

Frogs in the *Attic Nights*: Aulus Gellius and the Art of the Quote

The *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius is a great treasure trove of memorable quotations. His readers find that quotes and paraphrases of others seem to hold their own against the thoughts of Gellius himself, so that some scholars have equated Gellius's reticence with unoriginality. But in recent years, work by Stephen Beall (1988), Madeleine Henry (1994), Erik Gunderson (2009), Wytse Keulen (2009), and others has revealed some of the artistry of the *Attic Nights*. This paper aims to examine Gellius's artistry in placing a pivotal quote at the climax of his Preface: six lines from Aristophanes's *Frogs* (354-6, 369-71). The lines push away those in the audience who are uninitiated in the Muses' work, and they exhort enlightened audience-members to participate in the poet's παννυχίδες ("all-night activities"). In the Preface of the *Attic Nights*, Aristophanes's words have special relevance to Gellius's program. In these verses, Gellius has Aristophanes mirror the progression of the *Attic Nights*' own initiation ceremony, as it were: first, the author's authority is established by attacking those imagined to be hostile to the text, then the text is represented as part of a mystic endeavor, and finally the reader/audience is invited into the "nights" of the text.

The quote, then, serves as the climactic statement of Gellius's program in the Preface, where he expresses most directly the nature of his relationship with readers. Their understanding of this relationship will drive their interpretations and use of the rest of the work, so that they can continue the work of Gellius himself, i.e., the gathering up of memorable sayings and readings and the development of them by readers into essays destined for miscellanies of their own.

The impetus of the quote extends throughout the *Attic Nights*: two chapters in Book 1 (2 and 9) pick up on some themes introduced in the *Frogs* quote. In these, the themes of silence and initiation established in the Preface play an important role in the interpretation of Book 1. Two

different kinds of silence in these chapters represent two different kinds of participation by readers (an in-group/out-group division that permeates the *Attic Nights*), and Pythagorean initiation in 1.9 is juxtaposed with young Gellius's participation in a class led by the philosopher Taurus.

Such connections – the quote's role both as summary statement of the Preface's program and as proleptic indicator of some of the entire text's themes – are signs of Gellius's care in choosing the right quote and putting it in the right place. While Gellius does cede his words to another author his integration of them into his own text indicates a different sort of originality.

Bibliography

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