

A NEW CHAPTER IN GELLIAN STUDIES (A REVIEW ARTICLE)

Scott J. DiGiulio, *Reading Miscellany in the Roman Empire: Aulus Gellius and the Imperial Prose Collection*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, XIII + 340 pp., ISBN: 9780197688267 (hardback), \$120.00.

The international community of Gellian scholars¹, familiar with Scott J. DiGiulio's previous research, looked forward with anticipation to the publication of his latest book. Now that *Reading Miscellany in the Roman Empire* is finally out, it turns out that it surpasses all expectations. This is a book that needed to be written and was written at the perfect moment in the history of Gellian scholarship. Thirty-five years have passed since Leofranc Holford-Strevens' monumental monograph on Gellius², a work that firmly set the course for two generations of scholars and will remain the first piece of *Sekundärliteratur* read by any future Gellian scholar for centuries to come. In the intervening years, much has been written – on the *NA*, on the genre of poikilography, and on imperial literature more broadly. DiGiulio's work does not aim to replace Holford-Strevens' seminal contribution. Rather, he synthesises existing scholarship and offers a fresh, coherent methodology for interpreting the *NA* as a dynamic, pedagogical, and intertextual masterpiece.

DiGiulio's publication originated as a doctoral dissertation titled *Aulus Gellius, the Noctes Atticae, and the Literary Logic of Miscellany Under the High Roman Empire*, submitted in 2015 at Brown University³. As expected, the findings from his earlier research have now been significantly refined and expanded. Notably, Chapters V and VII introduce entirely new material that extends beyond the scope of the original dissertation. Additionally, Chapters I and IV offer a detailed exploration of ideas that DiGiulio had previously addressed only briefly.

In the "Introduction", DiGiulio provides a concise yet highly informative overview of various approaches to the *NA* that have emerged over the past two hundred years (a topic he later expands upon in Chapter VII). He pays particular attention to the most recent interpretations shaped by different strands of modern literary theory, offering clear guidance through often complex concepts.

He then proceeds to outline his own approach. While terms "textualities" (in quotation marks, p. 7) or "chronotopic" (p. 14) may initially unsettle those classicists who prefer a more conventional outlook, DiGiulio reassures the reader with his emphasis on blending diverse new methodologies with a traditional philological framework (p. 8). He acknowledges that his work draws heavily on the insights of Joseph Howley, whose interpretations also balance classical philology with modern theoretical perspectives.

DiGiulio's central idea is straightforward: "[...] by centering Gellius as an author who exercises control over his work, I offer a pathway to understanding him as a mainstream Roman literary figure, and to examining the implications of reading the *NA* as we would other works of imperial prose literature" (p. 9). He then introduces the original concept of multiple "ways of reading" the *Attic Nights* (p. 11), closely tied to the previously mentioned "textualities" or distinct layers of the

¹ Readers interested in staying updated on new publications in the field of Gellian studies are warmly invited to join the *Collegium Gellianum*, a Facebook group founded in 2020, which now gathers several dozen of participants, including some of the most prominent Gellian scholars from around the globe [www.facebook.com/groups/collegiumgellianum].

² L. HOLFORD-STREVENES, *Aulus Gellius*, Chapel Hill 1988, later expanded into *Aulus Gellius: An Antonine Scholar and His Achievement*, Oxford 2003, rev. ed. 2005.

³ Available at Brown Digital Repository [repository.library.brown.edu/studio/item/bdr:419519].

text, of which Gellius, as the author, is fully aware. DIGIULIO promises to explore and illustrate these rival yet complementary ways of reading in the subsequent chapters – a promise he delivers on admirably. The different ways of reading, he argues, are proposed (or “encoded”, p. 18) by Gellius himself and can be applied to further our understanding of the *NA* once they are recognised. Examples of such readings are thoroughly investigated in Chapters I, II and III.

It is worth noting here that DIGIULIO is fully aware of the limitations of his methods. He acknowledges that his approach “may lead a reader to see connections where they might not have been intended originally” (p. 8 n. 22)⁴. At the same time, he underscores the risks inherent in other interpretations of the *NA* and he accepts the challenges posed by his own interpretative paradigm.

Before we survey the main content of DIGIULIO’S book, I would like to consider the generic identity of the *NA* and the name of this genre – both topics briefly dealt with on p. 3–5. DIGIULIO not only adopts the word *miscellany* throughout his book, even though he acknowledges that “to do so is anachronistic” (p. 3), but even embraces it to the extent of including it in the book’s title. This is, to a certain extent, understandable, because this term is very well established in English. A comprehensive discussion of terminology was made in 2005 by Amiel VARDI⁵ in his deservedly well-known paper where he concludes that there is no compelling reason to abandon the term *miscellany*. There have been, however, other terminological suggestions in other languages, which could be easily promoted and adopted in English. One such proposal was made in 2005 by Krystyna BARTOL in the largely overlooked paper *Per una morfologia della ‘poikilographia’ antica*⁶. In this study, the Polish scholar reintroduces the term ‘poikilography’. The expression is not an ancient one: the adjective ποικιλογράφος appears only once in Diogenes Laertius, but the substantive *Poikilographie* (in German) as a name of the genre entered scholarly literature when Felix JACOBY announced his monumental plan in the preface to the first volume of *FGrHist*⁷. Among the few scholars who have employed the term is Albrecht DIHLE⁸, who references Clement’s Στρωματεῖς as an example of “die sogenannte Poikilographie”. In my opinion,

⁴ This brought to mind a conference I once attended, titled *Without Order or Narrative? Reading Latin Text Collections from Late Roman Republic to the Early Middle Ages*, where participants joked that this was an event for classicists indulging in conspiracy theories (Durham–Tübingen *Latin Text Collections* on-line seminar, 15–16 April 2021, organised by Roy Gibson and Robert Kirstein).

⁵ A.J. VARDI, *Genre, Conventions, and Cultural Programme in Gellius’ Noctes Atticae*, in: L. HOLFORD-STREVS, A. VARDI (eds.), *The Worlds of Aulus Gellius*, Oxford 2004, pp. 159–186, here at p. 163.

⁶ Eos XCII 2005, pp. 210–223 [available at eos.ptf.edu.pl]. DIGIULIO does not seem to know it.

⁷ F. JACOBY, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker. Erster Teil*, Berlin 1923, p. V. The challenges of his categorisation were later highlighted by G. SCHEPENS in the preface to *FGrHist* IV.A.1 [scholarlyeditions.brill.com/bnjo/preface-iv]. The planned vol. IV.E of the *FGrHist* was at that point set to bear the title: *Paradoxography, Poikilography, and Antiquities*, which, however, eventually appeared as IV.E. *Paradoxography and Antiquities* (Leiden 2022). The forthcoming vol. IV.F is currently announced as: *Collections, Anthologies and Hypomnemata (and related genres)*.

⁸ A. DIHLE, *Die griechische und lateinische Literatur der Kaiserzeit. Von Augustus bis Justinian*, München 1989, p. 339. Even though the calque *Buntschriftstellerei* is well established in German, some researchers are dissatisfied with it and prefer *Poikilographie*, like G. KRAPINGER, “Poikilographie (dt. Buntschriftstellerei)” in: *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik. Band 6: Must-Pop*, G. UEDING (hrsg.), Tübingen 2006, while at the same time others explore still different options, e.g. J.-O. LINDERMANN, *Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae, Buch 9: Kommentar*, Berlin 2006, p. 28, where the Latin word *commentarii* is proposed as a *terminus technicus*.

there is no reason not to use this term in all languages of modern scholarship. As a neologism it is free from the charge of being anachronistic, and as a word derived from Greek – just like so many other *-graphia* compounds – it can be easily incorporated into any language system.

DiGIULIO's discussion of the characteristics of the genre derives from the analysis of VARDI, who examines Gellius' own references to the *NA* and to other similar works and identifies several defining features common to this kind of writing: (1) Knowledge (*doctrina* or *historia*): content of the book; (2) Accumulation: the author's effort in gathering appropriate material; (3) Choice: the author's deliberate decision about what to include; (4) Isolation: the author's skill in arranging the content into digestible sections. Incidentally, these conclusions could not have been taken into account by BARTOL, whose paper on poikilography was published only a few months later. She proposes a definition of the genre based on a comparison of the prefaces by Gellius and Pliny the Elder, as well as the epilogue to Aelian's *Περὶ ζῴων ἰδιότητος*, independently identifying three constitutive features of such literary production: (1) Variety of content (*disparilitas*), characterised by its eclectic subject matter; (2) Compilatory character, emphasising the accumulation of references to earlier works, which underscores the third feature: (3) Internal coherence, where the author's creative input lies in transforming old material into a new, aesthetically cohesive text.

The similarities in BARTOL and VARDI's conclusions, despite differing methodologies, encourage us to embrace both proposals, each highly convincing in its own right. VARDI highlights the structural organization of the text, while BARTOL places greater emphasis on its artistic elaboration – together, these elements define the full scope of a poikilographic work. Both perspectives are now represented in a balanced way in the work by DiGIULIO, but had BARTOL's paper not been published in Italian, maybe her insights would have entered the scholarly discourse much earlier.

DiGIULIO's Chapter I "Reading the *NA* through the Latin Literary Past: Gellius and the Imperial Prose Tradition" offers deep analysis of the relationship between Gellius and several earlier writers: Pliny the Elder (unsurprisingly), Seneca (notoriously disliked by Gellius), Quintilian, as well as Pliny the Younger. Especially the inclusion of the latter author deserves a lot of attention: since Pliny's *Epistulae* are never explicitly quoted in the *NA*, no one, as far as I know, had ventured such an interpretation before. DiGIULIO's hypothesis is that "[i]n his letters Pliny represents himself as an avatar of the intellectual culture of his day, and he provides an artistic and a social model for Gellius to emulate" (p. 36). This hypothesis challenges previous scholarship by suggesting that Gellius' interactions with earlier Latin literature are much more nuanced than mere citation or critique.

Chapters II and III ("Approaching a Miscellanistic Work from the Outside In: Paratextual Strategies" and "Prescribing a Way of Reading: Gellius' Preface as Critical Model") non only convincingly apply Gérard GENETTE's interpretative framework to Gellius' title, preface, and table of contents, but also offer a deep and coherent philological analysis of these paratexts. Furthermore, Gellius' ideas in the *praefatio* are thoughtfully compared with those of Pliny the Elder's *Historia naturalis* and Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis* and *De recta ratione audiendi*.

Chapter IV bears the brilliant title, "Confronting Variety in the *NA*: A Guide for the Perplexed". While much has been said about *varietas* in Greco-Roman literature generally and in Gellius specifically, DiGIULIO elevates the discussion to a new level: not only does he explore its pedagogical impact in the *NA*, but also provides a detailed analysis of the numerous ways in which *varietas delectat* (*docetque*) its readers – an effect, he argues, consciously envisioned and meticulously crafted by the author.

Chapter V, titled "The Poetics of Prose: Gellius, Alexandrianism, and the Composed Book," introduces a highly original idea: that Gellius consciously situates his prose compilation within the realm of poetry collections, while sharply contrasting the two realities on the level of language. DiGIULIO's argument begins with the intertextual link between *NA praef.* 20 and Horace's *odi profanum vulgus et arceo* (*Carm.* III 1, 1). While previous scholars have noted this parallel

phrasing⁹, DiGIULIO sees it as signalling Gellius' deliberate positioning of his work as a prose counterpart to the aesthetic and cultural ideals of poetry. Drawing on Alexandrian models of refinement and intellectual elitism, Gellius adapts these principles to his prose miscellany, crafting a text that rejects the formal unity of poetry while retaining its emphasis on erudition and selectivity. This interplay invites readers to approach the *NA* with the same critical mindset they would bring to poetry, elevating it from a collection of trivia to a carefully composed poikilographic work designed to challenge, educate, and entertain.

Chapter VI guides the reader through Book III of the *NA* and offers compelling insights on "How to Read a Book". DiGIULIO proposes three distinct "ways of reading": (1) The character-oriented method, which focuses on the interactions and roles of figures such as Favorinus; (2) The citation-oriented approach, which examines Gellius' use of authoritative sources; And (3) the intratextual reading, which explores thematic and structural connections within and across chapters, encouraging a deeper engagement with the *NA* as a unified work. In 1999 Stephen BEALL accurately prophesied that "the next 'wave' of Gellian scholarship will include a cautiously speculative inquiry into the genesis of individual chapters of the *Attic Nights*"¹⁰. DiGIULIO does exactly that, and more: his book collects the results of such analyses of many chapters and combines it into a coherent and innovative interpretative framework.

Instead of including a typical "literature review" or "reception" section, commonly found in introductions to scholarly dissertations (think for instance of the introduction to the monumental edition of Gellius by Hertz), DiGIULIO chose to place this content in the final Chapter VII, "Approaches to Reading Miscellanistic Aesthetics from Late Antiquity to Today", using it as a conclusion to his work. In this chapter, he traces the influence of Gellian miscellanism on figures such as Poliziano, Montaigne, Robert Burton, Isaac D'Israeli, and Jorge Luis Borges. This is fitting, as the history of various approaches to the *NA* underscores Gellius' enduring legacy and provides a kind of open ending. It leaves the reader with the assurance that new interpretations and influences will continue to emerge, both in academic literature and creative writing. "The *NA* thus casts a long shadow over the evolution of prose collections and of writing about reading, and in helping others think about their own place within the literary firmament" (p. 22).

Throughout the book, DiGIULIO's ideas are very well documented by his detailed scrutiny of the source texts. In each chapter, he first gives a general interpretation of Gellius' literary practices, and then proceeds to the analysis of the sources. Each chapter is then summarised. This might be just my personal preference, but I found this order to be counter-intuitive. I needed to read the analysis and then to go back to the initial general interpretation in order to fully appreciate it. In my opinion, introduction to each chapter might serve better as its conclusion (and the other way round), but again, this is probably just a difference in the personal style of processing information.

The only aspect of DiGIULIO's book that might be considered a flaw is its repetitiveness. The content of the entire work is first summarised in great detail in the "Introduction". Then, each chapter begins with its own introduction and concludes with an extensive summary. These introductory and concluding sections often reiterate ideas previously discussed in the main "Introduction" or re-introduce concepts already covered in other chapters. A notable example is the beginning of Chapter VII, which focuses on the reception of Gellius but opens with the following passage (p. 267): „In many ways, the *NA* is a paradoxical text. From the outset, Gellius declares its disordered, random state yet he introduces a table of contents that codifies its order. He openly disdains the literary pretensions of his Greek counterparts in the same breath that he challenges his reader to recognize the

⁹ HOLFORD-STREVS, *Aulus Gellius...*, p. 209 n. 64; expanded by J. SHEPPARD, *Self-education and Late-Learners in The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, MA dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, 2008, p. 80 (the latter not cited by DiGIULIO).

¹⁰ S.M. BEALL, *Aulus Gellius 17.8: Composition and the Gentleman Scholar*, CPh XCIV 1999, pp. 55–64, here at p. 55.

artistry inherent in his miscellanistic collection. Perhaps most importantly, he aligns his work with traditions of encyclopedic and other technical writing that presume a reference-oriented method of reading while simultaneously advertising a critical approach that invites his audience to understand the disparate parts of the work as different sides of a dialogue operating in concert”.

While these observations are compelling, all this has already been said before. The discussion continues for an entire page before transitioning into a straightforward review of other ideas covered in earlier chapters: „Throughout this book, I have elaborated a broad set of ways of reading, invited by Gellius himself in the Preface and in his other comments on reading throughout the work” (p. 268). This pattern extends across the next *three* pages, as DIGIULIO reiterates: “As I have argued throughout this book, Gellius demonstrates awareness of the different ways of reading that are inherent in miscellanistic composition [...] (p. 269). It is only in the last paragraph of this introductory section, on p. 270, that we finally encounter anything related to the chapter’s announced subject: the reception of the *Attic Nights*. To be clear, I am not complaining – *repetitio est mater studiorum*. However, as a reviewer, I feel it is my duty to prepare future readers for this occasionally overflowing stream of consciousness, which might have been tempered by a more exacting editing process. That said, this does not detract significantly from the value of DIGIULIO’s excellent work; it merely requires readers to exercise patience and navigate some recurring content.

Apart from the frequent repetitions, I greatly appreciate the composition of DIGIULIO’s book. It is interesting that a scholarly work dealing with the art of literary composition, itself manifests a rather unique structure. The book’s organization mirrors its subject matter, as chapters build upon each other in a way that reflects the interplay of *varietas* and cohesion central to the *NA*. This alignment of form and content reinforces DIGIULIO’s arguments, subtly guiding the reader through a meta-experience of the very principles he attributes to Gellius.

On the whole, the book is excellently edited, with hardly any typographical mistakes catching my attention¹¹. One major observation – directed, however, to the publisher rather than the author – is that it would have been far preferable if the review copy had been provided in a physical paper version (or at the very least in a .pdf format) instead of the online e-book format¹². An e-book is a soul without a body.

This soul, however, is a very beautiful one. I do not hesitate to call this work groundbreaking. For any future student of Aulus Gellius, I would suggest the following reading order: first, the *Attic Nights*; second, Leofranc HOLFORD-STREVEN’S *Aulus Gellius: An Antonine Scholar and His Achievement*; and then, before anything else, Scott J. DIGIULIO’S *Reading Miscellany in the Roman Empire: Aulus Gellius and the Imperial Prose Collection*.

Katarzyna Ochman

University of Wrocław, Faculty of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

¹¹ On p. 5 “If we characterize Gellius’ work is a miscellany” should be “If we characterize Gellius’ work as a miscellany”. On p. 7 the sentence: “In the same year Erik Gunderson interpreted the *NA* as a production of ‘antiquarian literature’ and reading the text as a sequence of interactions with the world of knowledge” should be reformulated to “In the same year, Erik Gunderson interpreted the *NA* as a production of ‘antiquarian literature,’ reading the text as a sequence of interactions with the world of knowledge”. On p. 35 “complaints” should be “questus” instead of “quaestus”. In note 90 on p. 56 the phrase “changes it” at the end of the sentence is redundant. The name of Katarina Petrovičová is misspelled both in the footnotes and in the bibliography.

¹² The book was made available to me via VitalSource Bookshelf which meant that I could not even download it to my Kindle device. Do not misunderstand me: I use e-books daily for both research and leisure reading. However, as a reviewer I can better appreciate the essence and character of a book by experiencing it in print. It is valuable to see at a glance a well-edited scholarly text alongside its footnotes, to physically evaluate the proportions of chapters, to quickly compare different passages, to distinguish the book’s main content from its references and indices. These qualities are entirely lost in a web-based reader.