Boxes in Boxes: The *Penus* Chapter of Aulus Gellius in its Context

This paper will be a reading of the first chapter of Book 4 of Aulus Gellius’s *Noctes Atticae*, in which Gellius stages a debate between the sophist Favorinus and an unnamed *grammaticus* on the meaning of the word *penus* (a storehouse). Both Erik Gunderson (2009) and Wytse Keulen (2009) have treated this chapter in their books on Gellius, and both have treated it from the perspective of *auctoritas*. Indeed, the chapter invites such a reading with its setting at the vestibule of the Palatine temple as a crowd of learned men await the emperor’s *salutatio*. I will offer a reading from a different perspective, inspired on a larger scale by a sequential reading of the *Noctes Atticae*. My primary focus will be on chapter 4.1 in terms of the *NA*’s Preface: how it echoes some of the things mentioned and promised there (e.g., the *penus* metaphor, the time and location of intellectual activity, the bounds of proper intellectual activity).

The character of the arrogant but insufficiently learned *grammaticus* is also of interest here because he represents the false-intellectual type often found in the pages of the *NA*. But, in my reading, verbal echoes of the Preface in the speech of the *grammaticus*, combined with similar interests shown by Gellius himself elsewhere in the *NA*, suggest an ironic self-identification with the pretentious grammarian. This potential irony encourages the reader to re-evaluate Gellius’s fidelity to the program that he had laid out in the Preface.

But, whatever the status of this irony, the interaction between the pedantic *grammaticus* and the truly knowledgeable Favorinus explores the bounds of the *NA*, in terms of both what is worth knowing and what is a sensible limit to learning. The echoes of the Preface activate for the reader an understanding of the importance of this chapter.

If one is reading (preferably in sequence) with an ear for echoes, a method of reading that I suggest for the *NA*, then one cannot miss the connection between this chapter and the Preface. Moreover, a sequential reading makes the reader more aware of the situational context of this (or any) chapter: a similar situation in the final chapter of Book 3 (in which Favorinus rejects the etymology of *parcus* from *arcus* – a kind of container, not unlike the *penus*) reinforces the probability that the reader will be reminded of the Preface’s *penus* and encourages the reader to ponder the meanings of words and the limits of knowledge.

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