

BUSYBODIES OR BUSY BODIES?
PLUTARCH'S *DE CURIOSITATE* AND GELLIUS*

1. A lively and enjoyable short treatise by Plutarch (no. 97 in Lamprias' catalogue) bears the title *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*, and is usually referred to by the Latin title *De curiositate*, current since the Renaissance. Though this paper mainly deals with what is arguably the first evident testimony of its reception in the Latin world, in Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae*, only a few decades later than Plutarch's death, a few words about the appropriateness of this Latin title are in order. But first we must shortly dwell on the concept of *πολυπραγμοσύνη* itself and on its evolution in Greek culture from the fifth century BC down to Plutarch's time.

It must first of all be said that *πολυπραγμοσύνη*, like its opposite *ἀπραγμοσύνη*, as well as other words formed in the same way, like *δικαιοσύνη* or *σωφροσύνη*, are abstract nouns indicating human qualities¹. We should never lose sight of this, since, as we shall see, Gellius understands the term in quite a different way, as referring to a form of action rather to a psychological attitude. The linguistic elements making up this compound are clear, and in its actual use the idea of the attitude of busying oneself with many things soon received a negative twist, and the *πολυπράγμων*, the man bent on *πολυπραγμοσύνη*, was often regarded as a meddling busybody, tending to interfere with matters that were no concern of his.

The concept of *πολυπραγμοσύνη* has been investigated in a series of excellent studies, to which it will suffice to refer the reader. Victor Ehrenberg² has shown that in the fifth and fourth centuries BC the word was used almost exclusively in a political sense. It was commonly considered, for example, as the main guideline of Athens' foreign policy, positive or negative according to the different points of view. In domestic politics the term was often used by the aristocrats and other conservatives to blame whoever tried to change the status quo, in order to undermine their political pre-eminence, as shown by A.W.H. Adkins³. Even for Plato justice consists in *τὰ ἑαυτοῦ πράττειν καὶ μὴ πολυπραγμονεῖν*⁴. Still in Plutarch *πολυπραγμοσύνη* has mainly political implications in the *Vitae*⁵, whereas, as we shall see, in the treatise expressly devoted to the *πολυπραγμοσύνη* it refers to ethics. The

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¹ See, correctly, Ehrenberg 1947, 46.

² Ehrenberg 1947.

³ Adkins 1976,

⁴ Plat. *resp.* 433a.

⁵ Cf. van Loof 2008, 302. For the *πολυπραγμοσύνη* as "subversive" tool see also Brown 2006, 555-558.

whole range of the concept of πολυπραγμοσύνη has been thoroughly investigated by Matthew Leigh⁶, also in connection with the Latin ideas of *curiosus* and *curiositas*.

It is hardly surprising that with the decline of the πόλις, in the Hellenistic period, and even more under the empire, the concept of πολυπραγμοσύνη found its more common application in the ethical sphere and in relation to the single individual. A number of plays belonging to the so-called “New Comedy” deal with πολυπράγμονες⁷ and a passage of Epictetus gives us a good idea of what a πολυπράγμων (or a περίεργος, a term that had become synonymous with the former, and is used as such in Plutarch’s treatise too) was considered to be at the end of the first century AD, by stating what he is not. The Cynic philosopher, who cares for other people’s business because he means to benefit all humankind, says Epictetus, cannot be called a πολυπράγμων or a περίεργος. In fact, as he remarks, “the man who is in this frame of mind is neither a busybody nor a meddler; for he is not meddling in other people’s affairs when he is overseeing the actions of men, but these are his proper concern”⁸.

2. As we said, Plutarch’s περί πολυπραγμοσύνης has been going by the Latin title of *De curiositate* since the Renaissance⁹. But, as we shall see, when Gellius tries to come up with a Latin equivalent of Plutarch’s title, he does not even take *curiositas* into consideration. This can be explained in many ways. First of all, before Gellius, the abstract *curiositas* appears only once in extant Latin, and not in a literary work, but in a letter of Cicero’s to Atticus, where it can be understood in the same sense as our “curiosity”, if somewhat to the utmost degree. Atticus has imparted his friend a mere hint of a piece of gossip; Cicero’s says that Atticus’ clue makes him ravenous with curiosity (*in curiositate* ὄξυπεινος), but that he is ready to wait and hear the whole matter from Atticus’ own voice¹⁰. As made clear by the Greek words interspersed in the Latin, Cicero is speaking informally with his friend, and does not refrain from creating a neologism of the type “que l’on

⁶ Leigh 2013.

⁷ Some even bear the title Πολυπράγμων: cf. Inglese 1996, 16 n. 23.

⁸ Epict. *diss.* 3.22.97 οὔτε περίεργος οὔτε πολυπράγμων ἐστὶν ὁ οὕτω διακείμενος· οὐ γὰρ τὰ ἄλλοτρια πολυπραγμονεῖ, ὅταν τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἐπισκοπῇ, ἀλλὰ τὰ ἴδια (transl. by Oldfather 1928, 165). See also Brown 2006, 553. Compare Philo *de Abr.* 20-21, pointed out by van Hoof 2008, 304.

⁹ See Holford-Strevens 2003, 229 n. 26.

¹⁰ Cic. *Att.* 2.12.2 *quantam porro mihi expectationem dedisti convivii istius ἀσελγούς! Sum in curiositate ὄξυπεινος, sed tamen facile patior te id ad me συμπόσιον non scribere: praesentem audire malo.*

risque dans une conversation familière, pour l'oublier aussitôt", in the words of a Swiss scholar: André Labhardt¹¹.

This is the first reason why *curiositas* could hardly be an obvious resort for the rendering of πολυπραγμοσύνη. But since Gellius, as we shall see, does envisage a neologism formed with the same suffix for the purpose – *negotiositas* –, though he finally rejects it, a more important reason is probably the unsuitable meaning of the adjective *curiosus* in the *Noctes Atticae*. In Gellius *curiosus* almost invariably refers to care and precision in scholarship¹², particularly as far as language and literature are concerned¹³.

It can hardly be denied that the Latin *curiosus* contains negative implications at times. One could even quote a passage in Plautus¹⁴ where it has a meaning almost perfectly akin to πολυπράγμων in Plutarch, probably influenced by the New Comedy's interest for πολυπραγμοσύνη we have mentioned before¹⁵. When Plautus says that the *curiosi* care for other people's business and all *curiosi* are malevolent, he is not far from Plutarch's definition of πολυπραγμοσύνη we shall presently discuss: the desire to know other people's evils, not devoid of envy and malevolence¹⁶. And the malevolent *curiosi* wishing to count Lesbia's and Catullus' kisses, to cast the evil eye on their love, are no different¹⁷. But *curiosus* in Latin does not invariably have negative implications¹⁸. Gellius himself points out, against Nigidius Figulus, that adjectives in *-osus* do not necessarily contain the idea of a faulty excess¹⁹, so that *curiosus* need not always imply an excessive disposition to *cura*, as stated by Varro in the *De lingua Latina*²⁰ – witness Gellius' own use of this adjective, or, even more, the *curiosa felicitas* Petronius attributes to Horace²¹.

In Plutarch's treatise πολυπραγμοσύνη, though it can be deflected toward

¹¹ Labhardt 1960, 209.

¹² See Holford-Strevens 2003, 225 n. 26; Leigh 2013, 57-58. See the texts quoted on p. 58 n. 23. One might add Gell. 7.14.13.

¹³ In Greek πολυπραγμοσύνη applied to literature normally refers to pretentious affectedness on the part of the writers (Leigh 2013, 161-194), rather than to the critics' diligence.

¹⁴ Plaut. *Stich.* 198-208 *sed curiosi sunt hic complures mali / alienas res qui curent studio maximo / ... / nam curiosus nemo est quin sint malevolus.*

¹⁵ Cf. Menand. *monost.* 583 = 703 πολυπραγμονεῖν ἀλλότρια μὴ βούλου κακά. Cf. above, note 7.

¹⁶ Cf. Plut. *cur.* 1, 515D, quoted below, note 35.

¹⁷ Catull. 7.9-12 *tam te basia multa basiare / vesano satis et super Catullo, / quae nec pernumerare curiosi / possint nec mala fascinare lingua.*

¹⁸ As made clear by Leigh 2013, 55-56.

¹⁹ Gell. 4.9. Therefore, even his first attempt at rendering πολυπραγμοσύνη (*negotiositas*: 11.16.3) does not necessarily contain any explicitly negative connotation.

²⁰ Varro *l. L.* 6.46 *curiosus, quod hac (scil. cura) praeter modum utitur.*

²¹ Petr. 118.5.

a more acceptable direction by those seeking moral progress, and even be praiseworthy at times (for instance in the case of doctors thoroughly examining their patients), is no doubt a vice, which must somehow be overcome, if not totally eliminated.

For all these reasons, then, πολυπραγμοσύνη could hardly be translated with *curiositas* in a work like the *Noctes Atticae*, faithfully reflecting Gellius' frame of mind²².

This word, that had completely disappeared from Latin literature after the single instance in Cicero's letters, resurfaces nevertheless in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius, who, though Gellius' contemporary, represents a completely different cultural and religious attitude. In this novel *curiositas* appears no less than a dozen times, and it is the hallmark of Lucius' (and Psyche's) character, which will put both of them repeatedly in trouble. In Apuleius the term is loaded with the idea of impious or ungodly curiosity – a fault only remotely akin to Plutarch's πολυπραγμοσύνη. Actually, we would have no reason to dwell on it here, if Apuleius did not present his protagonist as a descendant of Plutarch's, both at the very beginning and later in the novel²³. Some scholars maintain that this links, and in a way identifies, Lucius' *curiositas* with Plutarch's πολυπραγμοσύνη²⁴, and even that it reveals the Platonism of Apuleius' novel²⁵. The Italian commentator of the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*, Lionello Inglese, on the other hand, maintains that the idea, as outlined in Plutarch, is a long way from the mystical and religious realm in which Apuleius' *curiositas* belongs²⁶.

It should perhaps be reminded that this *curiositas* might be the transposition in Apuleius' world of magic and mysticism of the *περιεργία* that is a distinguishing mark of Λούκιος, the protagonist of the Greek version of the donkey novel²⁷ – possibly with the addition of a mystical and religious transformation of the negative aspects of Plutarch's πολυπραγμοσύνη.

²² As Leigh 2013, 58-60, remarks, a warning against positing any clear-cut equivalence between πολυπραγμοσύνη and *curiositas* comes precisely from Gellius' first attempt at translating the Greek term with *negotiositas*, rather than with *cura*. According to him, this may be compared with the use of *negotium* as an equivalent of πρᾶγμα in Cicero's translation (*nat. deor.* 1.45; *div.* 2.40; *off.* 2.36) of Epicurus, *R.S.* 1: τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον οὔτε αὐτὸ πράγματα ἔχει οὔτε ἄλλω παρέχει; it should be emphasized, however, that Gellius' *negotiositas* refers to *negotia* as business, not as trouble.

²³ *Apul. met.* 1.2.1; 2.3.2.

²⁴ Some of the more recent upholders of this thesis are Leigh 2013, 130-160, and Howley 2018, 25-26. A more balanced, and possibly saner, position in Walsh 1988, 75.

²⁵ DeFilippo 1990. A sensible conclusion is reached by Van der Stockt 2012, 174.

²⁶ Inglese 1996, 11 n. 5. See also Labhardt 1960, 215-216.

²⁷ Ps. Lucian. *Luc. sive asin.* 15 ὃ τῆς ἀκαίρου ταύτης περιεργίας (Lucius' lament after his transformation into a donkey).

3. Plutarch's *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης* is one of a series of treatises devoted to the therapy of different affections of the soul. Five of these, including the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*, have been carefully investigated by Heinz Gerd Ingenkamp²⁸. In one of these treatises, the *De garrulitate*²⁹, Plutarch formulates the method he will follow in all of them: the therapy of the soul's affections will take place in two different stages: first an analysis of the affection itself, based on a thorough and reliable judgment (κρίσις)³⁰; then the practical training aimed at extirpating, or at least alleviating, it (ἄσκησις)³¹.

It is hardly necessary to undertake a thorough scrutiny of the treatise, which has been the object of several analyses clarifying all of its essential features. We may refer to Lionello Inglese's commentary³², to the study of Paola Volpe Cacciatore³³, and to the pages devoted to our treatise by Lieve van Hoof³⁴.

We have seen how Plutarch defines *πολυπραγμοσύνη*: "a wish to learn about other people's evils, a disease not devoid of envy and malevolence"³⁵. This definition is expanded shortly after: "the wish to know what is kept hidden and secret... The *πολυπράγμων*, striving to expose evils, is subject to the affection of rejoicing over other people's misfortunes, the brother of envy and malignity"³⁶. As stressed by van Hoof³⁷, the three elements converging in this definition are the wish to know and its objects, namely other people's business, and their evils in particular. The common denominator is an attitude of envy and malevolence on the part of the *πολυπράγμων*. No doubt, then, that *πολυπραγμοσύνη* is a vice. Though it might eventually be turned inward, to one's own inner psyche, and become a tool for self-knowledge, this can only be achieved through an appropriate training.

In fact, the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*, like the other treatises we have mentioned, contains a part devoted to the κρίσις (roughly chapters 1-9) and one

²⁸ Ingenkamp 1971. The volume examines the following treatises: *De cohibenda ira*, *De garrulitate*, *De curiositate*, *De vitioso pudore*, *De laude ipsius*. The *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης* is analyzed on pp. 44-53.

²⁹ Plut. *garr.* 16, 510CD.

³⁰ Ingenkamp 1971, 74-98.

³¹ Ingenkamp 1971, 99-124.

³² Inglese 1996.

³³ Volpe Cacciatore 1987.

³⁴ van Hoof 2010, 176-210; also van Hoof 2008.

³⁵ Plut. *cur.* 1, 515D φιλομάθειά τις ἐστὶν ἀλλοτρίων κακῶν, οὔτε φθόνου δοκοῦσα καθαρεύειν νόσος οὔτε κακοθεΐας.

³⁶ Plut. *cur.* 6, 518C φίλοπευστία τῶν ἐν ἀποκρύψει καὶ λανθανόντων... κακῶν οὖν ἱστορίας ὁ πολυπράγμων ὀρεγόμενος, ἐπιχαιρεκακίας συνέχεται πάθει, φθόνου καὶ βασκανίας ἀδελφῶ.

³⁷ van Hoof 2008, 298.

to the ἄσκησις (roughly chapters 10-16), though overlaps are frequent. First the vice must be recognized in its essence, then the soul affected by it must be cured, and possibly healed, through an appropriate treatment. The aim is to overcome the πάθος of the individual's soul. As we have already remarked, no trace remains in Plutarch of the πολυπραγμοσύνη as a political phenomenon. In fact, he sketches his πολυπράγμων with traits reminiscent of Theophrastus' *Characters*, though this work does not contain the corresponding portrait, but only that of the περίεργος; actually, in many ways Plutarch's πολυπράγμων is a caricature, rather than the realistic picture of an actual type³⁸.

The therapy of the vice of πολυπραγμοσύνη, though, is carried out without losing sight of what is realistically possible. From the beginning Plutarch remarks that it is best to utterly eradicate the harmful affections of the soul; but – he immediately adds –, if this cannot be done, they should at least be modified and turned toward a more acceptable direction³⁹. It is the latter option that is actually developed in the whole treatise. So, while Plutarch recognizes the Stoic ideal of achieving a full ἀπάθεια, in reality what he advocates is an object more in keeping with the Peripatetics' μετριοπάθεια⁴⁰. It should be added that in this he does not radically differ from Seneca, who, though a Stoic, had no delusion about the chance for the common man to attain ἀπάθεια, and was bent on promoting the pursuit of a more modest, but more realistic, moral progress.

This short sketch of Plutarch's treatise, however rough, will hopefully be sufficient to tackle with adequate awareness the problem, central to our inquiry, of how Gellius deals with it – or rather with the mere title of the work.

4. Plutarch is referred to no less than twelve times by Gellius, and, though occasionally criticized⁴¹, is highly appreciated for his learning and considered a reliable authority: *vir doctissimus ac prudentissimus*⁴², and *in disciplinis gravi auctoritate*⁴³. Significantly, his name is the first word of the opening chapter of the *Noctes Atticae: Plutarchus, in eo libro eqs.*⁴⁴. It has even been suggested, with some exaggeration, that Gellius meant to propose himself as a "Roman Plutarch"⁴⁵. His references to Plutarch are conveniently collected

³⁸ See van Hoof 2008, 305.

³⁹ Plut. *cur.* 1, 515C ἄριστον μὲν ἐξωθεῖν τὰ ταῦτα καὶ καταλύειν εἰς ἕδαφος... εἰ δὲ μή, μεταβάλλειν γὰρ καὶ μεθαρμόττειν ἀμωσγέπως περιάγοντας ἢ στρέφοντας.

⁴⁰ See Inglese 1996, 23.

⁴¹ Gell. 2.8; 2.9: about excessively pedantic objections to Epicurus.

⁴² Gell. 1.26.4, in the words of the philosopher Calvisius Taurus.

⁴³ Gell. 4.11.11.

⁴⁴ Gell. 1.1.1.

⁴⁵ Barrow 1967, 174.

in a recent article by Ramiro González Delgado⁴⁶ and analyzed in depth by Fabio Stok⁴⁷. In my opinion, the only reference that up to very recent times has not been adequately investigated is precisely the one concerning the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*. Lately, however, it has received a great deal of attention in a book by Joseph A. Howley⁴⁸, whose conclusions, though brilliant, appear to overshoot the mark, as we shall presently see.

In book XI, chapter 16 of the *Noctes Atticae* Gellius contrives a veritable theatrical scene marked by careful stage directions. The players are Gellius himself and an occasional companion ignorant of Greek, an *opicus*, as Gellius calls him, with the disparaging term the Greeks applied to the Romans, especially those who rejected their culture, much to the resentment of the Elder Cato, in a famous fragment of his *De medicina*⁴⁹. The real, silent protagonist of the scene, however, is the still unopened roll containing Plutarch's *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*, which Gellius has just received. He has only had the time to read the *index*, the label attached outside, containing the name of the author and the title. At the request of the *opicus* to be told the author and the subject matter of the book, Gellius promptly replies that it was written by Plutarch, but must pause when it comes to explain its contents. As made clear by what follows, however, it is not so much the explanation of the book's contents as the adequate translation of the title that he is concerned with. He employs several of the technical terms used in Latin in connection with the translator's activity: *mutatio*⁵⁰, *interpretari*⁵¹, *verbum de verbo exprimere*⁵². I have investigated in detail the Latin terminology of translation in one of my books⁵³, and it is hardly necessary to dwell on it at length once more. We shall only remark that Gellius' first attempt at translating *πολυπραγμοσύνη* is through a neologism that never again appears in Latin: *negotiositas*; but he rejects it as inadequate, and starts looking for a *verbum de verbo*⁵⁴, or "word-by-word", rendering. Clearly, what he has in

⁴⁶ González Delgado 2017; see also Holford-Strevens 2003, 283-285.

⁴⁷ Stok 1998.

⁴⁸ Howley 2018, 23-33; see also Howley online.

⁴⁹ Cato *med.* 1 *Jordan nos quoque dictitant barbaros et spurcius nos quam alios opicon appellatione foedant.*

⁵⁰ In the title of the chapter. Before Gellius the noun only appears in Quint. 2.14.4. See Gamberale 1969, 122. But *mutare* and *commutare* are not unusual. See Setaioli 1988, 462-463.

⁵¹ Gell. 11.16.3; 5.

⁵² Gell. 11.16.3 *verbum de verbo expressum esset*. More common is *verbum e verbo*; *uno verbo* appears in Cic. *Verr.* II 2.154; Sen. *ep.* 9.2; and Gellius himself (1.20.9); in our passage *voce una* (11.16.5) and *uno nomine* (11.16.6).

⁵³ Setaioli 1988, 453-467.

⁵⁴ A formulaic expression, as Gellius himself makes clear (11.16.3 *ut dicitur, verbum de verbo*). See e.g. Beall 1997, 219 n. 24.

mind is an adequate calque or loan translation, formed with Latin morphemes retaining the internal structure of the Greek word⁵⁵, welding together, as he expressly states, the Latin correspondents of the two components of the Greek term: plurality (*multitudo*) and business (*negotium*). But he can think of no already existing word nor of any new compound that would not sound harsh and dissonant. So he finally gives up the search for a single term and resorts to a circumlocution, that is a roundabout way to signify what the Greeks are capable to express with just one word⁵⁶: a procedure that Cicero himself had justified⁵⁷. Gellius goes even further by splitting the concept of πολυπραγμοσύνη in two moments: first planning and undertaking, then actually performing actions: *ad multas res adgressio earumque omnium rerum actio*⁵⁸, expanded shortly after through the addition of a negative evaluation: *varia promiscuae et non necessaria rerum cuiuscemodi plurimarum et cogitatio et petitio*⁵⁹.

The first explanation, however, brings about a quite unexpected result: the *opicus* understands the opposite of the meaning that Gellius, however unfaithfully to Plutarch's actual intention, meant to convey: he is driven to think that πολυπραγμοσύνη is a virtue advocated by Plutarch's book. Gellius must explain that it is not so, but finally half concedes that the *opicus*' misunderstanding is his own fault – of his *infacundia*, as he says⁶⁰; but we shall see that it was a misunderstanding of his own (whether intentional or not) that sparked the *opicus*' mistake.

Does this lively scene reflect a real situation or was it invented by Gellius? According to Gamberale⁶¹, though the fictitiousness of the scene cannot be proved beyond a doubt, it is hardly unreasonable to think that the *opicus* ignorant of Greek may be a double of Gellius himself, meant to prompt the attempt at rendering a difficult Greek term defying the translator's efforts; and it must be admitted that the title of the chapter centers on this, not on Plutarch's treatise⁶². But even more important is the problem of the reality of Gellius' ignorance of its contents at the moment he attempts to translate its

⁵⁵ Like Cicero at *ac.* 2.31 κατάληψιν, *quam, ut dixi, verbum e verbo exprimentes, comprehensionem dicemus; top.* 35 ἔτυμολογίαν... *id est verbum ex verbo veriloquium.*

⁵⁶ This is not the only case in which Gellius avows the difficulty of translating from the Greek: see Gamberale 1969, 123-125.

⁵⁷ *Cic. fin.* 3.15 *equidem soleo etiam, quod uno Graeci, si aliter non possum, idem pluribus verbis exponere.*

⁵⁸ Gell. 11.16.6.

⁵⁹ Gell. 11.16.8.

⁶⁰ Gell. 11.16.9.

⁶¹ Gamberale 1969, 123; 125.

⁶² Gell. 16.1 title: *quod Graecorum verborum quorundam difficillima est in Latinam linguam mutatio, velut quod Graece dicitur πολυπραγμοσύνη.*

title for the *opicus*. The stage setting admits of no doubt concerning Gellius' artistic intention: he pictures himself when, with the still unopened roll in his hands, he has only read the name of the author and the title on the label affixed outside⁶³. Gellius obviously means to portray a definite moment, prior to his reading of Plutarch's work⁶⁴. According to Gamberale⁶⁵ Gellius' two periphrastic renderings of the title⁶⁶ prove his acquaintance with Plutarch's two definitions of *πολυπραγμοσύνη* we have mentioned above⁶⁷. But, as made clear by Gellius' formulation, and as we shall soon see more in detail, he understands the word as an actual engagement in many activities, and only when the *opicus* is led to take *πολυπραγμοσύνη* for a virtue does he add negative traits connected with excessive and useless activism; but he still refers to a way of acting, not to a psychological attitude as in Plutarch – he does not mention envy or malevolence, central to the Greek definition. So, this is no proof that Gellius wishes the reader to know that, though he presents himself at a moment when he is still ignorant of the book's contents, he has actually read it. It is difficult to think, however, that at the moment he writes he had not already read Plutarch's work⁶⁸.

Actually, according to Joseph A. Howley, in the recent book we have already mentioned⁶⁹, though the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*, ostentatiously left unopened in the chapter we have discussed, cannot be considered as a source for content in the *Noctes Atticae*⁷⁰, not only has Gellius carefully read it, but has made it central to the very conception of his own work. Howley believes that from the concept of *πολυπραγμοσύνη*, described as a psychological drive in Plutarch's treatise, Gellius has developed the idea of *inlecebra*, shifting the emphasis from the internal impulses to the external stimuli acting on the very same appetites, thus contriving an independent cognitive at-

⁶³ Gell. 11.16.2 *nuper etiam cum adlatus esset ad nos Plutarchi liber, et eius libri indicem legissemus eqs.*

⁶⁴ Even for Howley 2018, 25, the book "is cited, but not opened".

⁶⁵ Gamberale 1969, 127-128.

⁶⁶ See above, text to notes 58 and 59.

⁶⁷ See above, notes 35 and 36.

⁶⁸ This is also the opinion (*per litteras*) of my friend and colleague Carlo Santini, whom I wish to thank for several shrewd observations on the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης* and Gellius.

⁶⁹ Howley 2018, 23-33; see also Howley online.

⁷⁰ Howley 2018, 32 and n. 23, does remark that, though some anecdotes contained in the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης* appear in Gellius too, they are often changed or lead to different conclusions. In my opinion, this rather proves that they do not derive from the *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*. Gell. 10.17 mentions the story of Democritus blinding himself: Plut. *cur.* 12, 521CD denies its reality; for Gell. 1.9.3-5 Pythagoras' disciples kept silent for no less than two years: according to Plut. *cur.* 9, 519C for five years; at Gell. 14.6 a book full of useless information is rejected: Plut. *cur.* 10, 521B discourages excerpting mistakes or obscenities from literary works.

titude governing his whole work. Though it must be admitted that Howley's notion is brilliant, it seems difficult to accept the idea that Gellius may have drawn his central guideline from a work in which this supposedly basic concept is clearly depicted as negative. Significantly enough, in his quotation of most of Gellius' chapter⁷¹, Howley carefully omits his periphrastic definitions of πολυπραγμοσύνη, with the clearly negative implications contained in the second one.

As already observed, however, when Gellius must correct the *opicus*' misconception of πολυπραγμοσύνη as a virtue, he connotes it as a useless and excessive activism. If we did not possess Plutarch's treatise, and had to rely only on Gellius, we would think that in the Greek work πολυπραγμοσύνη was not, as it is, the reprehensible attitude of meddling busybodies, but the actual relentless activity of "bodies" – people – that are "busy" with undertaking and carrying out many and different matters. This is already clear from Gellius' first attempt at translation, *negotiositas*, which, as Holford-Strevens remarks⁷², would suggest the idea of being busy, like a good Roman. But the same is true for the first periphrastic rendering: to undertake and carry out many matters is indeed a virtue, as the *opicus* understands it, at least according to the traditional Roman conception, as clearly expressed by the Elder Cato: *inertia atque torpedo plus detrimenti facit quam exercitio*⁷³. One would say that Gellius has given πολυπραγμοσύνη the sense that would better suit the unattested word *πολυπραξία⁷⁴; if the latter existed, it would be to πολυπραγμοσύνη as ἀπραξία to ἀπραγμοσύνη: the former indicates actual non-action, the latter love of a quiet life, the psychological attitude opposite to πολυπραγμοσύνη.

What are we to make of this? It would seem that Gellius meant to lead the *opicus* to believe that πολυπραγμοσύνη was a virtue and intentionally modified the meaning it has in Plutarch. If we recall the title of the chapter, we shall realize that Gellius' main object is to demonstrate the difficulty and near impossibility to render some Greek terms in an adequate way. The title of Plutarch's treatise is a case in point, more important to Gellius' purpose than the contents of the book. Possibly, he may have wished to show that certain attempts at translation can convey a meaning opposite to that of the original term. One should not forget Seneca's remark that even a seemingly appropriate calque, a rendering *uno verbo*, or, as Gellius might say, *verbum*

⁷¹ Howley 2018, 24-25.

⁷² Holford-Strevens 2003, 229 n. 26.

⁷³ Cato *de mor.* 3 Jordan. The fragment is transmitted by Gellius himself (11.2.6).

⁷⁴ It would be possible to quote many such compounds that indicate an actual activity, not an attitude. It will suffice to refer to Diog. L. 10.26, according to whom Chrysippus vied with Epicurus ἐν πολυγραφία, i.e. in the activity of writing many books.

de verbo, could be understood in an opposite way; such is the case with *impatientia* as a rendering of ἀπάθεια. The latter term indicates the Stoic sage's impassibility or imperviousness to emotions; the former may be easily understood as the unwise man's inability to endure an unpleasant situation⁷⁵. With Gellius' periphrastic rendering, though he resorts to the very components of the Greek word (*multas res* exactly corresponds to πολλά πράγματα), the case is hardly different: the opposite of what is meant is understood. Besides, as we have remarked, the addition of *adgressio* and *actio* (πρᾶξις rather than πρᾶγμα) transposes the concept from psychology to the actuality of action.

Possibly, then, Gellius wished to furnish a practical specimen of the precariousness of any attempt at translation of Greek philosophical (or in any way technical) terms. The difficulties facing the translator are repeatedly stressed in the *Noctes Atticae*⁷⁶; if, as quite possible, the figure of the *opicus* ignorant of Greek is a mere prop to reveal these difficulties, we could perhaps understand why Gellius may have, somewhat intentionally, led him – and the reader – to mistake a vice for a virtue, finally putting the blame on himself and his *infacundia*, and indirectly on the traditionally alleged *patrii sermonis egestas*⁷⁷.

Incidentally, this would explain why Gellius represents himself at a moment when he has not yet read Plutarch's book – which enables him to concentrate on the Latin rendering of the Greek term the author employed for the title, rather than on the contents of the book itself.

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⁷⁵ Sen. ep. 9.2 in *ambiguitatem incidendum est, si exprimere ἀπάθειαν uno verbo cito vulerimus et impatientiam dicere; poterit enim contrarium ei quod significare volumus intellegi. Nos enim volumus dicere qui respuat omnis mali sensum: accipietur is qui nullum ferre possit malum.*

⁷⁶ See above, note 56.

⁷⁷ On this see Fögen 2000.

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ABSTRACT:

Plutarch's treatise *Περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης* aims to overcome the impulse to meddle in other people's business accompanied by envy and malevolence. Gellius translates its title with circumlocutions describing *πολυπραγμοσύνη* as relentless activity, closer to a virtue than to a vice. He tries to correct the misunderstanding by referring to excessive and useless activism rather than to a faulty psychological attitude, as it is in Plutarch: an instance of the difficulty of translating Greek terms into Latin.

KEYWORDS:

Plutarch; *περὶ πολυπραγμοσύνης*; *curiositas*; Gellius; difficulty of translation from the Greek.