

THE ENNIANISTA AT PUTEOLI: GELLIUS 18.5

During the summer holidays in Puteoli, Gellius tells us (18.5), while he and other friends were passing the time with the *rhetor* Antonius Julianus, *Iuliano nuntiatur ἀναγνώστην quendam, non indoctum hominem, uoce admodum scita et canora Ennii annales legere ad populum in theatro. ‚Eamus‘ inquit ‚auditum nescio quem istum Ennianistam.‘* The group finds him *inter ingentes clamores* reading from the seventh book. Although his reading contains an error, on which the rest of Gellius' scene focuses, the crowd does not notice, since the *Ennianista* leaves *celebrantibus eum laudantibusque omnibus* (18.5.4).

The *Ennianista* has attracted little attention. The Oxford Latin Dictionary, remarking that the word is formed from *Ennianus* on the analogy of *Homerista*, gives the definition „An admirer or connoisseur of Ennius' poems,“ but Gellius' *Ennianista* is more likely to have been a member of the complex and little-known world of professional literary or quasi-literary entertainers in the ancient world.

The story of Gellius' *Ennianista* begins, as the OLD implies, with *Homeristae*¹). Working in troupes and, perhaps, sometimes alone²), they recited portions of Homer in a dramatic, theatrical manner. They carried weapons³), including prop swords with retracting blades⁴), and even pretended to draw blood as they presented epic battles⁵). They seem to have performed most commonly in theaters⁶), although Petronius' Trimalchio presents a troupe in his home⁷).

Against the background of *Homeristae*, Gellius' *Ennianista* is revealed to be not merely an admirer of Ennius, but a professional entertainer whose recitation verged on performance, especially if we imagine him working with weapons as props, if only for brandishing. The question then becomes how common *Ennianistae* were. Gellius mentions another recitation of Ennius (16.10.1): *Otium erat quodam die Romae in foro a negotiis et laeta quaedam celebritas feriarum, legebaturque in consessu forte conplurium Ennii liber ex annalibus*, but three points need to be noted. First, Ennius was undoubtedly quite popular in Gellius' time⁸). Second, although the point cannot bear much independent weight, Gellius does not

1) The fullest discussions are given by A. Calderini, *OMHPIΣΤΑΙ*, *Rendiconti Reale Istituto Lombardo di scienze e lettere* n.s. 44 (1911) 713–723 and W. Heraeus, *Drei Fragmente eines Grammatikers Ovidius Naso*, *RhMus* 79 (1930) 395–402.

2) Trimalchio (Petr., Sat. 59.3) presents a *factio* of *Homeristae*, but individual *Homeristae* are mentioned in P. Oxy. 519, 1025, and 1050 = M. Vandoni, *Feste Pubbliche e Private nei Documenti Greci* (Milan 1964), numbers 36, 26, and 39. Heraeus (above n. 1), 401, suggests that the individuals in the papyri may be the leaders of troupes.

3) Petr., Sat. 59.3.

4) Ach. Tat. 3.20.4–7, although the word *Homeristes* is not used in the passage.

5) See Artem. 4.2 (p. 245 Pack.).

6) Ach. Tat. 3.20.4.

7) Sat. 59.3. This may well be a social blunder by Trimalchio; see R. J. Starr, *Trimalchio's Homeristae*, *Latomus* 46 (1987) 199–200.

8) See B. Baldwin, *Studies in Aulus Gellius* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1975), pp. 61–62.

give the person who read Ennius in the Forum any particular title, which may imply that he did not call himself an *Ennianista*. Third, and most significantly, in Gellius 18.5.3, when Antonius Julianus suggests that the group go to hear *nescio quem istum Ennianistam*, Gellius feels compelled to explain: *hoc enim se ille nomine appellari uolebat*, which suggests that *Ennianista* was not a commonly recognized title. Gellius' *Ennianista*, in fact, may well have been a single individual trying to capitalize on the passion for Ennius by imitating *Homeristae* and adding spectacle for even greater popular appeal. His experiment worked, at least for him. That we hear of no more *Ennianistae* may be chance, but it may mean that no one else followed his lead.