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**A LITERARY INTERCHANGE – GELLIUS, *NOCTES
ATTICAE* III, 15**

Quaeritur cur et quomodo capitulum XV libri III Noctium Atticarum Auli Gelli conscriptum sit. Quo cum locis similibus Titi Livii (XXII, VII, 13), Valerii Maximi (IX, XII, 2–3), Plinii maioris (VII, 180) collato apparet hanc fuisse Gellio mentem ut tacite Plinium carperet quod genere scribendi nimis arido locum quemdam tractavisset.

The paper proposes an analysis of Aulus Gellius' NA 3.15, with a special regard to its composition and literary aims. The relationship of NA 3.15.4 with Liv. 22.7.13, Val. Max. 9.12.2–3, and NH 7.180 is investigated, revealing the chapter to exemplify the tension often observed between Gellius and Pliny the Elder.

Key words: Aulus Gellius; *Attic Nights*; Pliny the Elder.

Aulus Gellius has been described as a compiler, and chapter 3.15 of the *Attic Nights* could be seen as one of the passages that justify this opinion. There is nothing wrong with compiling, provided that the compiler is not thoughtless – and Gellius has often been accused of lack of creativity. The now fashionable scholarly trend of re-assessing the creativity and originality of the *Attic Nights* can make very good use of this chapter, as the apparently simple compilation of four stories turns out to reflect a much more complex structure of references and associations,¹ which does not seem to be random, but rather carefully controlled by the author. What I propose be-

¹ An early version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Classical and Byzantine Literature “Literary Crossroads”, 19–22 September 2010 in Brno. The metaphorical topic of the conference suggested to me that if literary works contain some intertextual “literary crossroads”, then Gellius’ *Attic Nights* must be described as a huge, multi-level highway interchange.

low is an analysis of the composition and purpose of this chapter, according to the suggestions once put forward by Stephen M. Beall:²

In my view, the next “wave” of Gellian scholarship will include a cautiously speculative inquiry into the genesis of individual chapters of the *Attic Nights*. This investigation should not be restricted to source criticism, but should also try to relate the form of the chapter to Gellius’ general aims and methods.

Chapter 3.15 is typical of the entire Gellian collection: strongly dependent on other sources, extremely well arranged, elegantly written and fun to read. Its content is indeed a compilation of certain facts which share a common notion: death from joy. However, the form of the *capitulum* indicates clearly that it is not just an assemblage of information which our author found in other books. On the contrary: the composition is fine and deliberate.³

For the convenience of the reader I take the liberty of quoting this brief chapter.⁴ Certain parts of the text, which will be discussed below, are highlighted. I have also introduced divisions into cola in order to point out some artistic features of the composition.⁵

[lem.] Exstare in litteris perque hominum memorias traditum, quod repente multis mortem attulit gaudium ingens insperatum interclusa anima et vim magni novique motus non sustinente.

[1] *Cognito repente insperato gaudio exspirasse animam
refert Aristoteles philosophus Polycritam,
nobilem feminam Naxo insula.*

² BEALL, STEPHEN M. 1999. “Aulus Gellius 17.8: Composition and the Gentleman Scholar.” *Classical Philology*, 94, 55.

³ Research results concerning *NA* 3.15 have been described with much greater detail in my PhD thesis “A Commentary on Book III of the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius” (pp. 225–241), submitted to the University of Wrocław in April 2011. Financial support for my Gellian studies has been provided by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Poland (grant no. N N103 059938) and by the De Brzezie Lanckoroński Foundation.

⁴ The text is that of Marshall (*A. Gellii Noctes Atticae*, recognovit brevis adnotatione critica instruit P.K. MARSHALL. 1990. Vols. 1–2. Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁵ I strongly recommend that the reader reads the passage aloud, which in the case of the *Attic Nights* can sometimes give us surprising new impressions. This holds true even in the light of L. Holford-Strevens’ well-evidenced statement that “the commentarii of Gellius’ *Attic Nights* are as little rhythmical as those of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*” (HOLFORD-STREVEN, LEOFRANC. 2005. *Aulus Gellius: An Antonine Scholar and His Achievement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 61). On the following pages Holford-Strevens adduces a few examples showing that “although Gellius does not couch his scholarship in rhythmical prose, he would have us know he can write it” (ibid. 63).

[2] *Philippides quoque,*
comoediarum poeta haut ignobilis,
aetate iam edita,
cum in certamine poetarum praeter spem vicisset
et laetissime gauderet,
inter illud gaudium repente mortuus est.

[3] *De Rodio etiam* *Diagora celebrata historia est.*
Is Diagoras tris filios adolescentis habuit,
unum pugilem,
alterum pancratiasten,
tertium luctatorem.

Eos omnis vidit vincere coronarique Olympiae eodem die et,
cum ibi eum tres adolescentes amplexi coronis suis in caput patris positos savia-
rentur;
cum populus gratulabundus flores undique in eum iaceret,
ibidem in stadio
inspectante populo
in osculis atque in manibus filiorum
animam efflavit.

[4] *Praeterea in nostris annalibus scriptum legimus,*
qua tempestate apud Cannas exercitus populi Romani caesus est,
anum matrem nuntio de morte filii adlato
luctu atque maerore affectam esse;
sed is nuntius non verus fuit,
atque is adolescens non diu post ex ea pugna in urbem redit.

Anus
repente filio viso
copia
atque turba
et quasi ruina
incidentis inopinati gaudii
oppressa exanimataque est.

Let us first consider the paragraph division which is often quite random, but here at least each paragraph number corresponds to a separate content unit.⁶ First of all, the rule of the *wachsende Glieder* (LHS vol. 2, p. 722–726 §16) is conspicuous. The first “story” is just one simple sentence; the second, also one sentence, but a complex one. The Diagoras narrative is

⁶ The numbering of *articuli minores* first appeared in the 1741 Longolius edition and has been kept by subsequent editors.

already long enough to deserve a separate introduction: *De Rodio etiam Diagora celebrata historia est*.

The three first cases concern the Greek world, while the last one is taken from *our annals*. Gellius clearly distinguishes it from the rest when he says *praeterea* – the previous cases were connected with *quoque* and *etiam*, whereas the last story is separated.⁷ There is also a hint of a personal attitude to it, when Gellius uses the first person plural: *legimus*. The source of the story is indicated as *in nostris annalibus*. It seems that Gellius plays on the convention of opposing things Greek to what is Roman, i.e. serious, dignified, *our*. As opposed to the other examples, there is a touch of Roman *gravitas* in the last paragraph: the happiness of the Roman mother came to replace great sorrow. The notion seems not to be simply that it was impossible for her to bear the joy itself, but rather that her heart could not support such a spate of emotions. She was overwhelmed by the sudden turn in the situation.

The composition of the chapter is chiasmic when we take into account the gender of the characters: the first and the last story are about women, the second and the third about men. It is interesting to consider the causes of their happiness and the context of their death: the two men, Diagoras and Philippides, both had quite private reasons to be happy. Even though their death occurs in public circumstances, such as a poetic festival or Olympic Games, the happiness that strikes them is of personal nature.

On the contrary, the death of Polycrita and the Roman mother is intertwined with matters of state. This is obvious in the case of the Roman woman, as the reason for her joy and sorrow is what happens to her son, a soldier. In order to see the similarities with Polycrita, we must investigate her story, because Gellius does not give any details.

From Plutarch (*De mulierum virtutibus* 17, 254B–F; *Moralia* 2.251–253) we learn that during the war between Miletus and Naxos⁸ Polycrita was taken captive by the Erythrean general, Diognetus, who supported the Milesians, and she became his lover. As the Erythreans were preparing to celebrate a holiday, Polycrita asked Diognetus to allow her to send some sweets to her brothers. She inserted a lead tablet into a pie, and this way she informed her brothers about the celebrations that were soon to take

⁷ There is a link, however, in the content of §3 and 4: both mention the sons.

⁸ Some time in the seventh or sixth century BC Archilochus died in a naval battle during this conflict. For a detailed historical commentary see pp. 212–214 in HOSE, MARTIN [TRANSL., COMM.]. 2002. *Aristoteles. Die Historischen Fragmente*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. HOSE collects the passages of Gellius, Plutarch, and Athenaeus (8.348A–B, another story) as three extant fragments of Aristotle's historical work "The Constitution of the Naxians" (the title is preserved by Athenaeus).

place, encouraging the Naxians to attack the Erythrean camp during the holiday relaxation. Polycrita's brothers managed to convince their leaders. The Naxians attacked and gained a great victory. Polycrita asked her citizens to have mercy on Diognetus. Then, as the cheering crowd greeted her at the gates of the city, among flowers and happiness, she "did not bear the immensity of joy": οὐκ ἤνεγκε τὸ μέγεθος τῆς χαρᾶς, ἀλλ' ἀπέθανεν αὐτοῦ πεσοῦσα παρὰ τὴν πύλην, "but she died from it, having fallen next to the gate".

For this story Plutarch quotes the authority of "Naxian historians". Later he gives an alternative version from Aristotle, but without the description of Polycrita's death. The tale can also be found in Parthenius' *Narrationes amatoriae* 9, with Theophrastus and a certain Andriscus quoted as sources, and later in Polyaeus' *Strategemata* 8.36, written in Gellius' own time, in 162 A.D. A question arises: how well known was this story for a typical reader of Gellius? Since he mentions only the fact of Polycrita's curious death, did her very name instantly evoke associations with all the details of the story? Mentioning the Naxian woman at the beginning of this chapter can be seen as an invitation for further inquiry (searching for the appropriate passage of Aristotle?) for those who did not recall the story. It seems more probable, however, that Polycrita was an easily recognizable character, and Gellius took it for granted that the reader remembers the military events preceding her death. This assumption would be both starting point and preparation for juxtaposing Polycrita and the Roman mother described in the final part of the chapter. What is more, some crumbs from Polycrita's story can be recognized in other reports as well: the unexpected victory (not military, however) in §2 and the cheering crowd throwing flowers in §3 could be considered as elements of the omitted description of Polycrita's death.

Although three stories of growing length would make a perfect composition,⁹ Gellius adds the fourth tale. It is worth considering that the last paragraph might have been added as a postscript during the second redaction of the work, as can often be observed in the *Attic Nights*.¹⁰ In the case of this particular chapter, however, the fourth additional story matches the three already arranged particularly well, especially when we consider the ties between the first and the last story as described above.¹¹

⁹ Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 2.20.1–9: *Assem para et accipe auream fabulam, fabulas immo. [...] Sufficiunt duae fabulae, an scholastica lege tertiam poscis?*

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. in book III: 3.7.21 or 3.16.24.

¹¹ Note also that in both cases Gellius mentions his source, whereas the second and the third remain uncredited. It may be worth mentioning that I. Kretzschmer's curious idea of always seeking a single source for each chapter (KRETZSCHMER, I. 1860.

The same story about the sudden death of the Roman mother can be found in three other Latin authors, of which the earliest available is Livy, who places it in the context of the battle of Lake Trasimene:

Feminarum praecipue et gaudia insignia erant et luctus. Unam in ipsa porta sospiti filio repente oblatam in complexu eius exspirasse ferunt; alteram, cui mors filii falso nuntiata erat, maestam sedentem domi, ad primum conspectum redeuntis filii gaudio nimio exanimatam. (Liv. 22.7.13)

Livy was followed very closely by Valerius Maximus, who relates the story in his book IX (“De mortibus non vulgaribus”):

Vix veri simile est in eripiendo spiritu idem gaudium potuisse quod fulmen, et tamen idem valuit. Nuntiata enim clade, quae ad lacum Trasimennum inciderat, altera <mater>, sospiti filio ad ipsam portam facta obvia, in complexu eius expiravit, altera, cum falso mortis filii nuntio maesta domi sederet, ad primum conspectum redeuntis exanimata est. Genus casus inusitatum! Quas dolor <non> extinxerat, laetitia consumpsit. Sed minus miror, quod mulieres. (Val. Max. 9.12.2–3)

Gellius of course knew *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, but considering the major factual difference between the two reports we should not assume Valerius’ mediation for this passage.¹² As for Livy, Gellius never even mentions him in the *Attic Nights*.¹³

Chronologically closest to Gellius is the elder Pliny:

In primis autem miraculo sunt <summ>aque frequentia mortes repentinae – hoc est summa vitae felicitas – quas esse naturales docebimus. Plurimas prodidit Verrius,¹⁴ nos

De A. Gellii fontibus. Part. I. De auctoribus A. Gellii grammaticis. Posnaniae; cf. L. HOLFORD-STREUVENS 2005: 72–74) obviously fails for 3.15, unless we assume that Gellius simply re-wrote the entire composition, together with the Cannae-anecdote, from some other Latin miscellany, which is unlikely. We can envisage a single source for the three Greek stories, but the juxtaposition of the Roman story (which is the most important moment in the chapter) comes from Gellius.

¹² As opposed to the other reference to Valerius Maximus in the *Attic Nights*, which relates a popular story of an Athenian court postponing a case for one hundred years. Gellius concludes by citing his source: *Scripta haec historiast in libro Valerii Maximi factorum et dictorum memorabilium nono* (12.7.8). Even though the story is found in Valerius Maximus’ book VIII, not IX, and the comparison of the two versions reveals many more differences than similarities, HOLFORD-STREUVENS (2005: 79–80) argues convincingly that its source or inspiration is indeed *Facta et dicta memorabilia*.

¹³ He prefers republican writers: Claudius Quadrigarius and Cato.

¹⁴ Verrius Flaccus, whom Gellius mentions several times as the author of *De verborum significatu*, *De obscuris M. Catonis* and *Res memoria dignae*. This last work was suggested as Gellius’ source for this chapter by RUSKE (1883. *De Auli Gellii noctium*

cum dilectu modum servaimus. [...] Mater illa Cannensi filio incolume viso contra nuntium falsum [scil. gaudio obiit]. (NH 7.180)

Pliny's wording is very concise, but essentially, his report corresponds to that of Gellius, placing the details in the context of the battle of Cannae. It is worth noticing that the passage is found in Pliny's book VII, the same book from which Gellius will quote some unbelievable curiosities at the end of the following chapter (3.16.23–24). It has been observed that Gellius is often critical towards Pliny,¹⁵ he opposes him in various chapters and even in the preface. The passage about the “mother of Cannae”, placed at the end of this well composed chapter, can be seen as an improvement on Pliny, who simply quotes the fact in a long (and eventually rather boring) list of other *mortes repentinae*.¹⁶ It is tempting to imagine Gellius appalled by Pliny's lack of formal elegance and reaching to *our annals*¹⁷ for stylistic inspiration in order to make the story into a little archaizing masterpiece.¹⁸

Atticarum fontibus quaestiones selectae. Breslau, 39) and NETTLESHIP (1883. “The Noctes Atticae of Aulus Gellius.” *American Journal of Philology*, 4, 413). HOSIUS (in his 1903 edition, p. xxx n. 2) accepts Hertz's idea that the source of §1–3 is Favorinus and ascribes only the last paragraph to Verrius: [...] *illud praeterea in §4 significare videtur alterum iam exordiri auctorem, ut haec tantum paragraphus ad Verrium ex annalibus haurientem pertineat*. The origin of §1–3 and §4 is probably quite different, but as we will see below, there is no need to assume that Gellius accessed the old annals through Verrius.

- ¹⁵ See HOLFORD-STREVEVS (2005: 165f.) with further bibliography. AUDE DOODY (2010. *Pliny's Encyclopedia: The Reception of the Natural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 35) in her discussion of Pliny's *mirabilia* as a conscious element of composition observes that “Pliny's inclusion of *mirabilia* was already a problem for Aulus Gellius, one of Pliny's first recorded readers”, quoting *NA* 9.4.12–13 and 10.12.4. Interesting is also the already mentioned passage at 3.16.23–24, where Gellius distances himself from Pliny's information: since the story from the *Natural History* looks incredible, Gellius quotes it verbatim, to ensure that the readers do not blame him for a possible misunderstanding. ERIK GUNDERSON (2009. *Nox Philologiae. Aulus Gellius and the Fantasy of the Roman Library*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 183) gives this passage as an example of Gellius' general attitude towards the *Natural History*: “Gellius [...] usually flags a potential problem in Pliny rather than using him as an authoritative source of knowledge”.
- ¹⁶ By *cum dilectu modum servare* Pliny means to give no less than thirty examples (mostly Roman) of sudden death.
- ¹⁷ As for the very phrase *our annals* denoting the source of this story, compare *NA* 3.7, where the lemma announces both *historia ex annalibus sumpta* and *verba ex Originibus Catonis*. We could cautiously assume that here the story in §4 is also taken from Cato's *Origines*, since Gellius also used it for the preceding chapter 3.14.
- ¹⁸ Note, e.g., the archaic touch of redundant pronouns in *is nuntius ... is adulescens ... ea pugna*, and cf. 3.7.18, an imitation of Cato: *illi tribuno [...] in eo proelio usus venit [...]*”.

