

REVIEW

AELIAN: MENAGERIE AND VARIATION

Steven D. Smith, *Man and Animal in Severan Rome: The Literary Imagination of Claudius Aelianus* (Greek Culture in the Roman World). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 308. Hardcover, £65.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03398-6.

Man and Animal in Severan Rome claims to be a book about Aelian, but in many ways Smith's curiosity presses his project toward a broader remit. Modern scholar and ancient author emerge as well-matched interlocutors in a conversation that encompasses the nature of humankind (as opposed to that of non-human animals), the shared ethical and social responsibilities of all living creatures, and the ideas of Romanness and Hellenism within the heterogeneous world governed by the Severan Emperors. By the time Smith asks '... what qualities will finally rescue a being from the arena[?]' (271), his readers understand that such a question is not about animals in the traditional sense any more than it is about an 'arena' as a specific type of Roman spectacle venue. Rather, Smith and Aelian (or at least Smith's Aelian) ask us to consider the network of sympathies and prejudices that frame the existential arena we all share; and although Smith does not push a modern agenda overtly, one gets the strong impression that on many points his Aelian can speak as much to our contemporary situation as to the specific historical context of the Severan era.

In terms of his overt plan, Smith, who thanks the canine companions of his life in his acknowledgments (x), offers an elegantly articulated evaluation of Aelian's broad intellectual agenda, and he proposes that Aelian's treatment of animals (primarily in the *De natura animalium* (henceforth, *NA*) but also in the *Varia historia* and *Rustic Letters*) encodes a rich and dynamic critique of Severan Rome. Smith's Aelian emerges from these pages as something of a Hesiodic fabulist posing as an encyclopaedic natural scientist, such as Pliny the Elder. This Aelian is less a zoologist or encyclopaedist than is often assumed and far more a moralist and creative literary artist. Broadly speaking, Smith argues that Aelian uses animal lore in one of two ways: either to admonish humans to live up to an ethical benchmark set by some animal or to demonstrate that the demarcation between human and non-human is less rigid and more open to negotiation than is typically assumed. The book is organised into ten thematic chapters with an introduction, conclusion, and a useful appendix devoted to reconstructing the shape of Aelian's posthumous

invective against the emperor Elagabalus (*Katêgoria tou gunnidos*, ‘Abuse of a Ponce’).

The Introduction is among the most engaging parts of the book, and it would work well as stand-alone introduction to the ancient authorial voice in a post-humanist mode. Drawing upon Foucault and the tandem of Deleuze and Guattari but also figures such as Donna Haraway, who do not regularly appear in classical scholarship, Smith lays the groundwork for his study in terms of two particularly important concepts: the eclectic, seemingly random structure of Aelian’s work on animals (its *poikilia*), and Aelian’s emergence as a narrator constructed specifically in relation to his animal subjects. Smith takes a positive view of Aelian’s disordered literary plan, in which information about a particular animal might be spread over several parts of his vast work; instead of seeing *NA* as merely haphazard, he argues that Aelian has constructed a ‘hypertextual jungle’ that collects ‘molecular bits of a literary culture’ (5). Smith returns to the positive values of such *poikilia* in more detail in Chapter 3, but already in the Introduction we begin to see how the modern scholar imposes his vision onto the ancient author’s work by presenting *poikilia* as a positive aesthetic and intellectual model.

In terms of Aelian’s narratorial voice, Smith builds upon Aelian’s ancient reputation for eschewing the careerism of sophistic performance and political influence to argue (via Haraway) that this rejection of the expected Roman pattern for an educated elite man allows him to ‘become worldly’. This, in turn, allows Aelian to begin ‘writing like an animal’ (7). For anyone who comes to this volume with an interest in animal studies, this claim sets the tone for the post-human equivocation of Smith’s Aelian. On the one hand, Aelian is ready to become animal through his rejection of narrowly Roman (or Greek) notions of what it means to be human; yet he also becomes animal in order to write, which, generally speaking, brings him back into the sphere of human-as-opposed-to-animal (though Aelian does include stories of a few extraordinary non-human animals who learn to write). Smith’s Aelian frequently shows a degree of sympathy with and non-utilitarian admiration for non-human animals that is difficult to parallel among ancient authors, yet at other times he brings his animal lore to bear primarily with the goal of using the animal world as a moralising rallying cry for challenging human society to raise itself to a higher standard. The former attitude brings Aelian close to some post-humanist tendencies, but the latter remains rigidly humanist in seeing animals primarily in terms of their value to humans.

In Chapter 1, Smith does his due diligence by confronting traditional approaches to Aelian. As with so many other authors from antiquity, we know terribly little about the historical Aelian and the few ‘facts’ we have about him can either be called into question (does he create a fictionalised voice for himself? Do later ancient writers have real information about him or do they infer and surmise their biographical details?) or used as the foundation for

biographical reconstruction. Aelian seems to disrupt any simple approach to his own intellectual framework in *NA* by obfuscating his literary project. He asks to be ranked among the greatest poets, though he does not compose in verse; he compares himself to the great historians, though he does not write history; and he seemingly rejects philosophical engagement while claiming to have a passion (*erós*) for learning (*sophia*). With such a self-presentation, how can we hope to get our heads around him? To start with a seemingly simple point: What was Aelian's ethnicity? He himself is virtually silent on this matter, but Philostratus claims he was a Roman. His mastery of Greek could offer a clue to his ethnicity, but Favorinus of Arles and Lucian of Samosata remind us that such literary polish can come from rigorous training rather than being the birth right of ethnic identity. Was he a high priest from Praeneste as the *Suda* claims or is this a late fabrication? On all such matters, Smith tends toward anti-historicist scepticism, though a basic biographical framework (e.g. Aelian's rejection of the expected elite career) continues to inform some of his arguments in later chapters.

Chapter 2 deals with the role of animals in Aelian's *Rustic Letters*, and makes the persuasive argument that the animals who crowd the rural settings of these letters challenge readers to ponder the notion of a rustic humanity. 'One extreme is the putatively civilized farmer who asserts his moral authority and membership within conventional rustic society by marking his distance from and superiority over animal life. Another extreme is the putatively savage rustic who is represented by others and who represents himself as animal.' (34) This is a richly rewarding chapter with a series of close readings that highlight the literary talents of both Smith and Aelian. As might be expected, classical Athenian comedy also figures prominently. Of particular interest is Smith's unpacking of the Menandrian themes involving Kallipides and Knemon in *Epistles* 13–16 (41–5). At one point, Kallipides invites the rebooted old grouch to a festival of Pan where Knemon might get a little drunk and rape a cute girl. Kallipides presents this possibility in positive terms, and he suggests that the communal experience would draw Knemon out of his isolation and into the group. Knemon, ever wild (*agrios*), refuses and, unlike his Menandrian model, he is not integrated into the community. Smith builds toward the conclusion that 'Knemon depicts himself as both an ethical exemplar and a wild animal that remains outside social conventions' (44) and then sees Knemon's stance as a parallel to Aelian's own refusal to follow a traditional career path. This was a rare point where I felt that Smith could have pressed his thinking further, particularly in terms of the contestation of identities that Kallipides and Knemon undertake. There are competing ethical systems here (perhaps extending to the lot of the women exposed to sexual violence at the festival), and competing notions of community and identity (among the rustics but also with Aelian and his readership) that do not come

out clearly enough in Smith's assessment. Despite this quibble, however, this is a very effective chapter.

Chapter 3 returns to the theme of Aelian's varied style that had been broached in the Introduction. Here we get a full and compelling treatment of the implications of Aelian's organisational style. Perhaps outdoing the Callimachean tradition, Aelian presents *ta poikilia poikilôs*, 'the varied contents in a varied manner' (Smith's translation of *NA epilogue*, 431.3 on 51). Aesthetically, this is fascinating enough, but Smith shows how such an extreme form of *poikilia* could be understood as the mark of an effeminate author and how Aelian sought to pre-empt such criticisms by asserting a masculine usefulness for his *NA* (57–9). I was not exactly sure what this usefulness was, and it seems to shift into something more like aesthetic appreciation, but the posturing is interesting in its own right, particularly when combined with Aelian's adoption of something of an anti-Socratic Socrates to justify his own withdrawal from political life (64).

Chapter 4 introduces Smith's most political reading of Aelian, in which animals become the raw material for covert political critique. The chapter, like *NA* itself, begins with a tale about how Diomedes' companions were turned into birds that maintain certain human and specifically Greek attitudes. Smith's arguments here are enjoyable and elegantly layered; Smith's Aelian draws upon a variety of sources—especially Homer, Ovid, and Pliny—to imply that these men were changed into birds as punishment for Diomedes' attack on Aphrodite at Troy. Smith sees this as a programmatic passage that articulates, *sotto voce*, the dangers of overt critique, since for Diomedes' men 'becoming animal was the direct result of challenging divine authority' (71). I think that this is a compelling reading, though some might wonder why the opening passage in a work that presents *ta poikilia poikilôs* would be programmatic, since it is hardly *poikilos* to put such a passage first, or how an anti-Severan critique can be sustained without accepting a more historicist biography of Aelian than we find in the Introduction. Smith bolsters his reading with a variety of other examples that expand this political critique and show how Aelian urges us to rethink the dynamics of the arena. Rather than viewing animals as the stuff of blood-spectacle in the morally depraved tradition of Roman entertainment, his animals in *NA* lead to 'an appreciation of our common humanity with animals' (81).

Philosophy comes to the fore in Chapter 5, where (as in Chapter 1) Smith has to sort through various traditional readings that seek to lock Aelian into a narrowly delimited doctrinal box. Smith makes a strong case for seeing Aelian as an eclectic philosophical thinker who is steeped primarily, but never rigidly, in the Stoic tradition. From this perspective, Aelian's use of animals becomes particularly pointed, since Stoic doctrine denied the possibility of animal rationality. Although Aelian often refers to animals as *ta aloga*, the

traditional Stoic label for ‘the irrational’ creatures, he also presents examples of animal behaviours that challenge this delimitation. Here for the first time, we find a clear articulation of Smith’s main argument about Aelian’s figuration of the relationship between human and non-human animals: most ancient thinkers assert that some human superabundance distinguishes these two categories (Stoics posit rationality; many others, as discussed in Heath (2005), emphasise language), but Aelian presents this divide in terms of a human deficiency, perhaps a particularly Roman deficiency.¹ Whereas animals fulfil the Stoic aim of living in admirable harmony with nature, the vast majority of humans fail to do so because of our greed, ambition, ego, and weakness for luxury. Although Smith does not push in this direction, his presentation of Aelian begins to look rather like some modern post-humanist thinkers. Giorgio Agamben, for example, follows a similar template in *The Open* (2002), where he extends Heideggerian theories to show that humans lack the openness to a consuming fascination that characterises many animal species.²

Chapter 6 deals with myth and religion. Animals, of course, had always figured prominently in these conceptual spaces in terms of the close connections between certain divinities and animals, etiologies, sacrifice, etc. Here Smith’s main goal is to demonstrate Aelian’s greater creativity in working with animals in myth and religion than is typically recognised. For example, he shows that against the traditional habit of deriding Egyptian animal worship, Aelian notes a handful of cases in which Greeks exhibit similar cultic behaviour. Aelian also spurs his audience to reconsider well-known tales, as with his adaptation of Petronius’ ‘Widow of Ephesus’, which Aelian, in his post-humanist vein, reconfigures to emphasise the potential for an idealised ‘reciprocity of *kharis*’ (135) between human and non-human. And his description of the close relationship between the ‘quasi-divine’ (141) Pindos and an amazing snake draws upon Ovid and Euripides to problematise the boundary between human and the divine in a way that spurs critical reflection on the imperial cult.

By this point it comes as little surprise to find in Chapter 7, that Aelian uses ethnography as a creative, rather than an objective, mode of cultural commentary. His notably positive attitude toward Egyptian animal worship, for example, resists the lure of Hellenocentrism, and his openness to multiple explanations of such animal worship (including that practiced by Greeks) rejects the simplicity of totalising approaches to diverse cultural systems. Egypt (like Greece and Rome) cannot be reduced to a simple and consistently knowable ethnographic formula. Smith’s reading of Aelian’s story about the

¹ J. Heath, *The Talking Greeks: Speech, Animals and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus and Plato* (Cambridge, 2005).

² G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. K. Attell (Stanford, 2003).

killing of the *anthias* fish as a pointed reflection on Caracalla's slaughter of Alexandrian youths in 215 CE is fascinating and convincing (162–4). And his discussion of India as 'hypernatural' (165) returns to the theme of considering the human condition in terms of a deficit, as in the example of the non-verbal *kunokephaloi*, who seem to enjoy the best of human civilisation while avoiding many of its shortcomings (170).

Chapter 8 focuses on sexualised animal narratives, and here the ambivalence of Aelian's use of animals as a narrative tool becomes clear. In Chapter 5, we saw Aelian praise animals for living in harmony with nature, but here the variegation of the animal world challenges such a perspective. Whereas the elephant is easily praised for its sexual modesty, the *skaros* fish deserves to be caught because of its boundless lust. Yet since Smith's Aelian is less of a natural scientist and more of a moralist, he can have it both ways. The *skaros* fish thus serves to condemn human lust, while dual-sexed animals, such as the hare and the ichneumon, 'elicit wonder rather than disgust' (194), since they are gifts of nature. Smith corrals Aelian's flexible approach to animal sexuality in this way: 'ensorious moral pronouncements in the *NA* should not be taken at face value as indications of the author's philosophical or moral "attitude". In fact, the *NA* demonstrates that holding tenaciously to a single philosophical or moral attitude will inevitably fail when the moralist is faced with nature's infinite variety' (185).

Chapter 9 presents Aelian's 'radically indirect' (246) discussion of kingship that is carried out through his accounts of bees, lions, and eagles. I found this chapter to be wonderfully successful, in large part because of the way in which these three animals exemplify the flexible power of Aelian's non-linear organisational structure. Smith begins the discussion with an overview of imperial literature dealing with theories and practices of kingship, and this provides a useful framework within which to assess Aelian's covert and fabular take on this genre. Taken together, the bee (as denizen of the well-ordered hive and producer of honey), the lion (a ferocious carnivore that can occasionally be tamed), and the eagle (a rapacious raptor and symbol of both Roman military might and imperial power) allow Aelian to speak of kingship in a variety of capacities. Each of these kingly animals offers us lessons about the possible greatness and potential pitfalls of giving a single human a position of ultimate authority.

The final chapter deals with women in the *Varia Historia* and the challenge that they present to Aelian's thinking about the ethics of the male-centred Roman world. Smith uses the sections on Aspasia (a *hetaira* from Phokaia, not the more famous consort of Pericles) and Atalante to show how Aelian presents these women as cultural constructs. Both women eschew luxury in favour of ethically superior moderation, but beyond this blunt point Smith shows Aelian to be exploring far more challenging ideas. Aspasia is

surely virtuous, but her novelistic life-arc demands that she adapt herself to radically changed social circumstances. If morals are culturally contextualised, then this poses yet another challenge to Hellenised Roman ethical norms. And Aelian's *Atalanta* is simultaneously so desirable and so artificial as to become a paradox. She is the ideally objectified distillate of the patriarchal system of erotics, but she can only be encountered via literary artifice. Both women emerge as 'provocative figures that compel careful readers to rethink the moral criteria by which both male and female subjects are constructed in Roman Imperial life' (268).

By the end of *Man and Animal in Severan Rome*, one gets the sense that the task of understanding Aelian approximates the challenges of coming to terms with one of Kandinsky's paintings—neither artist follows an expected pattern (narrative or figurative) and thus neither artist advertises an obvious point of interpretive entry. A dismissive response might claim that there is no structure or meaning to be found or generated amid such chaos; but Smith finds an impressionistic habit, an irregular network of recurrences and resonances that do permit the articulation of meaning in Aelian's thinking. Throughout this review, I have referred to 'Smith's Aelian', because there is an inherent risk in accepting Smith's reading. If *poikilia* is the name of the game, then do concepts such as political critique of the Severan regime or sustained (if non-contiguous) reflections on Stoicism or Hellenism not begin to sound more like the idiosyncratic deductions of the interpreter rather than a real excavation of Aelian's 'literary imagination' (as the subtitle claims)? Perhaps. And certainly someone else might have written a vastly different account of Aelian's presentation of 'man and animal' (above and beyond the way that every work of scholarship is uniquely personal). But as when someone has the chance to hear an expert offer an elegant discussion of how to experience a Kandinsky, Smith gives us a compelling, incisive and thought-provoking tour of Aelian's thought. Smith's Aelian is well worth knowing.

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