

Reviews

S. FRANGOULIDIS: *Roles and Performances in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*. Pp. VIII + 197. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2001. Paperback, DM 56,00. ISBN 3-476-45284-0.

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Stavros Frangoulidis, hereafter F., is well-known to scholars on the ancient novel, and has published widely on theatricality and performance in Apuleius, and several sections of this book are revised versions of articles that have appeared elsewhere.¹ An analysis of the story of *Cupid and Psyche* has already appeared in another monograph.² This new book wholly dedicated to performances and role plays in Apuleius is the outcome of a long-standing interest in performance theory as applied to this particular novel. Given that only a few Latin passages are translated, the book seems not to be directed at a general audience.

F. begins with a very short overview of other scholars' analyses of theatrical elements in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, and then changes to his own particular approach, which is not in the strict sense related to theatricality or even intertext with the dramatic genres, but based on semiotic-structuralist theory, concentrating on the "perspective of "roles" and "performances" on the discourse level" (p. 1).

Underlying the whole study is the argument that the constant shifting of the roles played by the novel's major characters is a result and indication of the novel's key theme of metamorphosis. An element of his structuralistic

¹ The sections "From Friend to Unwitting Enemy: Aristomenes' Tale of Socrates" (pp. 16–35), "A Faithful Wife's Revenge: The Servant's Tale of Charite" (pp. 82–103), "The Ass as a Helper? The Ass' Tale of the Miller's Wife" (pp. 105–119) and "'Theater" and "Spectacle": The Robber's Tale of Trasyleon" (pp. 129–147) appeared respectively in *CJ* 95 (1999), 375–391, *AJP* 120 (1999), 601–619, *Scholia* 9 (2000), 66–78, *Drama* 8 (1999), 113–135.

² As an appendix in *Handlung und Nebenhandlung: Theater, Metatheater und Gattungsbe-
wusstsein in der römischen Komödie*. Stuttgart: Metzler 1997.

approach, too, is the identification of roles complementing each other, either by offering striking parallels, or by portraying the complete opposite.

His concept of “roles” and “performances” is based on his own adaptation of a semiotic-structuralistic theory, Greimas’ actantial model, which he uses as a basic outline for his analysis.³ He accordingly focusses, as in his former publications, on characters playing “roles” in the story, either by transformations proper (as of Lucius into an ass) or by assuming disguises in order to deceive other characters.

This book can thus perhaps be seen as a companion volume to *Handlung und Nebenhandlung*, in which F. analyses roles and performances in select Plautine comedies. In this second book his use of Greimas is however more explicitly noted as a starting point. Accordingly, F. offers a short introduction to Greimas’ theory, which though developed for the analysis of narrative, is also occasionally used to analyse drama. Greimas as a structuralistic semiotician offers a model in which all narrative plots may be analysed in their deep structure as the interaction between six different “actants”, characters within the narrative holding specific functions, namely the “sender”, the “receiver”, the “helper”, the “opponent” as well as the “object” or “subject”. The same character may be successively cast as several actants, changing with his role in the plot.

F. applies this method by placing each character of the *Metamorphoses* as one of the six actants of the Greimasian model, and then seeing how their interaction changes, once their roles develop in the course of the narrative.

In this context he gives his own definition of “role” as the “distinct features which the narrative endows the actors/characters with at any given point in the novel’s discourse” (p. 5), and “performance” as the “actions undertaken by the actors/characters in order to achieve the object of their goals/values.” (p. 7). A “role” can thus add meaning to the narrative, because a character acting out a certain role succumbs to certain expectations connected to that particular role. A “performance” is thus constituted of the actions a character performs whilst taking over a certain role.

He also spends some time (p. 5ff.) on adapting Greimas’ jargon into his own. Basically he uses “plan” for any case in which actors are not playing a role, but act in their own self, whilst “plot or “scheme” is used by him for any actor disguising themselves or adapting a different persona from their own.

³ A.J. GREIMAS: *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*. Translated by D. MCDOWELL, R. SCHLEIFER and A.A. VELIE. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

The reason for this toning-down of theory is F.' hope that more "comprehensible" formulae prevent an overtheoretisation of his volume, which he tries to avoid. On the other hand, it creates some confusion about his terminology, and perhaps a more rigid adherence to technical terms would have prevented the occasional merging of theatrical terminology with his own theoretical terms, as e.g. when (p. 7) he argues that Thelyphron takes up another "role" (in Frangoulidis' sense) by putting a "patch or "mask" on his nose, and thus conceals his deformed face."

Similarly, there is some confusion of the application of theatrical language with structuralistic terminology, e.g. when F. argues that, during the Festival of Laughter, "from a theatrical perspective, the representation of wineskins as valiant men may be interpreted as yet another mask or role". (p. 52).

Greimas uses equivalences in order to get at the deep structure of narrative, but F. (as he himself states, p. 9) is not interested in this. Instead he concentrates on "instances in which both Lucius and other [*sic!*] secondary characters in the novel act out roles assigned to them by the narrative." (p. 9).

In this case, the question arises why the author introduces a tool and then declines to use it. Greimas, interested in how narratives are similar on the level of deep structure, has to use his elaborate model in order to find the structural similarities. F. stops on the surface of the model. The interpretation thus remains on the surface, and perhaps F. would have got more out of his topic if he had taken the plunge and analysed the deep structure of the novel itself, too.

This somewhat complex construction is then readily applied to some of the inset tales of the *Metamorphoses*. There is some justification in adapting a model of deception and role-playing when working on a novel which relies heavily on the tension provided by a character who is not at all what he seems, i.e. a human in the shape of an ass, and F. is certainly right in seeing disguises and similar plot lines in some inset tales, which also rely on deception.

F. focusses in particular on the following episodes: Aristomenes' Tale of Socrates (I.1), Thelyphron's Tale of Thelyphron (I.2), and the Festival of Laughter (I.3) are classed together as "Unwittingly Successful Performances", since all three cases offer stories involving witchcraft, and the "performances" of the three major characters are triggered by witchcraft. The following chapter concentrates on some stories of the Charite-complex, by analysing the Tale of Plotina (III.1) and the Servant's Tale of Charite (II.2), both grouped together as "fatally successful performances". The third chapter concentrates on "unsuccessful performances", as in the Ass' Tale of the Miller's Wife

(III.1), and the Tale of the Stepmother (II.2). Chapter four, on “man and animal”, concentrates on the Robber’s Tale of Thrasyleon and the events in the Theatre of Corinth in book 10. The final chapter (V) concentrates on Lucius’ Isiac initiation.

F.’ distinction into “unintentional” and “intentional” performances – the former include the Tale of Aristomenes, the Tale of Thelyphron and the Laughter Festival, the latter form the majority of the disguised performances, e.g. Tlepolemus’ pretending to be Haimon or Charite’s deceiving Thrasyllus – is quite helpful. However, from his definition it is not quite clear what he understands by “successful” or “failing” performances, and his view of the ending of the novel, namely that ultimately all performances fail except Lucius’ as an Isiac devotee in book 11, would have profited greatly from a clarification of this particular point. For instance, there is a difference between Aristomenes’ ill-fated attempt to save his friend Socrates and Charite’s revenge exacted on the murderer of her husband. Both are however classified as “successful”.

Since F. is following a structuralistic-taxonomic model, the bulk of his text consists of pointing out parallels between characters or their actions (“performances”). The section on the pantomime in book 10, for example, elucidates contrasts between the ass and Paris: both, he argues, are “betrothed”, but whilst the handsome Paris goes through with his marriage, the ugly ass refuses to “marry” the mass murderess. Some of his assumptions, however, e.g. that the pantomime re-enacts a marriage ceremonial, or that (p. 155) “The unexpected appearance of both boys and girls dancing the pyrrhic can be explained by the metaphoric association of the theme of love with war”, could have done with some backing up, since it is not clear whether these are his own observations, and whence he derives them, or even in which way they support his actantial analysis.

A similar problem is attached to his analysis of the Festival of Laughter, which he analyses (in many respects interestingly) as a contrast to book 11. The Festival of Laughter reduces Lucius to tears, and should be contrasted with the eternal joy offered by Isis. F. argues against the ‘*communis opinio*’ of the festival as a scapegoat ritual (p. 51). In his point of view it becomes an integration ritual, where all participants engage in role-playing, with the difference between the characters being that Lucius plays his role unwittingly, whilst the other participants are aware of their role-playing. In this bare form, this seems unconvincing.

Some applications of Greimas' model are very interesting, such as the analysis of Aristomenes as the *auctor* of the plan to escape from Meroe. This turns Meroe into the opponent, Socrates into the receiver, the goal or object is to escape from her, and Aristomenes is at the same time the helper figure (p. 22).

This kind of structure in Greimas is however only the starting point, not the result of the analysis. Greimas tries to find the underlying structure of narratives, and ways in which these basic characters or actants form their actions in reaction to each other. F. does not take this step. He contents himself with re-shifting the actantial model whenever the situation within the narrative changes. Thus, after the witches enter the room in which Aristomenes and Socrates sleep, F. reshuffles the actors (p. 24):

“In the second situation all actors or characters assume new positions in the actantial structure: Meroe occupies the double position of the subject and reviewer, her object being to exact revenge on Socrates. Aristomenes could perhaps be regarded as filling the position of the opponent, yet his repeated use of verbs of seeing, *video* (1.12), *aspexi* (1.13), underlines his passive role, as he does nothing to prevent the witches from performing their sacrifice of the sleeping Socrates. This passivity is also reminiscent of the role Socrates originally intended to assume as spectator of the gladiatorial games. Meroe foreshadows Aristomenes' subsequent replacement of Panthia in the role of helper, as she assigns him the role of burying Socrates when he dies.” Or further down: “On a broader level, Socrates' slaughter may be read as the symbolic “butchering” of Aristomenes' plan to save his friend.” – F. has an affinity for formulae, and, despite his hopes, a tendency to be too theoretical without offering an underlying interpretation.

A structuralistic-taxonomic approach has some advantages, but the criticism which can be offered of this particular school, namely that it is too rigid in trying to polarise everything into a system of opposites, to find either absolute parallels or stark contrasts, may also be applied to F.' approach. Some of the contrasts or parallels he finds are indeed striking, but others can appear decidedly forced.

He often seems too deeply entangled in his schematic outline of a story, e.g. when he analyses Aristomenes' burying of his friend Socrates' body: “Under normal circumstances this would be considered one of the most pious acts of friendship, yet we know that Meroe spared Aristomenes' love precisely so that he could perform this task (1.13). It can therefore be argued that he is

merely acting out his role as the witches' helper or Socrates' opponent in the continuation of her revenge" (p. 33).

Furthermore, some of his analyses seem to misrepresent the text in a significant way, e.g. p. 13 "The ass' fear of the wild beasts in the arena leads to his refusal to have sex with the convict and explains the ensuing secret exit from the theater." The same statement is repeated almost verbatim several times in chapter IV.2 (pp. 147–162). Apuleius however offers two further and perhaps more important reasons (10.34 *at ego praeter pudorem obeundi publice concubitus, praeter contagium scelestae pollutaequae feminae, metu etiam mortis maxime cruciabar*), and Lucius' exit, though unobserved by the unwary keeper, is not "secret" (*paulatim furtivum pedem proferens portam, quae proxima est, potitus iam cursu me celerrimo proripio*).

Besides, to understand the ass' refusal to sleep with the murderess as an espousal of celibacy and rejection of the prototype of Paris (thus F. p. 160 and 165) could be seen as a strange interpretation of Lucius' motives.

The whole point of the *Metamorphoses* is that everybody is constantly shifting roles, and the adaptation of Greimas' scheme to Lucius, as long as it only consists of identifying each character with one of the six actants, offers little progress in interpretation and reads more like a plot summary, e.g. (p. 6):

"Lucius first appears in the role of traveler going to Thessaly on business, but is subsequently transformed into an ass, as a result of his unbounded interest in magic and his pursuit of slavish pleasures. His transformation into an animal through magic constitutes a new role assigned to him by the narrative. This differs considerably from subsequent roles, such as playing the miller's human helper, which Lucius willingly assumes in the course of his asinine adventures (Book 9). The protagonist's restoration to human form suggests the assumption of yet another role, as Lucius is entirely different from his earlier animal form. He then acts out the role of neophyte, as a priest first of Isis and later of her brother/consort Osiris. When the latter elects Lucius to the college of pastophori, his promotion within the clerical hierarchy may also be seen as a variation on his role as a simple priest. In this role as pastophor, Lucius exercises both his religious and civic duties, proudly displaying his baldness and therefore making clear his role as an Isiac priest."

Greimas reduces all characters to one of six actants, and it is obvious from this passage that F., perhaps due to his reluctance to become over-technical, does not follow his model to the last degree. – Is the "role of the neophyte" that of the "sender" or the "receiver" in actantial terms?

On the other hand, the structuralistic approach offers some considerable advantages. F.' analysis is pointing out parallel elements and plotlines in the story. His analysis underlines the elaborate web of relations that Apuleius manages to draw from one story to the other, or the relationship between the portrayal of some characters either by setting them into parallels or contrasts with each other, offering some good insights into Apuleius' methods in holding the plot together. This is the book's strength. Nice for example is the parallel he draws between Meroe and the robbers, or the interpretation of Lucius' repeated initiations as indicating his constant rebirth as an Isiac in contrast to the stress on death in the preceding 10 books (p. 163f.). Also the contrasting of the Festival of Laughter, where Lucius alone was ridiculed, with his status as an Isis priest, where he is integrated into a society, which as a whole group may be subject to ridicule (p. 174), enhances our understanding of the unity of the novel.

The same goes for the main underlying concept, that the *Metamorphoses* consists of many tales of deception, many of which are written with the idea of complementing each other.

F. draws attention to the ubiquitous element of disguise and deceit in the novel, and the fact that most disguises result in disaster, and work against the intention of the disguised. The underlying structure of the *Golden Ass* is metamorphosis, change of roles, and the recognition of this forms the strength of the book.