

**‘Reality, Paradox and Storytelling in Aulus Gellius’ Narrative of Androcles and the Lion.’**

Patricia Watson

University of Sydney

patricia.watson@sydney.edu.au

The tale of Androcles and the Lion is best known from Aulus Gellius (*NA* 5.15), whose account may be summarised as follows: At a *venatio* in the Circus Maximus, a number of condemned criminals, including the slave Androclus, were brought in to face a particularly ferocious lion. On sighting Androclus, the lion approached and greeted him like a pet dog in an astounding scene of mutual recognition between man and beast. The audience went wild, prompting the presiding emperor to ask Androclus for an explanation. Then Androclus related his story: he had been the slave of the governor of Africa, whose habitual cruel treatment had forced him to flee and take refuge in the desert. Sheltering in a cave, he encountered a lion with a wounded paw, which he treated; thereafter he lived with the lion, sharing its food, for three years, until he tired of his animal-like existence, left, was caught and handed back to his master, who had him summarily condemned to the arena. The lion, explained Androclus, was simply showing gratitude for the benefaction it had received. The story was written on a tablet and circulated around the Circus; by popular request both slave and lion were freed and afterwards Androclus was often seen, with the lion on a leash, doing the rounds of the shops throughout the city, everyone who encountered them exclaiming: ‘This is the lion that played host to a man, this is the man who played physician to a lion’.

The story is attributed by Gellius to Apion, a scholarly Alexandrian writing under the Julio-Claudians. In the absence of Apion’s account, it is impossible to know to whether Gellius merely translates Apion’s Greek into Latin<sup>1</sup> or whether he adds touches of his own: a comparison of Gellius’ Arion and the Dolphin tale (*NA* 16-19) with an original that *is* extant - Herodotus, 1.23-4 - shows that here at least Gellius does make changes, either expanding, or giving less attention to, various narrative details.<sup>2</sup> Another version of the Androcles story, contemporary with Gellius, is to be found in Aelian, *On Animals* 7.48. Aelian’s account differs in several important respects from the version of Gellius. For instance, Androcles, whose master is a

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<sup>1</sup> That this is a possibility is suggested by the numerous times Gellius acknowledges his debt to Apion with *inquit*.

<sup>2</sup> See Anderson (2004) 108-12.

senator, has run away to escape punishment for a crime he has committed; when the lion spares him the crowd's initial reaction is that he must be a magician and a leopard is sent against him which the lion kills: it is then that the story is revealed and Androcles and the lion set free; the events are narrated in chronological sequence, leading to the moral that animals possess memory.

The precise relationship between Aelian, Gellius and Apion is unclear. Both Aelian and Gellius might possibly go back independently to Apion, changing details of the story to suit their own purposes. For example, Scobie<sup>3</sup> suggested that the reason given in Gellius for Androcles' flight - escape from a cruel master - was derived from Apion, who would not, as a Greek, have been reluctant to record such behaviour on the part of a Roman senator; Aelian, on the other hand, as a member of the literary circle of Julia Domna, might have made alterations to Apion's version to suit the sensibilities of his group, turning Androcles into a criminal fugitive from justice for an unspecified crime against his master.

Gellius' narrative has been discussed from three perspectives: (1) as a folktale (Scobie 1997) (2) for the light it casts on the attitudes of spectators to *venationes* (Fagan 2011) (3) as an illustration of Gellius' storytelling technique (Anderson 2004). I will discuss the story under each of these headings in turn.

### **(1) Androcles and the Lion as Folk-tale**

According to Scobie<sup>4</sup> the story is pure fiction, a folk-tale of Aarne-Thompson's type 156 (animals who show gratitude for human benefactions). Scobie's arguments include: (i) Pliny's (avowedly factual) list of animals that remember kindnesses done to them by humans (*HN* 8.56-61) does not include this story, though he must have known it, especially since it is mentioned by Seneca (*Ben.* 2.19.1): *leonem in amphitheatro spectavimus, qui unum e bestiariis agnitum, cum quondam eius fuisset magister, protexit ab impetu bestiarum* ('We have seen a lion in the amphitheatre, who, when it recognized one of the men who fought with wild beasts as the man who had once been its keeper, protected him against the attacks of the other animals'). Pliny must therefore have recognised it as fiction. But the Senecan passage does not prove that Pliny knew the story of Androcles, although the lion's protection of its former trainer from other animals might be reflected in the detail in Aelian's account where the leopard sent against

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<sup>3</sup> Scobie (1977) 20.

<sup>4</sup> Scobie (1977) 18-23.

Androcles is killed by the lion. (ii) there are fantastic elements in the account, such as the improbability of a lion being changed from savage predator to tame canine-like pet, or the unlikely scenario of a lion being released into the ownership of a former slave who was then allowed to parade it around the city on a lead. (iii) the suspicious appearance of the number three (Androcles stays with the lion three years; he is then captured after three days) is suggestive of folk-tales, in which the number is a significant one.

It cannot be denied that Gellius' narrative contains folk-tale elements or unrealistic details, such as a man and wild animal sharing their living quarters. But it does not necessarily follow that the story is 'pure fiction'. Apion apparently stressed the fact that he witnessed the event with his own eyes:

hoc autem, quod in libro Aegyptiacorum quinto scripsit, neque audisse neque legisse, sed ipsum sese in urbe Roma vidisse oculis suis confirmat ... 'Eius rei, Romae cum forte essem, spectator' inquit 'fui' (Gellius, *NA* 5.15)

but this incident, which he describes in the fifth book of his *Wonders of Egypt*, he declares that he neither heard nor read, but saw himself with his own eyes in the city of Rome ... "Of that spectacle, since I chanced to be in Rome, I was," he says, "an eye-witness".

This affirmation may easily be interpreted as a ploy to make the story realistic, but the emphasis on autopsy, together with the very specific Roman setting in a work otherwise dealing with Egyptian marvels, might suggest that there is at least some basis in fact. Indeed, a major stumbling-block to acceptance of the story as real - that a ferocious lion would not behave in a manner sharply at odds with its wild nature - can be shown to be of dubious validity. In addition to ancient accounts such as those of Statius (*Silv.* 2.5) and Martial (1.6, 14, 22, 48, 51, 60, 104) of tame lions in the arena,<sup>5</sup> and the various tales of interaction between wild animals and humans recorded by Pliny (*loc. cit.*; cf. Aelian, *loc. cit.*), two contemporary examples may be adduced. (i) Alex Larenty, an English animal expert working at a lion park outside Johannesburg, has forged a unique relationship with a nine-year-old lion, Jamu, by rubbing his

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<sup>5</sup> See also Coleman on Mart. *Spect.* 12.

paws. Larenty told the *Daily Mail* ‘he likes being scratched and tickled and now his favourite game is “This Little Piggy” ’.<sup>6</sup> (ii) Even more striking, and illustrative as well of a lion’s capacity for remembering a former human friend, is the story of Christian the Lion, which has recently become widely disseminated via YouTube. Christian was purchased as a cub by two Australians, John Rendall and Anthony Bourke, in Harrods, London, in 1969. The store was desperate to get rid of the lion because of an unfortunate incident when he escaped one night and destroyed the carpet department. The men kept him till he was a year old, obtaining permission from a local vicar to exercise Christian in a church graveyard, and they also took their pet on day trips to the seaside. When keeping a fully grown lion was no longer practical, they sent him to Africa to the care of George Adamson (who had raised Elsa the lioness, featured in the film *Born Free*). Christian was introduced to the wild and became leader of a pride. Two years later, the two original owners travelled to Kenya where their reunion with Christian was filmed.<sup>7</sup> The manner in which the lion pauses, then shows recognition, approaches slowly at first, and finally leaps up, tail wagging, and hugs and licks his former friends is markedly similar to Gellius’ description of the recognition scene:

hunc ille leo ubi vidit procul, repente ... quasi admirans stetit ac deinde sensim atque placide tamquam noscitabundus ad hominem accedit. Tum caudam more atque ritu adulantium canum clementer et blande movet hominisque se corpori adiungit cruraque eius et manus prope iam exanimati metu lingua leniter demulcet.

When that lion saw him from a distance, suddenly ... he stopped short as if in amazement, and then approached the man slowly and quietly, as if he recognized him. Then, wagging his tail in a gentle and caressing way, after the manner and fashion of fawning dogs, he embraced the man, who was now half dead from fright, and gently licked his legs and hands.

In both modern examples, the taming of the lion is explicable: Christian the lion had been brought up from a cub, while Alex Larenty is an animal handler. In Gellius’ account, on the other hand, there is the much more improbable situation - that a human encounters a fully-grown lion

<sup>6</sup> <http://news.ninemsn.com.au/glanceview/126971/tender-touch-tames-king-of-jungle.glance>

<sup>7</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvCjyWp3rEk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvCjyWp3rEk)

in the wild with whom he forges a relationship. Seneca's brief allusion (cited above) to an occasion when a lion in the amphitheatre protected a beast-fighter from the onslaught of the other animals because the *bestiarius* had been the lion's trainer is a more plausible scenario, and one which might conceivably underlie the Androcles story<sup>8</sup>, the tale being amplified and embroidered, possibly under the influence of folktales.<sup>9</sup>

## (2) Androcles in the Context of Venationes

In a recent work on the social psychology of the arena, Garrett Fagan uses the Androcles story to cast light on audience attitudes to *venationes*.<sup>10</sup> Although he regards the story as fable, he sees the reactions of the audience in Gellius and Aelian - astonishment in the first and vindictiveness in the second case - as two alternative, but equally plausible, ways of behaviour on the part of a Roman audience whose expectations were confounded, that is, when a wild animal acted with friendliness rather than aggression towards its human prey. Certainly, the unprecedented behaviour of the lion underlies the audience's response, accustomed as they were to lions routinely killing condemned criminals and/or being killed themselves.<sup>11</sup> But more can be added. In Gellius' account, in contrast to Aelian's, both man and animal *earn* the sympathy of the spectators. For Androcles, as a condemned criminal, the expected outcome of his fight as a *bestiarius* was death. Furthermore, if a *condemnatus* was spared, as sometimes happened,<sup>12</sup> it was because he had displayed some special sort of bravery or skill in fighting - something which Androcles had certainly not done. How, then, does Androcles earn his freedom? What is important here is the inversion of the usual roles of both slave and beast. Androcles, though a slave i.e. sub-human,<sup>13</sup> and a criminal, redeems himself by displaying traits associated not with slaves but with humane, civilised Roman citizens: he performs a *beneficium*,<sup>14</sup> he not only pulls

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<sup>8</sup> Especially if, as suggested above, the detail in Aelian of the leopard sent to attack Androcles reflects this story.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dunkle (2008) 228.

<sup>10</sup> Fagan (2011) 257-60.

<sup>11</sup> For the expectations of the audience and the popularity of spectacles involving the death of criminals, see Coleman (1990) esp. 54-57.

<sup>12</sup> Dunkle (2008) 139-40.

<sup>13</sup> For slaves as less than human and therefore regarded as legitimately subject to harsh punishments in the arena, see Coleman (1990) 55; Bradley (1994) 134-45 argues that despite the Stoic view (e.g. Seneca, *Ep.* 47) that slaves were part of a common humanity, the average Roman is likely to have regarded them as an inferior species.

<sup>14</sup> It was disputed whether a slave could perform a *beneficium*: for the case in favour of this, see Seneca, *Ben.* 3.18-28, but his may be a minority view: cf. n.13 above.

out the thorn, as in Aelian's version, but he treats the wound in a way that displays a degree of medical skill:

Ibi ... ego stirpem ingentem vestigio pedis eius haerentem revelli conceptamque saniem volnere intimo expressi accuratiusque sine magna iam formidine siccavi penitus atque detersi cruorem. Illa tunc mea opera et medella levatus ...

Then ... I drew out a huge splinter that was embedded in the sole of the foot, squeezed out the pus that had formed in the interior of the wound, and being now free from any great feeling of fear, dried it thoroughly and wiped away the blood. Then, relieved by that attention and treatment of mine ...

In addition, Androcles devises a way to cook his food in order to avoid eating it raw: *nam, quas venabatur feras, membra opimiora ad specum mihi subgerebat, quae ego ignis copiam non habens meridiano sole torrens edebam* ('for he used to bring for me to the cave the choicest parts of the game which he took in hunting, which I, having no means of making a fire, would roast in the noonday sun and eat'), that is, he stands on the side of 'culture' versus 'nature'. Moreover, he eventually leaves because he tires of his animal-like existence (*ubi me ... vitae illius ferinae iam pertaesum est, leone in venatum profecto reliqui specum* 'after I had finally grown tired of that wild life, I left the cave when the lion had gone off to hunt'), thus again asserting his humanity; by contrast, Aelian's Androcles amusingly gets itchy because of his unkempt condition. Finally, Androcles can be seen to have tamed the lion by his act of *beneficium* to it; thus representing the control of humanity - and Roman civilisation in particular - over the wild.

As to the lion, its ferocity is stressed; it is not just any lion but an outstanding specimen:

praeter alia omnia leonum . . . immanitas admirationi fuit praeterque omnis ceteros unus. Is unus leo corporis impetu et vastitudine terrificoque fremitu et sonoro, toris comisque cervicium fluctuantibus animos oculosque omnium in sese converterat.

But above everything else ... the ferocity of the lions was a cause of amazement, and above all other lions, one in particular. This one lion had drawn to itself the attention and eyes of all because of the vigour and huge size of its body, its terrifying and deep roar, the development of its muscles, and the mane streaming over its shoulders.

Such an animal would normally be expected to have ended its career by dying in the sight of the spectators, as does a lion in an epigram of Martial (Mart. 8.55). In Gellius' story this supreme example of natural savagery is humanised and civilised: note that its cave is represented as its home: *postquam introgressus ... leo ... in habitaculum illud suum* ('But when the lion had entered his own little abode'). It stretches out its paw to Androcles and afterwards lies with its foot in his hands; it is likened to a domesticated dog: *caudam more atque ritu adulantium canum clementer et blande movet* ('he wagged his tail in a gentle and caressing way, after the manner and fashion of fawning dogs'); Androcles leads it round the City *loro tenui revinctum* ('attached to a slender leash'). Thus both Androcles - the criminal and sub-human slave, and the beast, are elevated to the level of the civilised and tame, earning their liberation from the wild and uncivilised domain of the arena and their place in Roman society.

### (3) Gellius as Storyteller

Anderson's conclusion that Gellius is 'not a gifted storyteller'<sup>15</sup> may be challenged, especially by comparing the version of Aelian. I have discussed above the ways in which Gellius, by stressing the humanising of the slave and the lion, underscores the paradoxical nature of the tale. In particular, the extended descriptions, first of the exceptional ferocity of the lion, and then its canine-like behaviour (cited above in section 1), serve to throw emphasis on the contrast between the lion's natural wildness and its transformed state. The paradox is summed up in the concluding *hic est leo hospes hominis, hic est homo medicus leonis* ('this is the lion that played host to a man, this is the man who played physician to a lion'): contrast Aelian's bald statement of the moral of the story- that animals possess memory.

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<sup>15</sup> Anderson (2004) 117.

It has also been shown how the stress on the taming of the wild offers an explanation for the audience's eager desire to see Androcles and the lion pardoned. This is brought out more clearly by the use of the 'flash-back' technique, which allows for the juxtaposition of Androcles' narrative and the audience's reaction to it. Indeed, Gellius makes very effective use of this technique - and here a comparison with Aelian is again instructive. Whereas Aelian preserves the chronological sequence, Gellius engages the reader's interest immediately by commencing with a vivid description of the lions in the Circus, and the one in particular, as a lead-up to the encounter between Androcles and the lion. Furthermore, this narrative sequence is an effective means of adding realism, Gellius starting with a scene in the arena which might possibly have been familiar to his readers,<sup>16</sup> then including a story within a story, as Androcles relates the part of the tale which contains the most fantastic elements but which, by being incorporated within it, gains in credibility.

Finally, the circumstances under which Androcles has fled his master are notably different in the accounts of Aelian and Gellius. The former makes Androcles guilty of a crime against his owner, which prompts his flight and leads to his eventual condemnation to the arena. By contrast, Gellius evinces sympathy for Androcles by laying stress on the cruelty of the slave's master: it is this which both causes Androcles to flee and his master to have him subjected to a punishment that is somewhat excessive for the offence (*damnatio ad bestias*, though occasionally inflicted on fugitives, was usually reserved for really serious crimes such as murder, sacrilege or arson<sup>17</sup>). The reader is likewise encouraged to empathise with the lion, which is treated in an engaging manner, especially in the final scene where it is seen making the rounds of the shops in Rome on a lead, like a pet dog.

Gellius, then, highlights the paradoxical nature of the Androcles tale, so that the concluding *hic est leo hospes hominis, hic est homo medicus leonis* is no mere rhetorical flourish but a summing up of the essence of the story. He arranges the narrative in such a way as to maximise its apparent reality and lastly, he encourages his reader, by evoking sympathy for the slave and the lion, to identify with the audience in the arena, so that by the end the reader feels not only that a satisfactory conclusion has been reached but is also so involved in the story that the question of its actual reality seems quite unimportant.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. discussion above and n. 6.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Mart. *Spect.* 9.7-10 with Coleman, Garnsey (1970) 129-31.



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