

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, Preface:

1 *** other more entertaining writings may be found,¹ in order that like recreation might be provided for my children, when they should have some respite from business affairs and could unbend and divert their minds. 2 But in the arrangement of my material I have adopted the same haphazard order that I had previously followed in collecting it. For whenever I had taken in hand any Greek or Latin book, or had heard anything worth remembering, I used to jot down whatever took my fancy, of any and every kind, without any definite plan or order; and such notes I would lay away as an aid to my memory, like a kind of literary storehouse, so that when the need arose of a word or a subject which I chanced for the moment to have forgotten, and the books from which I had taken it were not at hand, I could readily find and produce it.

3 It therefore follows, that in these notes there is the same variety of subject that there was in those former brief jottings which I had made without order or arrangement, as the fruit of instruction or reading in various lines. 4 And since, as I have said, I began to amuse myself by assembling these notes during the long winter nights which I spent on a country-place in the land of Attica, I have therefore given them the title of *Attic Nights*, making no attempt to imitate the witty captions which many other writers of both languages have devised for works of this kind. 5 For since they had laboriously gathered varied, manifold, and as it were indiscriminate learning, they therefore invented ingenious titles also, to correspond with that idea. 6 Thus some called their books "The Muses," others "Woods,"² one used the title "Athena's Mantle," another "The Horn of Amaltheia," still another "Honeycomb," several "Meads," one "Fruits of my Reading," another "Gleanings from Early Writers," another "The Nosegay," still another "Discoveries." 7 Some have used the name "Torches," others "Tapestry," others "Repertory," others "Helicon," "Problems," "Handbooks" and "Daggers." 8 One man called his book "Memorabilia," one "Principia," one "Incidentals," another "Instructions." Other titles are "Natural History," "Universal History," "The Field," "The Fruit-basket," or "Topics." 9 Many have termed their notes "Miscellanies," some "Moral Epistles," "Questions in Epistolary Form," or "Miscellaneous Queries," and there are some other titles that are exceedingly witty and redolent of extreme refinement.³ 10 But I, bearing in mind my limitations, gave my work off-hand, without premeditation, and indeed almost in rustic fashion, the caption of *Attic Nights*, derived merely from the time and place of my winter's vigils; I thus fall as far short of all other writers in the dignity too even of my title, as I do in care and in elegance of style.

11 Neither had I in making my excerpts and notes the same purpose as many of those whom I have mentioned. For all of them, and in particular the Greeks, after wide and varied reading, with a white line, as the saying goes,⁴ that is with no effort to discriminate, swept together whatever they had found, aiming at mere quantity. The perusal of such collections will exhaust the mind through weariness or disgust, before it finds one or two notes which it is a pleasure to read, or inspiring to have read, or helpful to remember. 12 I myself, on the contrary, having at heart that well-known saying of the famous Ephesian,⁵ "Much learning does not make a scholar," did it is true busy and even weary myself in unrolling and running through many a scroll, working without cessation in all the intervals of business whenever I could steal the leisure; but I took few items from them,

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confining myself to those which, by furnishing a quick and easy short-cut, might lead active and alert minds to a desire for independent learning and to the study of the useful arts, or would save those who are already fully occupied with the other duties of life from an ignorance of words and things which is assuredly shameful and boorish.

13 Now just because there will be found in these notes some few topics that are knotty and troublesome, either from Grammar or Dialectics or even from Geometry, and because there will also be some little material of a somewhat recondite character about augural or pontifical law, one ought not therefore to avoid such topics as useless to know or difficult to comprehend. For I have not made an excessively deep and obscure investigation of the intricacies of these questions, but I have presented the first fruits, so to say, and a kind of foretaste of the liberal arts; and never to have heard of these, or come in contact with them, is at least unbecoming, if not positively harmful, for a man with even an ordinary education. 14 Of those then, if such there be, who may perhaps sometimes have leisure and inclination to acquaint themselves with these lucubrations, I should like to ask and be granted the favour, that in reading of matters which they have known for a long time they shall not scorn them as commonplace and trite; 15 for is there anything in literature so recondite as not to be known to a goodish many? In fact, I am sufficiently flattered if these subjects have not been repeated over and over again in the schools and become the common stock of commentaries. 16 Furthermore, if my readers find anything new and unknown to them, I think it fair that they should not indulge in useless criticism, but should ask themselves whether these observations, slight and trifling though they be, are after all not without power to inspire study, or too dull to divert and stimulate the mind; whether on the contrary they do not contain the germs and the quality to make men's minds grow more vigorous, their memory more trustworthy, their eloquence more effective, their diction purer, or the pleasures of their hours of leisure and recreation more refined. 17 But as to matters which seem too obscure, or not presented in full enough detail, I beg once again that my readers may consider them written, not so much to instruct, as to give a hint, and that content with my, so to speak, pointing out the path, they may afterwards follow up those subjects, if they so desire, with the aid either of books or of teachers. 18 But if they find food for criticism, let them, if they have the courage, blame those from whom I drew my material; or if they discover that different statements are made by someone else, let them not at once give way to hasty censure, but rather let them weigh the reasons for the statements and the value of the authorities which those other writers and which I have followed.

19 For those, however, who have never found pleasure nor busied themselves in reading, inquiring, writing and taking notes, who have never spent wakeful nights in such employments, who have never improved themselves by discussion and debate with rival followers of the same Muse, but are absorbed in the turmoil of business affairs — for such men it will be by far the best plan to hold wholly aloof from these "Nights" and seek for themselves other diversion. There is an old saying:

The daw knows naught of the lyre, the hog naught of marjoram ointment.⁶

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20 Moreover, in order that the perversity and envy of certain half-educated men may be the more aroused, I shall borrow a few anapaests from a chorus of Aristophanes, and the conditions which that wittiest of men imposed for the viewing of his play, I shall lay down for the reading of these notes of mine: namely, that the profane and uninitiate throng, averse to the Muses' play, shall neither touch nor approach them. 21 The verses which contain those conditions run as follows:⁷

All evil thought and profane be still:
far hence, far hence from our choirs depart,
Who know not well what the Mystics tell,
or is not holy and pure of heart;
Who ne'er has the noble revelry learned,
or danced the dance of the Muses high;
* * * * *
I charge them once, I charge them twice,
I charge them thrice, that they draw not nigh
To the sacred dance of the Mystic choir.
But YE, my comrades, awake the song,
The night-long revels of joy and mirth
which ever of right to our feast belong.

22 Up to the present day I have already completed twenty books of notes. 23 As much longer life as the Gods' will shall grant me, and as much respite as is given me from managing my affairs and attending to the education of my children, every moment of that remaining and leisure time I shall devote to collecting similar brief and entertaining memoranda. 24 Thus the number of books, given the Gods' gracious help, will keep pace with the years of life itself, however many or few they may be, nor have I any desire to be allotted a longer span of existence than so long as I retain my present ability to write and take notes.

25 Summaries of the material to be found in each book of my Commentaries I have here placed all together, in order that it may at once be clear what is to be sought and found in every book.