neither a neo-classicist nor an archaizer could admire him. DiGiulio's notion that Gellius follows on from the younger Pliny despite never mentioning him seems to be taken for granted when in fact it is need of detailed proof. What is there in Gellius that would not be there if he had never read a word of him?

More to the point, had Gellius known his expatiations on dolphins in love with boys at *Epistulae* 9.33, he could hardly have ignored them in compiling his own treatment of the topic in *Noctes Atticae* 6.8, albeit DiGiulio makes only a glancing reference to it (p. 34), seeing instead in Gellius' narrative a riposte to the elder Pliny's recounting of such tales at *Naturalis Historia* 9.25–28, which after devoting no little space to such an instance at Puteoli under

Augustus, and recording various others, briefly notes that Theophrastus had recorded such a case at Naupactus. Gellius, having ascribed the first story to Apion and adduced Theophrastus for the second, reverts to Apion's narrative, which he cites at length and partly in Greek; but for DiGiulio "the underlying target is almost certainly Pliny" (p. 33), who breathes not a word of Apion despite translating the odd phrase from him. Gellius' citation of Apion is said to correct Pliny's narrative, which cites different sources, yet such use is called ironic; the head spins, all the more so when the citation "suggests Pliny's own irresponsibility in including this narrative".

DiGiulio will have it that Gellius is challenging Pliny's addiction to the fuller style, even though he himself is rather expansive (p. 51); this indeed he is in comparison to Fronto and Apuleius, who are surely more relevant for his practice than the Trajanic orator. It is an accident of transmission that has given us Pliny's bloated *Panegyricus* and his correspondence to judge, but only scraps of Fronto's speeches and letters, even though he, not Pliny, would be reputed the second Cicero. To be sure, Fronto and Gellius are not interchangeable, either in style, for Fronto is an orator and Gellius is not, or in taste; Fronto's disregard of Vergil is not shared by Gellius, who admires Cicero's speeches without Fronto's reservations but pays almost no attention to the letters that Fronto prefers to them. But such differences, like those within a political party, are no more than may be expected within a literary movement.

DiGiulio's Gellius is always writing to go one up, always problematizing everybody else, always calling into question other writers' authority. At times this seems to mean no more than disagreeing with a particular statement, at others not even that: in 19.13 Gellius is said to problematize Fronto's authority, simply because he represents him as less than omniscient; this accords with his no longer being at home, as he is in previous chapters, but he is not omniscient even in 19.8. How indeed could he be expected to know for sure that no pre-Augustan writer had ever used *quadriga* in the singular without our electronic texts and search-engines?

Varro fares little better: (p. 234) "At 3.10, Gellius presents Varro's investigations into the powers of the number seven in the *Hebdomades*, chiefly to criticize his proclivity for reading too much significance into numbers." This is grossly unfair: only in the sixteenth of Paul Daniel Longolius' seventeen sections does Gellius turn to finding fault, when Varro lists hebdomads not built into the structure of the universe, details he considers *frigidiuscula*; even

if the epithet extends to the purely personal facts that conclude the chapter, nothing said in §§ 16–17 undermines Varro's authority on the length of human gestation, and only a malevolent nitpicker would assert that the exceptional cases discussed in the chapter did so.

If we turn from literary to social history, Gellius, as DiGiulio observes, did not pursue a political career; this is not purely a matter of personal choice, since especially in view of his modest wealth he would have needed a powerful patron, but his talents might no doubt have found him one had he searched hard enough. To be sure he enjoyed a certain respect as a man of letters, but knew his place none the less; though suffered to be in the company of great men, he did not speak (and is not spoken to) in their presence. Even in 19.10, when Fronto, *uir consularis*, humiliates a grammarian who disparaged the correctness of the word *praeterpropter*, the crucial proof-text is adduced not by Gellius but by Julius Celsinus, who though his social superior is not too grand to discuss the poet Laevius with him when they are *à deux*. By contrast, Fronto takes no individual notice of Gellius whatsoever; his appearance in three chapters of book 19 is an attempt by Gellius to make the relation seem closer than it was. Yet Fronto himself, despite his appointment as imperial tutor, his suffect consulate under Pius, and his close personal friendship with Marcus, was a marginal figure in public life, never offering or indeed being asked for advice on state affairs. What did he ever amount to compared with Q. Junius Rusticus or Lollianus Avitus?

Some points of detail:

p. 69. "Gellius reveals his anxieties by ensuring that the only named figures with whom he is connected are people of significant standing". If these anxieties, as may well be supposed, concern his place in Roman society, why should anyone, however secure in his status, have named nobodies of whom his readers had never heard? Even if any of the unnamed friends and others who appear in the *Noctes Atticae* should happen to be real persons, nothing was to be gained by naming them. One may presume that *Macedo philosophus, uir bonus, amicus meus* (13.8.4), had some standing, even if not very much exalted, simply by virtue of being a philosopher; but since we have no other notice even of his existence, it is hard to see what else can be said without circular reasoning.

p. 120. "words out of common parlance" mistranslates *obsoleta*, which is not 'obsolete' but 'trite'.

p. 154. One might suppose *id quoque* at 2.1.1 to be purely prospective, καὶ τόδε, but for DiGiulio we are meant to recall Socrates' resilience under Xanthippe's

insults in 1.17.1; this is not implausible, especially given the verbal echoes he notes, unlike the association on the next page between 10.8.1 on a military punishment, where again *id quoque* introduces one example amongst others not stated, and the civil punishment of Appius Claudius' daughter in 10.6, where no form or derivative of *animaduertere* is used.

p. 225 n. 6. The allegation that Favorinus was avaricious seems to be derived from one word in his enemy's account, as preserved in Arabic translation, namely an adjective that, like English 'greedy', may mean 'covetous' but is likelier to mean 'gluttonous', particularly when paired with 'dissolute', which he was certainly said to be. Admittedly Polemo also makes him a dealer in deadly poisons, but that seems to be mere calumny, for none of his brushes with the law involved that crime.

p. 229. It is not Probus' authority that is questioned in 3.1, but that of the person who attributed an absurd opinion to him; one may well ask what criterion of authenticity, other than compatibility with other reports, could be applied to one who wrote so little, but we are in no position to challenge Gellius' judgement. (That the real Favorinus would not have missed the Xenophontic source that passed Gellius by is a reminder that his reports of teachers may be fictitious.)

p. 241. "Menander omits every potential month for birth": only two of them, including the less often considered eleventh.

p. 242. Why is it any more naïve to cite a Menippean satire on a par with an erudite work for a matter of scientific fact than to adduce a Greek comedy?

p. 246: "details that Gellius deems patently ridiculous": indeed there is much in Pliny that Gellius regards as patently ridiculous, but where is the evidence that this is true of the assertions that yawning in childbirth is fatal and sneezing after intercourse causes miscarriage, which follow a serious report from a well-regarded jurist? That we cannot read them with a straight face proves nothing; more generally modern authors all too often take as ironic statements that they themselves could not have meant seriously without bothering to establish that the ancient writers did not do so. Renaissance doctors wrote arrant rubbish about the eating of vegetables, and their Victorian successors erred as much on female sexuality.

p. 249 n. 48. The two Scipios are conflated: it was the younger who shaved, the elder who was lampooned by Naevius.

Since it will have become clear that I have some difficulty in reading Gellius through DiGiulio's eyes, I am very happy to applaud his final chapter, demonstrating Gellian influence on later writers from Michel de Montaigne to Jorge Luis Borges; it is by no means unusual that literary critics should be

more convincing in respect of those who come after them rather than of those who come before.

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