Chapter 18

Valuing the Mediators of Antiquity in the Noctes Atticae

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1 Introduction

Aulus Gellius, author of the Noctes Atticae, had a fondness for the antique.1 His collection of nearly 400 essays on antiquities has long been valued by modern readers for its own overt valuing of Roman antiquity. But for all the attention lavished on Gellius’ collected antiquities, there has remained much less—until quite recently—spent on another substantial component of the Noctes: Gellius’ accounts of encountering and collecting those antiquities.2 For all the superficial charm and comfort of the Gellian fantasy of leisured reading and discourse, the actual act of engaging with antiquity is not only subject to a surprising level of detailed narration, but in that narration is represented as fraught and complicated. This is not the only aspect of his intellectual lifestyle to which he adds a deliberate element of difficulty, but it does reveal how much more complex the idea of ‘antiquity’ is in the Noctes than might first be apparent.3

Gellius directs his and his readers’ attention to the manifold processes of transmission that link antiquity to the present. And he imagines those links as mediating phenomena, indicating the way ideas and words are changed as they are repeated and interpreted. More importantly, he alienates antiquity, representing it as at once ubiquitous and difficult to access in the present. Also ubiquitous are post-antique interpretive aids that promise to elide that challenging distance, but which can easily mislead. And behind the present form of an antiquity may lurk chains of interpretation or transmission that have added to its difficulty. Elsewhere in this volume (ch. 14), Lawrence Kim has provided a comprehensive discussion of the periodization on which systems of ‘archaism’

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1 For Gellius’ relationship with the past, cf. Vessey 1994.
2 The significance of Gellius as narrator of his own research is hinted at in Anderson 2004, 113–117. Gunderson 2009 is the first book-length study to focus on Gellius’ depictions of the work that ostensibly produced the Noctes.
depend, including the important role of intervening, ‘post-classical’ eras. For Gellius, that intervening time is literally one of intervention—it is defined not by chronology or stylistics but by its inherent secondariness, its function as a time of transmission but also distortion of the antique past. Gellius does not narrate his readings as a charming veneer on a cabinet of curiosities: he actively represents the challenges of accessing antiquity as part of a systematic concern with representing and complicating intellectual activity. He announces as early as his preface that this is a work meant not to provide amusing baubles, but to stimulate curiosity and active learning. The Noctes is about valuing the antique, but even more so is it about valuing those who mediate and communicate antiquity.

In this chapter, I offer a few glimpses of the narrative and rhetorical techniques by which Gellius represents antiquity as inherently mediated, and explores the choices every valuer of antiquity makes, knowingly or not, about which mediators he or she will trust to provide reliable access to the antique. Gellius shares with Pausanias an interest in adding, to a tour of antiquities in the present, an aura of uncertainty about their meaning. But he unpacks and analyzes the processes that cause that uncertainty, demonstrating how to navigate and master it. And he relates bravura performances, on his own part, of multimedia engagements with antiquity. The Noctes does not seek to replace other mediating texts: functionally and logistically, it cannot substitute for all mediators. What it instead offers is a program for how to be more skilled at critically examining mediators and how to know when they must be replaced or circumvented with one’s own interpretation—in short, we might say, it advocates a media-literate value system for how one relates to antiquity.

2 The Difficulty of Visiting Another Country

Gellius’ ‘Attic’ nights are stocked with antiquities, apparently united by little other than their nature as antiquities. The effect is not unlike a museum such as

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4 E.g., Gell. NA praef. 12, 16.
5 Modern scholarship has recently begun to move away from merely ‘mining’ Gellius for his facts and instead considering himself, his project and his agenda; see most prominently Astarita 1993, Holford-Strevens 2003, Gunderson 2009, Keulen 2009. Gunderson’s observations in particular on the Noctes as readings-of-readings have been influential to my discussion here. See also the complex analysis of memoria in the Noctes in Heusch 2011, particularly 52–58 for an explication of the various linguistic media in which Gellius sees memory as being constituted.