

# WHY *ATTIC NIGHTS*? OR WHAT'S IN A NAME?\*

In the preface to his *Noctes Atticae*, Gellius explains his choice of title:

quoniam longinquis per hiemem noctibus in agro, sicuti dixi, terrae Atticae commentationes hasce ludere ac facere exorsi sumus, idcirco eas inscripsimus *Noctium esse Atticarum* (praef. 4)<sup>1</sup>

He then proceeds to enumerate other titles used for miscellaneous works similar to his own, both Greek and Latin, which, he claims, are far more refined and witty than his title (§§4–9). Attractive as Gellius' explanation may be, it raises some serious difficulties<sup>2</sup> and should not be taken at face value, especially since it seems to establish a novel type of relation between title and work. None of the titles in Gellius' list seems to have been based on the circumstances of the inception of the work, nor indeed does any other extant title prior to the publication of the *Noctes Atticae*. There is no reason to deny Gellius the credit for inventing a novel principle of titling, yet titles based on the circumstances of composition rather than on the content of the work fail to perform a primary function of titles, namely an initial direction of the expectations of prospective readers.

This, of course, was not the original function of titles, which were first affixed to already circulating literary works to facilitate their identification and designation. But once it became customary for writers to label their works before publishing them, titles acquired a range of additional functions, from disclosing the content of the work to advertising it and attracting the attention of readers. Correspondence between title and content, once preferred for mnemonic convenience, thus became a vehicle for providing prospective readers with some foreknowledge of the content of the work. Sending Terentius Scaurus a copy of an oration, Pliny promises him: 'Materiam ex titulo cognosces, cetera liber explicabit' (*Ep.* 5.12.3), and Martial claims his (generic) title should suffice to warn fastidious readers off his work (1. praef.). This function of titles seems to have been familiar already to Augustan scholars, since it underlies a comment found in Festus' epitome of the *De Significatu Verborum* of Verrius Flaccus: 'Originum libros quod inscripsit, Cato non satis plenum titulum propositi sui videtur amplexus, quando praegravant ea, quae sunt rerum gestarum populi Romani' (Festus 216.20f. Lindsay),<sup>3</sup> and is well established by Gellius' time (e.g. praef. 5;

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<sup>1</sup> From the words 'sicuti dixi' it seems quite certain that the explanation Gellius offers for his title in the lost section at the beginning of the preface was not substantially different from the one quoted here from praef. 4 and repeated in praef. 10.

<sup>2</sup> I shall not deal here with the apparent 'historical' difficulty caused by the fact that some of the 'notes' included in Gellius' book are explicitly said to have been taken in periods prior to his stay in Athens (esp. 20.6.1, with 15). This has been answered by R. Marache's distinction between *commentationes* or *commentarii*, which denote composed short pieces, and *annotationes*, the rudimentary notes taken while compiling material to be included in the book; see his edition, vol. i (Paris, 1967), p. 2 n. 2, and L. Holford-Strevens, *Aulus Gellius* (London, 1988), pp. 24–5.

<sup>3</sup> For similar criticism of titles by later grammarians, see H. Jordan (ed.), *M. Catonis praeter librum de Re Rustica quae exstant* (Leipzig, 1860), p. xxi.

11.16.7, 13.9.3). Gellius is no less attentive to the capacity of certain titles to allure readers, as is clear from his remark on the *De Loquendi Proprietate* of Aelius Melissus: 'Ei libro titulus est ingentis cuiusdam inlecebrae ad legendum' (18.6.3); and sensitivity to the role of titles in advertising a work is attested in Fronto as well, who is well aware of the possibility that a title like *Laus Fumi et Pulveris* may deter some of his readers (*Laudes* 1.1, p. 215.6–7 v.d. Hout<sup>2</sup>).<sup>4</sup>

Although ancient titles of miscellanies tend to be far more imaginative than the schematic *περί/de...* titles of monographic works, they nevertheless betray their heterogeneous nature, a fact which does not escape Gellius' notice (praef. 5; cf. 13.9.3). An examination of the titles enumerated in his preface, as well as those found in the similar lists of Pliny (*Nat.* praef. 24–5) and Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 6.2.1 Stählin), reveals that most of them suggest the multiplicity of the material collected in the work by using the plural number (*Εὐρύματα*, *Προβλήματα*, *Memoriales*, etc.) or collective nouns (such as the *Βιβλιοθήκη* of Apollodorus and Diodorus Siculus and the *Συναγωγή* ascribed to Hippias of Elis in Ath. 13.609a).<sup>5</sup> Occasionally the idea of non-uniformity is added, as in *Πανδέκται*, *Παντοδαπή Ἱστορία*, *Coniectanea* and *Quaestiones Confusae* (Gel. 3.9.1).<sup>6</sup> The same idea is sometimes expressed through metaphors of variegated textiles like *Στρωματεῖς*, *Πέπλος*, and the *Κεστοί* of Julius Africanus (*POxy* iii.412), or of a medley of flowers in meadows or bouquets such as *Pratum*, *Λειμών*, *Ἀνθηρά* and perhaps the *Florida* of Apuleius.<sup>7</sup> The title of the *Libri Musarum* of Aurelius Opillus was meant to suggest heterogeneous learning (Suet. *Gram.* 6), as is probably the case with *Ἑλικών*. A compilation from various sources is implied in Pliny's *Libri Studiosorum* (Gel. 9.16.2), in *Βιβλιοθήκη* and perhaps in *Πίναξ* as well.<sup>8</sup> Titles like *Πάγκαρπον*, *Ἀμαλθείας Κέρας*, and *Κηρία* seem to suggest value and productiveness in addition to plurality and variety, and immediate accessibility is suggested in *Ἐγχειρίδιον* and *Παραξίφιδες*.<sup>9</sup> Occasionally a title defines the type of material contained in the miscellany (*Τόποι*, *Εὐρύματα*, *Antiquae Lectiones*) or its form (*Epistolicae Quaestiones*). An unfinished state of the material

<sup>4</sup> On the history of titles and their functions see: L. W. Daly, 'The Entitulation of Pre-Ciceronian Writings', *Classical Studies in Honor of W. A. Oldfather* (Urbana, 1943), pp. 21–3; E. Schmalzriedt, *Περὶ φύσεως: zur Frühgeschichte der Buchtitel* (Munich, 1970), pp. 20–50; N. Horsfall, 'Some Problems of Titulature in Roman Literary History', *BICS* 28 (1981), 103–4; and beyond classical antiquity: S. G. Kellman, 'Dropping Names: The Poetics of Titles', *Criticism* 17 (1975), 152–67; H. Levin, 'The Title as Literary Genre', *MLR* 72 (1977), xxiii–xxxvi; A. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 92–8. Titles which function as authorial commentary or guides to understanding the work (*La vida es sueño*, *Ulysses*) seem not to have been employed in the ancient world.

<sup>5</sup> For identification of the works referred to in Gellius' list, see P. Faider, 'Auli Gellii Noctium Atticarum Praefatio', *Musée Belge* 31 (1927), 203–8 and the bibliography cited there, pp. 189–90. Ancient titles are conveniently collected and classified in H. Zilliacus, 'Boktiteln i antik litteratur', *Eranos* 36 (1938), 1–41.

<sup>6</sup> The term *Miscellanea* seems to have been first used as a title by Politian in the fifteenth century; see R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From 1300 to 1850* (Oxford, 1976), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> This is how Clement explains his own choice of title (*Strom.* 4.4.1; cf. 6.2.1), although he later adds the notions of rarity and value (4.6.2); see A. Méhat, *Étude sur les 'Stromates' de Clément d'Alexandrie* (Paris, 1966), pp. 96–104; for Apuleius' title, see R. Helm's note in his edition of the *Florida* (Leipzig, 1959), pp. xviii–xix; other examples are brought by Zilliacus, *Eranos* 36 (1938), 25–30.

<sup>8</sup> O. Regenbogen, *RE* XX, p. 1412, s.v. 'Pinax'; but see K.-E. Henriksson, *Griechische Büchertitel in der römischen Literatur* (Helsinki, 1956), pp. 117–18.

<sup>9</sup> On *Ἐγχειρίδιον/a* in antiquity, see: G. Broccia, *Enchiridion: per la storia di una denominazione libraria* (Rome, 1979), pp. 11–44.

collected is suggested in Σχέδιον, and perhaps in Ateius' Ὑλη and the Latin *Silvae* as well.<sup>10</sup> Similar principles are revealed in the names of miscellaneous genres, such as Ἀνθολόγιον/*Florilegium*, *Satura* and *Cento*.<sup>11</sup>

While all these titles refer in one way or another to the content of the work, references to the circumstances of composition are very rare. Occasionally a Dialogue is named after a geographical site, such as the Λεσβιακός and Κορινθιακός of Dicaearchus (Cic. *Tusc.* 1.21, 77) and Cicero's *Tusculanae Disputationes*, but these refer to the dramatic setting of the Dialogue and not to the place in which it was written.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Dialogues are sometimes named after other components of their *mise en scène*, such as Lucian's Πλοῖον, the *Saturnalia* of Macrobius, and all Συμπόσια and Δείπνα. Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* stands out as a title which refers to the actual circumstances of composition. Yet anyone familiar with Ovid's mishap, as most of his contemporary readers probably were, could have anticipated that a collection of poems thus named would differ only in title and not in subject matter from the *Tristia* (*Pont.* 1.1.17).

Two more titles, the *Lucubrations* of Bibaculus mentioned in Pliny's list and the Λύχνοι enumerated by Gellius, seem to refer to the circumstances of composition, or rather of the acquisition of the knowledge contained in the work. From a very early time the effort of acquiring knowledge had established itself as adding to the grandeur of intellectual achievements.<sup>13</sup> Lamplight, metonymous for nocturnal toil, has thus come to be used in titles and prefaces to flaunt the author's erudition. That Gellius' 'Nights' connotes hard labour is suggested by their characterization as 'long and hibernal' (praef. 4; cf. 10: 'hibernarum vigiliarum'). He subsequently refers to his notes as 'lucubratiunculas istas' (praef. 14), and denies his work to readers who 'nullas hoc genus vigilias vigilarunt' (praef. 19; cf. 19.9.5: 'labor hic vigiliarum et inquires').<sup>14</sup>

Night hours, however, are used for a variety of activities, and had Gellius' *Noctes* been Milesian rather than Attic, his title would have suggested a work of a completely different nature.<sup>15</sup> It is by alluding to Athens with its celebrated schools that he assures the predominance of the notion of intellectual endeavours. At the same time, Attica might well have been meant to suggest sophistication and variety: elegant villas, like that of Herodes Atticus in Cephisia to which Gellius was invited (1.2,

<sup>10</sup> So Henriksson, op. cit., pp. 122–5 on the basis of Quint., *Inst.* 10.3.17; but see K. M. Coleman in her edition of Statius' *Silvae* iv (Oxford, 1988), pp. xxii–xxiv.

<sup>11</sup> For *Satura* and similar titles see M. Coffey, *Roman Satire* (London, 1976), pp. 11–18.

<sup>12</sup> Some other works of peripatetic provenance were similarly titled, such as the Μεγαρικός of Theophrastus (D.L. 5.44) and the Χαλκιδικός of Demetr. Phaler. (ibid., 5.81), but these titles do not necessarily refer to the dramatic setting of a Dialogue, as is clearly the case of Dio's Εὐβοικός and the Ἀττικὸν Δείπνον mentioned by Athenaeus (4.134–7, if it is a title); see R. Hirzel, *Der Dialog: ein literarhistorischer Versuch* (Leipzig, 1895), vol. i, pp. 311–12 n. 2; p. 319 n. 1. For similar titles in the 'Greek Novel' see: C. W. Müller, 'Der griechische Roman', in E. Vogt (ed.), *Griechische Literatur* (Wiesbaden, 1981), pp. 391–2.

<sup>13</sup> At least as early as Democritus 68.B.182 D-K. On the *litterarum radices amarae*, see A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890; repr. Hildesheim, 1965), p. 195, 'litterae', 1; and for ancient adaptations of Verg. *G.* 1.145 to suit a similar idea, see R. A. B. Mynors's commentary on the *Georgics* (Oxford, 1990), p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> See Marache, op. cit., pp. xii–xiii. For a history of this metonymy and its uses in prefaces see T. Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions* (Stockholm, 1964), pp. 97–8, 147–8; cf. Fro. *M.Caes.* 1.4.1 (pp. 5.22–6.2 v.d. Hout<sup>2</sup>), Apul. *Apol.* 5 for further uses in the second century.

<sup>15</sup> On the erotic *Milesiaka*, see P. G. Walsh, *The Roman Novel* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 10–17. 'Night Words' is the title given by G. Steiner to his article on pornographic literature; see his *Language and Silence* (London, 1958), pp. 89ff.; for similar uses of *Nox* in Latin, see *OLD* s.v. 'Nox' 3.c.

18.10), the merry life of students (2.21.1–3, 15.2.3, 18.2.1–6), and the opportunity to make the acquaintance of colourful characters like Peregrinus Proteus (8.3, 12.11). But above all it recalls that part of Gellius' education of which he is particularly proud, and through which he can claim superiority to the *virī civiliter eruditi*, to whom he addresses the book (praef. 13; cf. 18.10.8).<sup>16</sup> Not many Romans had the opportunity to pursue philosophical studies in Athens, and even fewer could do so in addition to rhetorical studies back in Rome, as Gellius did.<sup>17</sup> For the *civiliter eruditi*, the allusion to Attic studies would probably evoke the glamour of Hellenic scholarship.<sup>18</sup> Parading one's erudition is not alien to ancient writers. Gellius openly does so in section 12 of his preface, and Apuleius, more or less his contemporary, does not fail to remind the Carthaginian audience of his own studies in Athens (*Fl.* 18, 20).

Thus, whether or not it was in Athens that Gellius embarked on his composition, his choice of title seems to have been motivated primarily by the desire to attract readers and the need to provide them with sufficient foreknowledge of the nature of the work. It is novel and ingenious enough to attract attention, while at the same time conveying polymathy, thereby both advertising the work and hinting at its genre. The use of the plural in the title would have been a further indication of the work's miscellaneous character, especially in a period when this genre was so common. Once Gellius' title became familiar to readers, it was frequently imitated without risk of misapprehension.<sup>19</sup> But it seems that even a second-century reader who first encountered it in one of the bookshops or libraries of Rome could have had a fairly accurate idea of the nature of a work thus named.

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps to be identified with the class of 'public moyen' characterized by A.-M. Guillemin, *Le Public et la vie littéraire à Rome* (Paris, 1937), pp. 18–22, 82–6. See further: S. M. Beall, *Civilis Eruditio: Style and Content in the 'Attic Nights' of Aulus Gellius* (Diss., Univ. of California at Berkeley, 1988), 3–4, 35–6.

<sup>17</sup> M. L. Clarke, *Higher Education in the Ancient World* (London, 1971), pp. 6–7, 80. On Gellius' education, see Holford-Strevens, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13, 61–71.

<sup>18</sup> As suggested by G. Maselli, *Lingua e scuola in Gellio grammatico* (Lecce, 1979), p. 53. Whereas *Atheniensis* is used exclusively for persons or for the city itself, *Atticus* is quite commonly employed for language, rhetorical styles and philosophy; cf. *TLL* II.5 s.v. 'Atheniensis', pp. 1029–30; s.v. 'Atticus' II.A, p. 1134.

<sup>19</sup> Some such title are enumerated by Holford-Strevens, *op. cit.*, p. 21 n. 7.