

## The Limits of Philology: Aulus Gellius, NA 2.9

### Os limites da Filologia: Aulo Gélío, NA 2.9

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to study the use of the Greek verb *λεξιθηρέω* in Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*. Its coinage in the work of the Roman author is indicative of a cultural programme, and reflects contemporary concerns on the appropriate use of language.

**Keywords:** *λεξιθηρέω*; Aulus Gellius; otium; literary cultura.

The second century AD was a period that witnessed the efflorescence of polymaths and works of miscellaneous content. Gellius' *Attic Nights* is a fine example of this genre that offers, among many anecdotes and accounts of all kinds, a detailed evaluation of the social and cultural milieu of the period. Charlatans, belletrists and grammarians competed in order to impose their cultural agendas. In this context, Gellius' criticism of the excessive philological zeal (as exemplified by the use of the verb *λεξιθηρέω* NA 2.9), of grammarians' pedantic debates, and the presence of opsimaths in the cultural milieu, shed light on issues concerning culture and education in the second century AD.

Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights* have challenged modern scholars as his work remains a bottomless reservoir of anecdotes, data and information on a wide variety of topics, as he acknowledged in the preface of the work (NA Praef. 3: *rerum disparilitas*). Because of the protean nature of his work Gellius has eluded ascription to a single literary genre, having thus been described as a versatile philhellenic, an etymologist, a satirist, or a dilettante<sup>3</sup>. In addition to Beall's prediction of a wave of Gellian

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<sup>3</sup> G. Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: some problems of perspective*: D.A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford 1990) 91-110, part. 109; G. Anderson, "Aulus Gellius: a miscellanist and his world": *ANRW* 34.3, 1994, 1834-1862, part. 1839-1841; W.H. Keulen, *Gellius the Satirist: Roman cultural authority in Attic Nights* (Leiden 2009);

scholarship<sup>4</sup>, the shift in the estimation of the Roman author should also be noted: from being a writer whose work was composed in “un’età che non fu grande per potenza d’ingegno e fu mediocre per originalità di manifestazioni artistiche e letterarie<sup>5</sup>”, to becoming a central figure in the cultural scheme of the Second Sophistic<sup>6</sup>. Unsurprisingly the breadth of Aulus Gellius’ *Noctes Atticae* has prompted discussions of numerous issues within modern scholarship. The technical, paradoxographical and chameleonic nature of his encyclopedic work is a “labyrinth-like” game that can be interpreted from a variety of perspectives. From a reservoir of past knowledge to a simple pastime, from meta-literature to bilingualism, Gellius’ *Noctes Atticae* incorporates miscellaneous themes that are not always linked in an obvious way<sup>7</sup>. The blending of triviality, feigned carelessness and scholarly erudition in Gellius’ work has contributed to the fluctuating degree of esteem in which it has been held over the centuries<sup>8</sup>. As Gunderson has enthusiastically pointed out, Gellius can be read “as Borges”<sup>9</sup>.

Gellius’ passionate involvement with *copia verborum* and his accomplished bookishness were appropriate to a period (second century AD) in which words were unconditionally worshipped and cared for. In a work

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F. Cavazza, “Gellius the Etymologist: Gellius’ Etymologies and Modern Etymology”: L. Holford-Strevens and A. Vardi (eds.), *The Worlds of Aulus Gellius* (Oxford 2004) 65-104.

<sup>4</sup> S. Beall, “Aulus Gellius 17.8: Composition and the Gentleman Scholar”: *CPh* 94.1 (1999) 55-64, part. 55. For a brief summary of opinions on Gellius’ work, C. Knapp, “Archaism in Aulus Gellius”: H. Drisler (ed.), *Classical Studies in Honour of Henry Drisler* (New York 1894) 126-171, part. 126-128.

<sup>5</sup> L. Dalmasso, “Aulo Gellio lessicografo”: *RF* 1.2 (1923a), 195-216, part. 195.

<sup>6</sup> K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia in the Greek and Roman world of the high Empire: literary forms and intellectual realities* (Oxford, unpubl. PhD, 2007), 1-5, 234. Thanks are due to Dr. Oikonomopoulou for granting me permission to quote passages of her PhD.

<sup>7</sup> G. Maselli, *Lingua e scuola in Gellio Grammatico* (Lecce 1979) 81 stresses “il carattere miscelaneo e sostanzialmente disordinato della compilazione”. See also A.M. Riggsby, *Guides to the wor(l)d*: J. König and T. Whitmarsh (eds.), *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge 2007) 88-107, part. 100-102.

<sup>8</sup> G. Anderson, *ANRW* 34.3, 1836-1838; D.W.T. Vessey, *Aulus Gellius and the cult of the Past*: *ANRW* 34.2 (1994) 1863-1917, part. 1867-1868; 1890-1894.

<sup>9</sup> E. Gunderson, *Nox Philologiae: Aulus Gellius and the fantasy of the Roman Library* (Madison 2009) 6.

of polymathy such as *Noctes Atticae*, however, Gellius also devoted much effort to determining the extent to which punctilious philological debates were useful outside of Roman scholarship groups. Thus, in what follows I will first focus on the usage of the verb *λεξιθηρέω* in Gellius' *NA* as its appearance worked not only as a descriptive term but also as a cultural filter. Then I will contextualize its use in the work of the Roman author and in the cultural and social milieu of the second century AD as part of Gellius' attempt to establish the limits of philology and cultural orthodoxy among elite Romans.

## I

In the first passage I want to discuss Gellius mildly rebukes Plutarch for his criticism of the inappropriateness of a word used by Epicurus (*NA*, 2.9): "in the same book, Plutarch also finds fault a second time with Epicurus for using an inappropriate word and giving it an incorrect meaning. Now Epicurus wrote as follows: "The utmost height of pleasure is the removal of everything that pains". Plutarch declares that he ought not to have said "of everything that pains," but "of everything that is painful"; for it is the removal of pain, he explains, that should be indicated, not of that which causes pain. In bringing this charge against Epicurus, Plutarch is "word-chasing" (*λεξιθηρεῖ*) with excessive minuteness and almost with frigidity; for, far from hunting up such verbal meticulousness and such refinements of diction, Epicurus hunts them down (*has enim curas uocum uerborumque elegantias non modo non sectatur Epicurus, sed etiam insectatur*)". In his translation, Rolfe only notes the word-play between *sectatur/insectatur*<sup>10</sup>. It is Marache who highlights the use of *λεξιθηρεῖ* as a Gellian hapax: "*λεξιθηρεῖ* est hapax: il signifie *faire la chasse aux mots*. Il ne s'agit pas ici de la chasse aux mots telle que la pratiquait Fronton, mais de la recherche trop subtile de nuances de sens"<sup>11</sup>. The doctoral dissertation of Holford-Strevens also pays attention to the captious pedantry (*λεξιθηρεῖ*) that Gellius accuses

<sup>10</sup> Gellius' texts taken from P.K. Marshall, *Auli Gelli Noctes Atticae* (Oxford 1999). Gellius' translations taken from J.C. Rolfe, *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius* (Cambridge, Mass. 1961).

<sup>11</sup> R. Marache, *Les nuits attiques* (Paris 1967-1998) I 97, n. 1.

Plutarch of, however his interest lies in the content of Plutarch's criticism rather than in the use of *λεξιθηρεῖ*<sup>12</sup>.

It is important to note that the verb *λεξιθηρέω* was consistently used in the Roman Imperial period to denote the playful but trivial tendency to hunt for words with the intention of picking obscure meanings, divulging obsolete words, or for the sake of pedantic quibbling. Curiously enough, the use of *λεξιθηρέω* was almost monopolized by Christian authors who deployed it in order to portray those heretics who questioned the orthodox reading of the Scriptures: the bishop Epiphanius of Salamis took recourse to *λεξιθηρέω* to chastise those heretic groups (Ebionites, Arrians, Apollinarians) who misread the Scriptures and looked for unorthodox interpretations (*Panarion* 30.16.6-9, 25.1-4; 45.4.1; 69.50.1, 61.1, 76.4; 77.33.3). Similarly Adamantius (*De Recta in Deum Fide* 90.12; 236.12), Didymus the Blind (*De Trinitate* 2.8), and Cyril of Alexandria (*De Sancta Trinitate* 485.2) used *λεξιθηρέω* when attacking heretics who questioned the unity of the Trinity<sup>13</sup>.

The use of a Greek word in a Latin author from the Imperial period should be rightly contextualized as it will help us explain the implications of the use of *λεξιθηρεῖ* in the methodology, purposes and intended readership of Gellius' work. By his time the restrictive policies for the use of Greek expressions had been relaxed (see Cass Dio 57.15.2-3; 60.17.4; Suet. *Tib.* 71). Gellius' recourse to Greek words differs from that of other authors. Terentius, for instance, used them for ethopoetic purposes; Plautus to embellish the Greek situations that occurred in some of his plays; Cicero's pendular attitude towards Greek ranged from *De Fin.* 1.3.10 (*Latinam linguam non modo non inopem, ut uulgo putarent, sed locupletiore[m] etiam esse quam Graecam*) to *Tusc.* 2.15.35 (*quorum copiosior est lingua quam nostra*); Vitruvius borrowed numerous technical words; even Cato, despite his anti-Hellenic tendencies, could not help but employ Greek words<sup>14</sup>. The cultural milieu of the second

<sup>12</sup> L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius: an Antonine Scholar and his Achievement* (Oxford 2003), 273-274.

<sup>13</sup> See also Const. Apost. 3.5; Orig., *De princ.* 3.1.16; Soc. Sch. 6.22.

<sup>14</sup> P. Boyancé, "La connaissance du Grec à Rome": *REL* 34 (1956) 111-131, part. 124-127; J.N. Hough, "The use of Greek Words by Plautus": *AJPh* 55.4 (1934) 346-364, part. 362; L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius*, 48-64; P. Ruffel, "Mots grecs dans Vitruve":

century AD, however, compelled a change in the intentions behind the use of Greek terms. In this context Gellius' extensive use of Latin archaisms (see his own treatment of the issue in NA 15.7)<sup>15</sup> harmonized with his use of Greek vocabulary since, as Dalmasso put it, "non si può inoltre dimenticare che il rifiorire arcaicizzante del II sec. va posto in relazione col neoatticismo o neogorgianismo greco<sup>16</sup>". Not in vain did Augustine describe him as *uir elegantissimi eloqui* (C.D. 9.4).

Gellius resorted to Greek words both with a practical purpose and a broader plan in mind. The practical purpose consisted of their use as a linguistic instrument that helped him fill gaps in the Latin language or explain concepts alien to the Roman culture<sup>17</sup>. His definition of garrulous people (1.15.17: *quod genus homines a Graecis significantissimo uocabulo κατάγλωσσοι appellantur*), or his explanation of the Latin coinage of "solecism" (5.20: *sed nos neque "soloecismum" neque "barbarismum" apud Graecorum idoneos adhuc invenimus; nam sicut βάρβαρον, ita σόλοικον dixerunt*) relied on the use of Greek terms for a better understanding. In fact he acknowledged his struggles to describe some situations in plain Latin (18.13.5: *Latina oratione*

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M. Renard and R. Schilling (eds.), *Hommages à Jean Bayet* (Bruxelles 1964) 627-639; S. Boscherini, *Grecismi nel libro di Catone «De agri cultura»*: A&R 4.3 (1959) 145-156. "A comprehensive study of the use of Greek in Roman public affairs": J. Kaimio, *The Romans and the Greek Language* (Helsinki 1979) 59-129.

<sup>15</sup> R. Marache, *Mots nouveaux et mots archaïques chez Fronton et Aule-Gelle* (Paris 1957) remains the reference in this particular field. See also Knapp, "Archaism in Aulus": 141-171; G. Maselli, *Lingua e scuola*: c29-56; F. Portalupi, *Frontone, Gellio, Apuleio. Ricerca stilistica* (Torino 1974) 78-90, 106-267. The Spanish humanist Luis Vives described Gellius' style as follows (*De Ratione Dicendi*, 2.2): **Quaedam oratio ex stillicidiis colligitur tamquam aqua pluvia, quum non perpetuo fluit fonte, et naturali, ac suo, sed ex variis videtur emendicata, et corrogata, ut A. Gellii.**

<sup>16</sup> L. Dalmasso, "Aulo Gellio lessicografo": RF 1.4 (1923b) 468-484, part. 470. It should be noted, however, that when Roman writers slip into and out of Greek, as opposed to composing in it, the current Greek of the day was used without Atticizing.

<sup>17</sup> C. Heusch, *Die Macht der memoria. Die Noctes Atticae des Aulus Gellius im Licht der Erinnerungskultur des 2. Jahrhunderts n. Chr* (Berlin-New York 2010) 229-250; L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius*, 226-228; S. Swain, "Bilingualism and Biculturalism in Antonine Rome: Apuleius, Fronto and Gellius": L. Holford-Strevens and A. Vardi (eds.), *The Worlds of Aulus Gellius* (Oxford 2004) 3-40, part. 3-17. For Gellius as Greek translator in NA 11.16, see S.M. Beall, "Translation in Aulus Gellius": CQ 47.1 (1997) 215-226.

*non satis scite ac paene etiam inlepidè exponuntur*). As for the plan Gellius had in mind when resorting to Greek vocabulary: it had, as Swain has highlighted, a meta-linguistic purpose<sup>18</sup>. His recourse to Greek words was addressed to the connoisseur of Greek literature and the (mostly bilingual) cultural elites of the Empire<sup>19</sup>; emphasizing the bicultural design of his *Noctae Atticae* therefore involved the frequent and free use of Greek words<sup>20</sup>. In having recourse to Greek words, Gellius desired surprise, literary amusement and stylistic variation as they were key elements of the complex “proceso evolutivo nel rapporto fra le due cultura, un processo che l’autore crede giunto a maturazione nel suo secolo<sup>21</sup>”.

The use of *λεξιθηρέω* in NA 2.9 provides us with relevant information about two fundamental issues concerning the intrinsic nature of Gellius’ work and its educational and cultural scope. On a first and readily apparent level, the use of *λεξιθηρέω* aims to criticize Plutarch, one of his main sources of information and inspiration<sup>22</sup>, for his captiousness when correcting the use of a participle in Epicurus<sup>23</sup>. Gellius excuses Epicurus on the grounds that the philosopher was not concerned with the beauty of language (NA 2.9.5: *curas uocum verborumque elegantias*). In the previous chapter the philosopher had also been defended by Gellius against Plutarch’s accusation of having used a faulty syllogism (2.8.1: *imperfecte atque praepostere atque inscite synlogismo*). In both instances it is apparent that Gellius mitigates Plutarch’s criticism<sup>24</sup> by highlighting the fact that Epicurus had not neglected his prose (2.8.6: *Sed Epicurus, cuiusmodi homost, non inscitia uidetur*

<sup>18</sup> S. Swain, *Bilingualism and*: 28-40.

<sup>19</sup> M. L. Astarita, *La cultura nelle “Noctes Atticae”* (Catania 1993) 82.

<sup>20</sup> L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius*: 54-55; D.A. Russell, *Introduction: Greek and Latin in Antonine Literature*: D.A. Russell (ed.), *Antonine Literature* (Oxford 1990) 1-17, part. 5-7; S. Swain, *Bilingualism and*: 27-29.

<sup>21</sup> M. L. Astarita, *La cultura*: 68.

<sup>22</sup> S. M. Beall, *Aulus Gellius*: 57-59; L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius*: 110-115, 283-286.

<sup>23</sup> Epic., *Ratae Sententiae* 3.1; Plut., *Frag.* 124.4.

<sup>24</sup> L. Rusca and C.M. Calcante, *Aulo Gellio. Notti Attiche* (Milan 1992) highlight Gellius’s use of *subfrigide* as this term [722]: “è termine di critica letteraria che Gellio usa per attenuare il giudizio negativo su uno scrittore del calibre di Plutarco”.

*partem istam synlogismi praetermisisse*) but prioritized the philosophical message<sup>25</sup>. Gellius' favorable treatment of Epicurus in NA 2.9 is not consistent throughout his work<sup>26</sup>: in NA 5.15-16 he includes Epicurus' theories on the nature of voice and the process of vision with those of other philosophers. Dissatisfied with their explanations, Gellius ironically remarks that (NA 5.15.9) *philosophandum est paucis*. When considering the nature of pleasure, Gellius quotes what his teacher Taurus said whenever Epicurus was mentioned (NA 9.5.8): "[he] always had on his lips and tongue these words of Hierocles the Stoic, a man of righteousness and dignity: "Pleasure an end, a harlot's creed; there is no Providence, not even a harlot's creed". As for Plutarch, his hostile attitude to Epicurus<sup>27</sup> comes as no surprise as their views clashed on philosophical grounds (Plutarch's Platonism collided with Epicurus' atomic theory).<sup>28</sup>

In my opinion, Gellius' use of *λεξιθηρέω* attempts to denounce an activity which was becoming endemic in the cultural milieu of the Imperial period, that is, the quest for lexical rarities and the pedantic quibbling as an *ars gratia artis* unnecessary adornment. Terms such as *λεξιθηρέω*, *λεπτολογία*, *λογοθήρας*, *ονοματοθήρας* or *εύρησιλογία* in the works of Graeco-Roman authors bear witness to this trend<sup>29</sup>. For instance, Clement of Alexandria confesses that he will not bother to hunt for words (*Paed.* 1.6.45.3: *Ὁὐ γάρ μοι τῆς λεξιθηρίας μέλει τὰ νῦν*) in a digression on solids and

<sup>25</sup> Epicurus' claims of *σαφήνεια* (see D.L. X 12-13) are criticized by Cicero in *Brut.* 35; *De orat.* 3.63; *De fin.* 2.4.12.

<sup>26</sup> Such inconsistency coincides with the ambiguous consideration in which Epicurus was held in the second century AD, see J. Ferguson, *Epicureanism under the Roman Empire*: ANRW 36.4, 2257-2327, part. 2295, 2326-2327.

<sup>27</sup> J. P. Hershbell, *Plutarch and Epicureanism*: ANRW 36.5, 3353-3383.

<sup>28</sup> NA 2.9 should not be located in the philosophical milieu since Gellius did not belong to any philosophical school (although he could have sympathized with Platonist philosophy as one of his teacher, Taurus, was a Platonist), see L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius*: 260-262.

<sup>29</sup> *λεπτολογία*: Luc., *Iup.* 10, *Prom.* 6, *Bis Acc.* 34; Dio Cas. 55.28; 59.18; 72.18. *λογοθήρας*: Phil. Alex., *De Congr. Erud.* 53.4; *De Vita Mosis* 2.212; *Quod omnis probus* 80.2; *εύρησιλογία*: Plut., *Quae. Conv.* 625c, 656a, 682b; *De Stoic. Repug.* 1039b; *Adv. Stoic.* 1070f, 1072f. See also F. Klotz and K. Oikonomopoulou, *The Philosopher's Banquet: Plutarch's Table talk in the intellectual culture of the Roman Empire* (Oxford 2011) 121-123.

liquids. However, if we follow Marrou's explanation, *λεξιθηρία* was a common practice in Clement's works: "Clément pratique lui aussi cette *λεξιθηρία*. Le *Pédagogue* est plein des mots inattendus qui surprennent l'helléniste le mieux exercé, mots pittoresques et expressifs, piquants par leur rareté même"<sup>30</sup>. Similarly, hunting for words can also be found in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*. These *ὀνοματοθήρας* (3.97f; 99e; 4.184b; 14.649b) are grammarians and sophists for whom coming up with the strangest word became an obsession. Unsurprisingly, the symposiarch was nicknamed (1.1e) "*κεῖται ἢ οὐ κεῖται*", thus revealing an anxiety over the use of canonical language. Gellius' acquaintance, the rhetorician Fronto, also expressed concern about how to find the proper balance between efforts to pick the right word and the avoidance of unnecessary quibbling (*Ep.* 4.3.4-5: *quanta difficultas, quam scrupulosa et anxia cura uerbis*). Purity of language and the ability to adequately select words is central to Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Grammarians* (176-240) and, needless to say, to Pollux' *Onomasticon*. Plutarch's *De Garrulitate* and Lucian's *Lexiphanes*, among many of their other works, stand out for their portraits of sophists, grammarians, dilettantes and wannabes haunted by the need to chase unusual words with which to awe their audiences. Although the links between these authors and Gellius are difficult to establish, it seems evident that Greek and Roman authors from the second century shared a common concern over the trend to search for unusual words.

Hunting for words, therefore, became a leitmotif in the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire. What emerges from these examples is that Gellius' use of the verb *λεξιθηρέω* reflected a contemporary feeling of distress when it came to the correct use of language. Of course Gellius himself was a belletrist with an interest in grammar, lexicography and etymology both in Latin and Greek<sup>31</sup>. There was a grey area between literary carelessness and exaggerated attention to language, and it was to this area that he wanted to direct his audience. For Gellius it was a question of the degree to which an

<sup>30</sup> H.I. Marrou and M. Harl, *Le Pédagogue* (Paris 1960) 82.

<sup>31</sup> *NA* 1.4, 6, 7; 2.5, 21, 25; 3.11; 5.10, 20; 6.121; 8.1, 5, 14; 9.2, 7, 13; 13.3, 10, 17; 15, 5; 19.7, 10. See also A. Vardi, "Diiudicatio Locorum: Gellius and the History of a Mode in Ancient Comparative Criticism": *CQ* 46.2 (1996) 492-514, part. 502-506.

author should toil and devote efforts to find the appropriate word. In this sense his use of *λεξιθηρέω* seems to attempt to set the boundaries at which erudition should stop, and at the same time he endows the verb with a meta-literary function in the context of his educational programme.

## II

It is easy to appreciate that the cultural programme of *NA* was in tune with a cultural milieu in which compiling, commenting and epitomizing previous literature became a genre of its own<sup>32</sup>. The use of *λεξιθηρέω* is aligned with Gellius' distinctive way of ordering the heterogeneous knowledge of his work, the setting of its limits and of a cultural orthodoxy. Note, for instance, his insistent advices and exempla intended to establish how rhetorical deliveries had to be canonically performed<sup>33</sup>. In this sense I would like to stress that *NA* is part of Gellius' process of reconfiguration of Romanness and a re-evaluation of Roman cultural orthodoxy in the second century AD.

In the first place, the literary genre of *NA* is not disengaged from the general purpose of the work. Its pedagogical dimension attempted to impose a limit on the knowledge acquired in *otium* and how it should be organized and understood<sup>34</sup>. The encyclopedic genre of Gellius' *NA* was in its heyday in the second century. Having been recently defined as "collections of isolated and self-contained pieces of knowledge, in a variety of fields, and which the author deems worthy of remembrance"<sup>35</sup>, it should be added that the miscellaneous nature of *NA* did not stop Gellius from composing

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<sup>32</sup> J. König and T. Whitmarsh, "Ordering Knowledge": J. König and T. Whitmarsh (eds.), *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire*, Cambridge, 2007, 3-39, part. 29-31.

<sup>33</sup> *NA* 1.5, 10, 15; 2.5; 3.1, 5, 13; 4.1; 5.1, 15; 6.5; 8.9; 9.2; 10.22, 24; 11.9; 13.21; 16.2; 17.12; 18.13.

<sup>34</sup> J. König and T. Whitmarsh, "Ordering Knowledge": 7-19. On the genre and convivial context of *NA*, see G. Anderson, *Aulus Gellius: 1836*; G. Anderson, "Athaeneus: the Sophistic Environment": *ANRW* 34.3 (1997), 2173-2185, part. 2176-2177; K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia*: 9-49, 207-303.

<sup>35</sup> A. Vardi, "Genre, Conventions, and Cultural Programme in Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*": L. Holford-Strevens and A. Vardi (eds.), *The Worlds of Aulus Gellius* (Oxford 2004), 159-186, part. 164.

his work as a conscious attempt to provide elite Romans with an educational tool. Although Gellius insistently diminishes the transcendence of his work in its preface (Praef. 1: *quando animus eorum interstitio aliqua negotiorum data laxari indulgerique potuisset*; 13: *non enim fecimus altos nimis et obscuros in his rebus quaestionum sinus*)<sup>36</sup>, he acknowledges that his main purpose is to encourage and stimulate study should the readers find an uncommon subject (Praef. 16: *quae porro nova sibi ignotaque offenderint*) that raises their curiosity<sup>37</sup>. However, *NA* was far from being a mere instrument for *Konversationskultur*<sup>38</sup>. It is apparent that the mixture of Greek and Roman topics that formed the *rerum disparilitas* (Praef. 3) he has collected reflected a social and cultural order in which culture was a tool of inclusion in the elites<sup>39</sup>. In this context, what Gellius implied by using the verb *λεξιθηρέω* is that those with an excessive philological zeal were to be excluded from such a social and cultural sphere.

Gellius deemed irrelevant and fruitless the cultural valency of Plutarch's philological criticism (the use of *παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος* instead of *παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγεινοῦ*) for elite Romans. Knowledge, inextricably associated with social status and self-definition<sup>40</sup>, had to be positively sanctioned by its utility for society (*Praef.* 12-14). Gellius' specifications on what type of knowledge suited elite Romans was not aimed at negotiating directly in the political sphere but was inserted in the everyday life of the new type of elite Romans who benefited from miscellaneous works such as *NA*<sup>41</sup>. In this sense *λεξιθηρέω* befit the opsimaths — that is, those who studied late in their lives — that Gellius so much despised and regarded as parvenus. *NA* 11.7 is central to his tenets of the proper cultural competence, for Gellius

<sup>36</sup> D. W. T. Vessey, *Aulus Gellius*: 1894.

<sup>37</sup> This was a topic of miscellaneous collections, see de E. Faye, *Clément d'Alexandrie, étude sur les rapports du christianisme et de la philosophie grecque au II<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris 1898), 98-99.

<sup>38</sup> D. Pausch, *Biographie und Bildungskultur. Personendarstellungen bei Plinius dem Jüngeren, Gellius and Sueton* (Berlin 2004) 150-163.

<sup>39</sup> K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia*: 295-296.

<sup>40</sup> J. König and T. Whitmarsh, "Ordering Knowledge": 22-24.

<sup>41</sup> K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia*: 302-303. Also L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius*: 239-240.

criticizes the use of words too *démodé* (NA 11.7.1: *obsoletis exculcatisque*) or too new (NA 11.7.1: *insolentibus novitatisque*; also 16.7). Such faults, (NA 11.7.3) *quam Graeci ὀψιμαθίαν appellant*, involved talking about a topic without commanding it<sup>42</sup>. According to Marache, Gellius meant to discredit these *opsimaths* on the grounds of immoderate verve<sup>43</sup>, but in NA 15.30.1 he refers to “those who approach the study of letters late in life (*qui ab alio gener uitae detriti iam et retorridi ad litterarum disciplinas serius adeunt*)” as *garruli natura et subargutili*<sup>44</sup>. *Opsimaths*’ engagement with *λεξιθηρία* is exemplified by NA 15.30.2-7, when an anonymous late-learner ignored the etymology of *petorritum* and declared that the term was a hybrid word (*πέτορμαι* and *rota*).

Either because of their excessive zeal or their garrulity, it is evident that Gellius did not think of these late-learners as part of the elite Romans. It is no coincidence, as Beall has pointed out, that Gellius feared that the miscellaneous nature of his NA would attract precisely these *opsimaths* he disliked<sup>45</sup>, thus becoming the counterpart of the *semidocti* he also chastised (NA 1.7.17; 15.9.6). In a recent work Oikonomopoulou has interpreted Gellius’ concern from a socio-cultural perspective: “It was the prerogative of the elite, who could use it as a criterion of exclusion for the *ὀψιμαθεῖς*, the *arrivistes* who lay claims to the status of the *pepaideumenos* because, from their perspective, *paideia* was a ticket of admittance into elite circles”<sup>46</sup>. Gellius, no doubt, would agree with Fronto (*Ep.* 4.3.1): being *imperitum et indoctum* was preferable to *semiperitum ac semidoctum*.

At the other end of the spectrum, Gellius amuses himself by describing grammarians’ competitions and disputes between learned men that claimed expertise — which is, according to Vardi’s punctilious study, the motive behind Gellius’ jests against them<sup>47</sup> — in grammatical matters

<sup>42</sup> Theoph., *Caract.* 27 (check). See also Luc., *De Merc. Cond.* 23.

<sup>43</sup> R. Marache, *Les nuits attiques*: III, 181: “il s’agit plutôt d’excès de zèle que de pédantisme”.

<sup>44</sup> Examples of Gellius’ criticism of loquacity in NA 1.2, 15; 5.14; 15.30.

<sup>45</sup> S. Beall, *Aulus Gellius*: 60-61 argues that Gellius tried “to preserve the respectability of his work by investing it with a kind of philosophical gravity”.

<sup>46</sup> K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia*: 66-67.

<sup>47</sup> A. Vardi, *Gellius against the Professors*: ZPE 137 (2001) 41-54, part. 41-42.

(NA 4.1; 6.17; 13.31; 14.5; 15.9; 16.6, 10; 18.4; 19.10; 20.10). Their quibbling and fruitless controversies bothered our author for he considered grammar an important discipline whose successful management was combined with social status and ethics<sup>48</sup>. For Gellius, the false refinement of arrivistes — what Michel called “excès de subtilité gratuite”<sup>49</sup> —, the inappropriate pettiness of grammarians<sup>50</sup>, and the gratuitous talk of those *leves et futiles et importunes locutores* (NA 1.15) belonged to a world of fatuities.

The linguistic minutiae the Roman grammarians were so fond of clashed with the educational spirit of NA. In the preface (Praef. 1.12) Gellius clearly states that he intends his work to be a respite from business and to provide a becoming education for the Roman aristocracy. Thus what would be the use of telling the difference between *παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγοῦντος* and *παντὸς τοῦ ἀλγεινοῦ* to an elite Roman? What would be the use of this type of “ivory tower” knowledge to their *negotium*? The learned *otium* of a convivial table was meant to be profitable and furnish the Roman aristocrats with useful knowledge (see Cic., *De Off.* 3.1: *in otio de negotiis cogitare*). In the case of NA 2.9, familiarizing oneself with Epicurus’ philosophy (the removal of pain is pleasurable) is an ethical and philosophical lesson of some importance; by contrast the proper use of a neuter participle instead of a noun would derive little gain. Consequently, the practice of *λεξιθηρία* should be prevented in order to avoid becoming too punctilious, even though Gellius seems to imply that *λεξιθηρία* was an imposition of the Zeitgeist when he recalls the case of a friend of his — (NA 5.21.1: *uir adprime doctus*) — who became “second nature to his tongue” because of the (NA 5.21.3) *assidua ueterum scriptorium tractatione*.

The practice of *λεξιθηρία*, therefore, became an important element in the sphere of Second Sophistic cultural politics. In this context, the brilliant

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<sup>48</sup> R. A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: the grammarian and society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1988) 57-60.

<sup>49</sup> A. Michel, “Rhétorique et philosophie au second siècle ap. J.-C.”: *ANRW* 34.1, (1993) 3-78, part. 43; R. Marache, *La critique littéraire de langue latine et le développement du goût archaïsant au IIe siècle de notre ère* (Rennes 1952) 208-213.

<sup>50</sup> For other motives of Gellius’ prejudice against grammarians, see A. Vardi, *Gellius against*: 48-51. Also R.A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*: 65-66.

and seminal work of R. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, approaches the study of numerous passages of Gellius' *NA* from a social perspective. His in-depth study deals with the competitive aspects of the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire<sup>51</sup>. The grammarians' claims, Kaster argues, to the control of language earned them general enmity<sup>52</sup>. Examples of these grammarians discussing philological questions in Gellius' *NA* (1.7; 14.5; 15.9; 17.2; 11.1; 19.10) confirm that impression. However, hubristic as it may sound, I would like to supplement his view by locating *NA* not only in the competitive cultural sphere but also in the realm of education and ethics, two territories intimately intertwined.

Kaster has highlighted that "in Gellius, a chief attribute of the professional that we might assume would separate him from the dilettante is taken over by the amateur literary tradition and regarded as a moral trait, one of the attributes of the good man –his scrupulous attention to the details of his cultural tradition (what impatient modern readers of Macrobius and Gellius commonly call their "pedantry")"<sup>53</sup>. I consider that Gellius deemed to be pedants those who resorted to *λεξιθηρία* and over-theorization because their knowledge was worthless (*NA* 5.15.9: *neque in his scrupulis aut emolumentum aliquod solidum ad rationem uitae pertinens aut finem ullum quaerendi uideremus*) and inadequate to his educational and cultural programme (*Praef.* 13, 17)<sup>54</sup>.

The coinage of a hapax such as *λεξιθηρέω* in a self-confessed archaizing work serves to confirm that in *NA* the study of past events and literary works connects with contemporary issues. Being a snob<sup>55</sup> and with a vocation for setting the limits of cultural orthodoxy (in fact, he has been credited with being the first author to have used the term *classicus* in a literary

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<sup>51</sup> See also W.H. Keulen, *Gellius the Satirist*: 25.

<sup>52</sup> R. A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*: 52-60. K. Hopkins, "Élite mobility in the Roman Empire": M. I. Finley (ed.), *Studies in Ancient Society* (London 1974), 103-120, part. 110-112.

<sup>53</sup> R. A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*: 66.

<sup>54</sup> A. Vardi, *Gellius against*: 45-52; M.L. Astarita, *La cultura*: 149-151.

<sup>55</sup> A. Vardi, *Gellius against*: 54.

context, NA 19.8.15<sup>56</sup>), Gellius would feel tempted to codify the cultural and educational agenda of elite Romans<sup>57</sup>. His cultural agenda involved the prioritization of the relationship between education and *mores*<sup>58</sup>. Thus Kaster's competitive interpretation of the passage in which two grammarians engaged in a discussion over the vocative case of *egregius* (NA 14.5) can also be read as Gellius' attempt to set the boundaries of learning. The image of Gellius leaving those grammarians shouting because of their fruitless and prolonged quarrel (NA 14.5.4: *eaque inter eos contentio longius duceretur, non arbitratus ego operae pretium esse eadem istaec diutius audire*) speaks volumes about what his cultural and educational schema wanted to achieve and, especially, to whom it was addressed. Learned *otium* would prove inefficient if over-specialization consumed cultural discussions. Not even Gellius and some of the intellectuals he usually portrayed in a favorable light were exempted from partaking of grammatical and philological debates (NA 6.17; 16.10; 19.10; 20.10)<sup>59</sup>. Therefore Gellius' animosity towards opsimaths, *semidocti*, and professional grammarians should not be interpreted as a personal grudge. Instead, it was their quibbling, puniness and petty quarrels over trivial issues that should be stopped.

The hunt for words had to be called off. The main aim of Gellius' coinage of *λεξιθηρέω* dovetailed with what Marache has called "humanisme gellien"<sup>60</sup>: he had to cope not only with the captiousness of cultural elites but also with how to remove obstacles from the elite Romans' road to

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<sup>56</sup> F. García Jurado, "La ciudad invisible de los clásicos: entre Aulo Gelio e Italo Calvino": *Nova Tellus* 28.1 (2010) 271-300, part. 274-280.

<sup>57</sup> S. M. Beall, *Aulus Gellius*: 64 considers that Gellius was persuaded of the "translatability of Greek and Roman culture". See also J. König and T. Whitmarsh, "Ordering Knowledge": 10-12.

<sup>58</sup> For the close relationship between ethics and *artes*, see E. Rawson, *Intellectual Life in Late Roman Republic* (London 1985) 117-131. See also R.A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language*: 59-65; K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia*: 250-252, especially 250: "For Gellius, being (this or that sort of person) is inextricable from doing (this or that action)".

<sup>59</sup> A. Vardi, *Gellius against*: 46-47.

<sup>60</sup> R. Marache, *Les nuits attiques*: I, p. xxiv.

an education that encompassed culture and Roman social values of Stoic ascendance<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> K. Oikonomopoulou, *The symposia*: 241-270. On the influence of Stoicism on Gellius, see C.N. Smiley, *Latinitas and ἑλληνισμός. The influence of the Stoic theory of style as shown in the writings of Dionysius, Quintilian, Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Fronto, Aulus Gellius, and Sextus Empiricus* (Wisconsin 1906) 257-267.

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**Resumo:** Este trabalho tem como objetivo estudar o uso do verbo grego *λεξιθηρέω* em *Noctes Atticae* de Aulo Gélío. A sua utilização na obra do autor romano é indicativa de um programa cultural e reflete preocupações contemporâneas sobre o uso adequado da linguagem.

**Palavras-chave:** *λεξιθηρέω*; Aulo Gélío; ócio; cultura literária.

**Resumen:** Este trabajo tiene como objetivo estudiar el uso del verbo griego *λεξιθηρέω* en las *Noches Áticas* de Aulo Gelio. Su empleo en la obra del autor romano es indicativa de un programa cultural al tiempo que se hace eco de preocupaciones contemporâneas sobre el adecuado uso del lenguaje.

**Palabras clave:** *λεξιθηρέω*; Aulo Gelio; ocio; cultura literaria.

**Résumé:** Ce travail se propose d'étudier l'usage du verbe grec *λεξιθηρέω* dans *Nuits Attiques* d'Aulu-Gelle. L'utilisation qui en est faite dans l'œuvre de l'auteur romain est révélatrice du programme culturel et reflète les préoccupations contemporaines en ce qui concerne le correct usage de la langue.

**Mots-clé:** *λεξιθηρέω*; Aulu-Gelle; oisiveté; culture littéraire.