

BOOK REVIEW

Man and Animal in Severan Rome: The Literary Imagination of Claudius Aelianus. By STEVEN D. SMITH. Greek Culture in the Roman World. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 308. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03398-6.

This is a welcome study of a neglected author. Recent editions and translations have made Aelian's works considerably more accessible, but there have been still few specialized studies devoted to him. Smith offers the first monograph-length study of Aelian in English, and the first in any language to include coverage of his three extant works: *On the Nature of Animals* (henceforth the *NA*), *Varied History*, and *Rustic Letters*. Smith's book therefore fulfills a long-standing need for a thorough treatment of Aelian, and for a reconsideration of his work in light of new approaches to Imperial Greek literature.

As should be expected, Smith offers a substantially different portrait of its subject from what one encounters in much previous scholarship on Aelian. Smith's Aelian is emphatically not a desk-bound and dull moralist, much less a simple repository for fragments of lost authors and kernels of historical fact, as he has often been regarded. He is instead a paradoxical figure, offering in his works what seems to be the outlook of a conservative Roman, but doing so in Atticizing Greek with all the playfulness and elusiveness of a sophist. Smith's major claim is that Aelian was a "countercultural" figure in Severan Rome (7): his works present a thoroughgoing but mostly oblique critique of the society in which he lived.

To support his major claim, Smith offers a valuable literary study of Aelian's works. The core of the book is devoted to the *NA*, which Smith rightly describes as Aelian's "greatest work" (45). Seven chapters, organized thematically, focus on it; these are bookended by single chapters devoted, respectively, to the *Rustic Letters* and the *Varied History*. All of these chapters offer extended close readings of key passages from Aelian's works; full quotations of these passages are always included, with both the Greek text and an accompanying translation. The close readings that Smith provides helpfully point out possible allusions and intertexts, most often to Greek texts, but occasionally and intriguingly also to Latin texts. Smith's discussions are attentive to subtle nuances in Aelian's Greek, and to al-

ternative readings in the manuscript tradition. The close readings of individual passages are the greatest strength of Smith's study, which should become an obligatory point of reference for future treatments of Aelian's works.

Smith's literary study is grounded in a discussion of Aelian's life. There is little evidence to work with here, and little new for Smith to say on this subject. The only sources for Aelian's life are Philostratus' brief mention (*VS* 2.31 624-5), an entry in the *Suda* (at 178 Adler), and a handful of autobiographical passages in his own works. Smith provides a sensible review of this evidence, and justly rejects as unlikely some of the more speculative suggestions about Aelian's life, such as that his family came from Egypt (17). Aelian, Smith observes, is evasive about himself, and this evasiveness makes it hard to link biographical details about him from Philostratus and the *Suda* with the literary persona that appears in his own works. This is a helpful observation, but there is a tendency at times in the rest of the study for biographical material from Philostratus to inform discussions of Aelian's works. Smith recognizes the problems inherent in a "biographically based approach" to Aelian's works (127), but this approach nonetheless makes some appearance in his study, notably in the section on marriage and the Roman family.

The limited evidence for Aelian's life and his position in Severan Rome also presents some problems for Smith's larger claims about his status as a countercultural figure. The term "countercultural" is never defined, and its use in the book also raises the significant question of what might qualify as normative culture in Rome under the Severans. To which culture(s) exactly was Aelian counter? Aelian's choice to write a treatise attacking the recently-deceased emperor Elagabalus hardly seems like a countercultural step to take during the reign of Severus Alexander, who was eager to distinguish himself from his controversial predecessor. Smith's study certainly demonstrates that Aelian's works criticize many aspects of contemporary Roman society, but this is not enough to establish that he was a countercultural figure.

The claim that Aelian was a countercultural figure runs into further problems if he is approached within a larger frame of reference than what is employed in Smith's study. Parallels and comparisons are offered between Aelian and a relatively select group of Greek authors of the Imperial period, above all Philostratus, but it is difficult to assign the label of countercultural to any of them. Better candidates for this label are mostly or entirely absent from Smith's study, including authors who shared Aelian's interests in animals. One such candidate is Tatian, a Christian and self-proclaimed Assyrian who lived in Rome a little before

Aelian's birth; among his lost works is a treatise called *On Animals*. Tatian offered a harsh attack in his extant *Against the Greeks* on contemporary Greek culture, and on Roman appropriations of it. With someone like Tatian in mind, the claim that Aelian was a countercultural figure falls apart.

Smith's study is still most welcome. It should be of interest to scholars of many different specialties; a full *Index locorum* and the thematic organization of its chapters both make quick consultation an easy task. Especially worthy of note is the study's appendix, which collects and discusses the possible fragments of Aelian's lost work against Elagabalus.

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