

# Tale of Aristomenes: Declamation in a Platonic Mode

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## Summary

This paper suggests sources for Apuleius' Tale of Aristomenes. The many legal references in the tale are consistent with its close resemblance to plots outlined by Cicero in *De Inventione* and *De Divinatione*; in both plots one of two travelers is murdered in an inn. This plot is then embellished by a story of two murderous witches, as found in Greek folktale. The story is further enriched by the addition of Platonic touches starting with the portrait of "Socrates" whose character both mirrors and contrasts with the famous Athenian philosopher.

The first lesson for Lucius to absorb in Apuleius' *Golden Ass* is the tale told by Aristomenes on the road to Hypata. This is a gripping story with a recurring legal flavor, having a repeated emphasis on Aristomenes' fear of prosecution for the murder of his companion; this emphasis seems consistent with the origin of the tale in a courtroom debate or school declamation; declamatory themes are a common source for the plots and details of tales in this novel.<sup>1</sup> The tale shows evidence of being cunningly stitched together from at least two major sources: the first a legal source with the flavor of the declamation schools, the second a folktale with a witchcraft emphasis. The tale which results from this combination has then been overlaid with Platonic allusion and allegory, with special reference to Plato's *Phaedrus*.

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison 2000, 224; van Mal – Maeder 2003.

- 1) The legal jokes begin with 1.9, where one of the victims of Meroe is a lawyer, whom the witch has now humbled by turning him into a ram; his bestial aspect however has not prompted him to retire from the bar, but he continues energetically to plead causes (*aries ille causas agit*). The narrator of the novel himself has legal aspirations and is trained as a public speaker (prologue 1), so that the declaimer-become-ram prefigures the narrator's transformation into an ass as a "lawyer joke".
- 2) In 1.14, after the apparent death of Socrates, Aristomenes speculates about the case which will be made against him in court, framing the accusations of a hypothetical prosecutor in the language of a legal *sententia* such as are categorized by Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria* 8.5 (see further below).
- 3) The suspiciousness of Aristomenes' desire to depart early, and alone, from the inn, after the death of Socrates, is pointedly remarked on by the sleepy innkeeper (1.15), who suspects him of murdering his companion, even without evidence of a corpse, simply because of his wanting to leave so hastily.
- 4) Aristomenes then attempts suicide, sure he will be found guilty because his bed is the "only witness" to what really happened (1.16).
- 5) The innkeeper rushes in, aroused by what he takes to be continued suspiciousness in Aristomenes' behavior, who first wanted to leave, but is now lying in bed; then, at the surprise revival of Socrates, the innkeeper's earlier accusations are now triumphantly dismissed by Aristomenes as "slander" (*calumniaris*).
- 6) Aristomenes, even after leaving the inn with Socrates, continues to worry that his companion will die after all, and that he will be accused of the murder; the absence of other travelers along the road, who might serve as potential witnesses, adds to his fear. After Socrates' second and final death, Aristomenes goes into exile, trembling and fearing for his life.

Thus a constant running sub-theme in the story is the possible prosecution of Aristomenes for causing the death of his companion; Aristomenes is preoccupied, almost to the point of obsession, with the possibility of being falsely condemned (indeed one school of critical thinking argues that, because Aristomenes carries out Meroe's wishes by burying Socrates, he is in fact a kind of

accomplice in the latter's death).<sup>2</sup> The injustice of such a possible suspicion about Aristomenes is heightened by the knowledge, impressed on us by the narrator (*Socraten contubernalem meum...necessarium et summe cognitum*, 1.6.1–2) that the two men are in reality bosom companions, and that Aristomenes, far from plotting against Socrates, has gone to great lengths to rescue him and restore him to dignity. Clearly the legal aspects of the tale are central to its orientation, and may tell us something about the origin of the plot. As the bizarre series of events unfolds, our expectations are increasingly aroused that Aristomenes will actually be charged with murder. As it turns out, in Apuleius' manner the repeatedly expressed fears of the narrator prove to be false clues, and Aristomenes is never arrested; yet as in the case of Homer's Bellerophon, another victim of unjust persecution (Homer *Iliad* 6.200–202), his life is deeply altered by the incident and he is compelled to leave his homeland and wander into exile along trackless paths. (Some of the same preoccupation with legalism, likewise creating a sense of foreboding about the fate of the narrator, pervades the subsequent Tale of Thelyphron, 2.22–30, where Apuleius slyly inserts the false expectation that Thelyphron will be mutilated by the authorities as a punishment for his failure to stay awake, 2.22.) This emphasis on an unresolved legal quandry in the witchcraft tale is easier to explain if the story has its origin in a real or hypothetical court case.

In fact we can find such a case in a legal exemplum cited by Cicero in 2.4.14 of *De Inventione*; this exemplum is mentioned in passing in Scobie's commentary on Book 1 of the *Golden Ass*,<sup>3</sup> but it has not been given the close study it deserves as a probable important source for the Tale of Aristomenes. *De Inventione*, a youthful work by Cicero, seems likely to share a Greek source with the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, with which it has some close thematic and structural connections. Cicero himself, however, speaks of having patched the treatise together out of "notebooks" (*commentariola*) based on the lectures of his teachers at Crassus' house,<sup>4</sup> left it incomplete and later disparaged it (*De Oratore* 1.2.5). Be that as it may, its likelihood as a source on which Apuleius may have drawn is increased by its evident popularity, circulation and influence in later antiquity (commentaries were written on it by

<sup>2</sup> Perry 1967, 375 n. 22; Scobie 1975, 110–111; on Aristomenes as accomplice, Frangoulidis 1999, 375 and 387–388.

<sup>3</sup> Scobie 1975, 112, on 1.15.

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy 1972, 106–107.

Victorinus and Grillius) and in the middle ages.<sup>5</sup> A similar story by Cicero about two travelling companions and an innkeeper (*De Div.* 1.57) will be examined further below.

In the tale from *De Inventione*, presented by Cicero in bare outline, two travelers, one a businessman with a large sum of money, meet on the road and stop together in an inn. They fall into a deep sleep. The innkeeper enters the room, draws the sword of the businessman's companion, kills him, takes his money, replaces the sword in its scabbard, and withdraws. The dead man's companion has slept through the murder, but then awakens and decides (for unexplained reasons) to leave the inn long before dawn. After repeated shouts he is unable to arouse his companion, but then takes his own sword (without realizing that its blade is now bloody) and other belongings, and resumes his journey. The innkeeper, discovering his absence, raises a cry of murder, and with some guests he sets out in pursuit of the traveler. They find him with the bloodstained sword. He is returned to the city and accused of murder, framed by the real criminal but with the evidence running strongly against him.

If this story, or one like it, is the basis for Apuleius' tale of Aristomenes, some of the seemingly whimsical oddities and loose ends in Apuleius' story are explained as carryovers from the source, plot details now placed in a new context. Apuleius has added to the pathos of the story by making the two men bosom companions, in contrast with Cicero where they meet for the first time on the road. Both stories have the two men staying in the same room, and both emphasize the deepness of their sleep due to weariness (Cicero *artius iam ut ex lassitudine dormire*, 2.4.14; Apuleius 1.17 [spoken by Socrates] *marcidum alioquin me altissimo somno excussit*). In both stories, the murder is done with a sword; in Cicero's story a sword is understandable as the protective weapon a traveler might need, but in Apuleius' case the murder is carried out by a pair of witches who intrude into the scene, and who have probably been introduced by Apuleius into the originally separate story of the two travelers. A sword might seem an unlikely weapon for a witch to carry. Witches usually kill in a variety of other ways such as with their bare hands, or by poison or magic herbs, or by starving their victims to death; cf. Canidia in Horace *Ep.* 5. 32–34; the witch in 9.31 hangs her victim. The sword may be a carryover from the legend of Medea, who uses a sword to kill her children (cf. Seneca *Medea* 969–970; Apuleius *Apology* 78, where Medea is joined with Philomela and Clytemnestra as murderesses who use swords), or its use by one of the witches

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<sup>5</sup> Howell 1941, 28–29; Kennedy 1972, 106–111, 126–138.

may be an instance of imperfect suturing by Apuleius of two disparate stories, and it provides thematic links within the *Golden Ass* to the sword-swallower described earlier by Lucius and to the “flashing sword” later used by Charite (8.13).

Conversely, however, some of Apuleius’ touches may have been deliberately (and skillfully) added to account for unexplained details in Cicero. The hypothetical courtroom cases devised by rhetorical theorists tend to include details which seem contrived and unconvincing, and Cicero’s story is no exception: improbabilities include the landlord risking the murder of the businessman when his companion, a potential witness, was sleeping nearby (though there is an attempt to account for this by a reference to both men’s deep sleep from weariness, which the landlord *sensit*, was aware of), followed by the unmotivated awakening of the companion after the murderer has already departed, and his sudden desire to leave the inn in the middle of the night; finally, one is struck by the oddity of his failure to approach the murdered man to examine him after his repeated shouts do not wake him up. These loose ends in Cicero are explained away in Apuleius’ version, whose character Aristomenes is rudely awakened by the violent intrusion of the witches, and then, after the murder of Socrates, has a good reason for leaving the inn early and alone, since he wants to escape possible prosecution; he has no need to examine Socrates’ body closely, since his death after the removal of his heart seems a foregone conclusion. For good measure, the inevitability of death in such a case can even be reinforced by another legal *topos*, for Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 5.9.5) says that “When a man has received a wound in the heart, he is bound to die, and the reference is to the future.”

In contrast with this inexorable chain of decisions by Aristomenes which seems to leave him in a trap, the man in Cicero’s story who leaves early does not realize his companion is dead, and thus has no clear motive for his sudden departure; indeed this departure seems artificially devised by the author of the tale to make him look suspicious and weight the case against him, added to the unexplained facts that he does not wake up during the murder and never approaches his companion to try to rouse him. Aristomenes, for his part, is prevented from leaving by the innkeeper who is discovered, in an almost surrealistic scene, asleep behind the door. The innkeeper interprets Aristomenes’ desire to leave before dawn as evidence of his possible guilt in murdering his companion, with whom he has been alone. Aristomenes imagines his hypothetical accusers claiming, “You could at least have called out for help, if a big

man like you could not fight off a woman by himself...” The hypothetical charge against him is framed in such a way as to recall the language of the lawcourts. In the Roman legal system, one who has witnessed a murder has to provide a plausible explanation for his failure either to prevent the crime or to apprehend the criminals. For example, in Ps. Quint. *Decl. Mai.* 7.11 a father has witnessed the murder of his son, but the question arises as to why the killers are still at large. The answer by the father depends on his convincing the jurors that to take action against the killers would have been unreasonable for a father in the state of bereavement, would have called for the aid of more than one person, and moreover would not have been appropriate to his social station. These are the presumptions which apparently lie behind the father’s objection that to leave the body of his son and pursue the culprit would more properly have been the job of servants and freedmen (which he lacked), and not of a bereaved father. Aristomenes has no such ready objection since his adversary was a woman, and presumably weaker, and the deed took place in an inn, where help would presumably have been ready at hand if he had asked for it. Even worse, he creates a further suspicion when he suddenly wants to leave the inn at night. In legal terms, his departure alone would add credence to the motive of attempted escape from arrest. For example, in *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* 4.41.53, a defendant’s departure for home “in the dead of night” (*multa nocte*) after a murder is listed as a highly suspicious sign; so also Quintilian 5.10.44 (*noctu existi*), and Ps-Quintilian *Decl. Mai.* 1.13 (here the murder is made more probable by the opportunity of a secret place, weapon, and the cloak of darkness).

As Aristomenes ponders the words of his hypothetical accuser, the case against him climaxes with the clever reversal of the outburst, “Therefore, since you escaped death, return to it now!” This has the force of a highly effective rhetorical climax, and is consistent with Quintilian’s definition of an *epiphonema*, or “explanation attached to the close of a statement or proof by way of climax” (Quint. *Inst. or.* 8.5.11). Moreover the sentence also has a pointed style which recalls the courtroom debates of the elder Seneca’s *Controversiae*. Quintilian specifically points out that *sententiae* often depend on paradox or surprise twist for their effect (8.5.15). The cleverness of the riposte is intended to type it as a crushing objection to Aristomenes, for which he can provide no answer (contrast, for example, the weak accusations made in court by Aemilianus, quoted verbatim in Apul. *Apol.* 54, which Apuleius as defendant is able easily to ridicule and refute).

After the return of Aristomenes to the bedroom and his pathetic attempt at suicide, the innkeeper in Apuleius' tale is suspected by Socrates of wanting to steal something; this charge blurted out by Socrates may simply be based on a natural suspicion which is associated with the profession of innkeeper (i.e. their supposed tendency to steal);<sup>6</sup> in fact, such a taint extends to female innkeepers and Meroe herself is described as a *caupona*.<sup>7</sup> Socrates' remark, however, acquires new meaning if it is a sly glance by Apuleius at the plot of the original story recorded by Cicero, where the innkeeper measures up to his stereotype, and actually does steal the businessman's money. Finally, in 2.13.43 of *De Inventione* Cicero lists a series of pertinent circumstances about the case which tend to suggest the guilt of the accused traveler, such as his approaching his companion, asking to spend the night with him, and his abandoning a supposedly intimate friend with such indifference, and wanting to leave the inn alone; many of these circumstances apply to Aristomenes as well, except the final one, that he had a bloodstained sword. Finally, another of Aristomenes' fears has a precedent in Cicero:

(1.19): The very absence of other travelers along the road added to my fear. Who would ever believe that one of two companions was murdered without the other being guilty? (*quis crederet* itself is a phrase which may be associated with the courtroom, see Seneca *Controv.* 1.1.3).

In *De Inventione* 1.80.43 we find a similar possible argument being used in a murder case about the presence of witnesses being a possible deterrent to a crime. Though in that instance the argument is rejected by Cicero as illogical, it might have suggested the above idea to Apuleius:

"The murder must have been committed in a lonely spot. How could a man be killed in a crowd?" The consideration of the location of the crime seems to have been a commonplace in deliberations about the probable guilt of a suspect; similarly the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, in his discussion of "place" as one of the factors to be considered in deciding the guilt of the accused, says:

"The Place is examined as follows: Was it frequented or deserted, always a lonely place, or deserted then at the moment of the crime?... Could the victim be seen and heard?" (2.3.7), cf. also Quint. *Inst. or.* 7.2.44; ps. Quint. *Declam. Mai.* 7.9 (concerning the unreliability of a single witness to a murder occurring in a lonely place).

<sup>6</sup> Panayotakis 1998, 128.

<sup>7</sup> Scobie 1983, 94.

In short, the inquisitiveness of the doorkeeper, who seizes on Aristomenes' suspicious behavior, gives him an air of ominousness and eeriness, almost clairvoyance, because he knows so much and sounds trained in the law, knowing which arguments will be effective in court; furthermore, the ongoing soliloquies by Aristomenes himself, in which he is daunted by the enormity of the *prima facie* case against himself, give the tale a legal atmosphere. The overall effect is another reminder of the power of the two witches: their combined evil has the power of creating a likely presumption of guilt against an innocent victim, whose very kindness toward his friend, and attempts to help him, do nothing but increase the gravity of a charge of murder which can be made out against him; eventually these fears of prosecution turn him into a paranoid wreck whose subsequent life is haunted by his fears of prosecution.

The second version of this story told by Cicero (*De Div.* 1.57; there is a closely similar version in Valerius Maximus 1.7 ext. 10) adds a few further details which Apuleius may have borrowed. Here two close friends (*familiares*, like the two men in Apuleius, in contrast with the two men in *De Inv.* who meet on the road as strangers) arrive in Megara, where one traveler stays at an inn, the other at the home of a friend. The man in the inn appears to his friend in a dream in the middle of the night, first begging for protection against the murderous innkeeper, then in a later dream, reporting the murder and instructing his friend how to find the body before the innkeeper disposes of it (this plot is also the source for the story told by Chaunticleer in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* 2984–3049). Here the two travelers stay at separate lodgings, and there is no longer a possible suspicion that one is responsible for the other's murder. However, the two dreams predicting and reporting the murder may have provided the suggestion for the bloody dreams described by Aristomenes and Socrates in *Met.* 1.18, in the second of which, as in this second story by Cicero, the dead man (as a ghost in Cicero, and as a walking corpse in Apuleius) describes his own murder<sup>8</sup> (there is another partial parallel for the *De Divinatione* in Chrysippus' work on dreams, see Pease's notes on Cicero, and the *Suida*).

Apuleius may have fleshed out Cicero's bare plot line from the *De Inventione*, which has the flavor of a clichéd *topos* used to illustrate principles of courtroom procedure, into a full-blown story by weaving into it some unexpected external material. But the parallels with Cicero should warn us against assuming that Apuleius' tale has an immediate Greek source (aside from the

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<sup>8</sup> See Panayotakis 1998, 128.



issue of the precise identity of Cicero's hypothetical Greek sources) or must have been found in the lost Greek *Metamorphoses*. Whatever the immediate source may be, many of the details lend the tale a Roman flavor, and the legal interest is what we would expect from the clever Latin sophist of the *Apology* whose narrator forewarns us in the novel's prologue of his double training in Greece (philosophy, which we consider more closely below) and Rome (the legal milieu of the forum).

### A Folktale Source

The attribution of the Tale of Aristomenes to a plot found in Cicero assumes a complex process, then, because it seems to involve a combination of details from related but separate stories. But interwoven with the Ciceronian stories of two travelers is the second, and most sensational, part of the tale, involving murderous witches and their victims, which seems to come from a separate, and probably Greek, source. Several possible sources from Greek folklore lie at hand. The bursting in of the two witches on Aristomenes and Socrates, with Meroe vowing to get revenge on Socrates for the insults she has received, resembles a modern Greek tale recorded by John Lawson; Scobie remarks on the tendency of witches to "resort to members of their own sex to find remedies for real or imagined injuries inflicted on them by the opposite sex".<sup>9</sup> The modern folk tale, as in the Tale of Aristomenes, has two witches (they are sisters in Apuleius' version; in the modern version, they are the wife and mother-in-law of their victim) tearing internal organs out of a sleeping man and repairing the wound so that it is not visible. Eventually, the man and his companion track down the witches and kill them. In the story as Lawson records it, the two women are Striges, capable of assuming other forms, and it is no surprise that they are drunkards (like Apuleius' Meroe), as well as hungry for human flesh. They are also apparently capable of turning into birds like Apuleius' Pamphile, since at one point they fly off by unspecified means to raid the local wine-shop in order to supplement their dinner of human flesh. So also in the Aristomenes tale the two women steal Socrates' heart presumably to eat it; likewise in the Tale of Thelyphron, 2.23, the witches try to bite off strips of flesh from the corpse which Thelyphron is guarding, and end up at-

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<sup>9</sup> Lawson 1910, 182; see the same story compared by Klinger 1907 with the Aristomenes tale; also Scobie 1975, 88–90.

tacking Thelyphron himself in a similar manner (in other witch-stories the body parts may be collected to use as ingredients in performing magic spells, as in the grisly collection assembled by Pamphile in *Golden Ass* 3.17). As in Apuleius, the horror of the folktale story consists partly in a man's discovering that his bedpartner has murderous, even vampirish intentions against him (compare also the story of Tobit from the Biblical Apocrypha). What is notably absent from the story of the two witches as recorded by Lawson is the kind of sexual jealousy which is so strong a motivator of Meroe in the Tale of Aristomenes, even driving her to kill the man who wants to escape from her embraces. Still, by using a modified version of this folktale in his story in combination with the episode from Cicero, Apuleius caps the emotional tension and irony by interweaving two stories which combine intimacy with violence: the sexual intimacy of two lovers (in the folktale, husband and wife) is violently ended by the woman's murderous intentions against her partner. This is consistent with the folktale behavior of witches who as Scobie says,<sup>10</sup> invariably strike at those closest to them, their "kith and kin," as Medea famously does in killing her own children. The extra shudder associated with this witchly behavior is then enhanced by Apuleius' *contaminatio* whereby it is combined with a separate episode in which the close friendship of two travelling companions is not enough to prevent the suspicion that one has murdered the other. The indignation of the wrongly accused partner is highlighted (much as later, in 7.3, Lucius is horrified by the suggestion that he has robbed the house of his host Milo, whom he perversely regards as almost like a father to him), and the charge of murder against him, brought by the perfidious landlord, is reduced to a hypothetical case against Aristomenes which never actually is brought to court, while the suggestion by Socrates that the landlord wants to rob him is the only vestige of the actual thievery by the landlord in the original story. The witchcraft and the sexual jealousy imported by Apuleius from the folktale source have greatly added to the human interest of the tale in his version of it.

This Greek folktale recording the murderous activity of two witches is sometimes cited as a guarantee of a Greek source for the tale of Aristomenes; obviously it is connected to Apuleius' story in some of its details, but is far removed from it in tone and atmosphere. Apuleius' tale has been fleshed out with a richness and complexity that seem to suggest a variety of sources, and

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<sup>10</sup> Scobie 1983, 87–88: he observes that a wife's resorting to witchcraft may be a consequence of the lack of legal channels available to her for redress of wrongs.

remind us of the Romanness in many respects. In addition to its likely inspiration for part of its plot in the law courts and rhetorical theory, and its dashes of philosophy, the story is noteworthy for its macabre humor, which gives it the touches of what we would call a black comedy. The victory of the domineering female and the humbling of the male have a very Roman flavor suggesting satire or New Comedy. Horace's Canidia has clearly influenced the portrait of the witches. Socrates' lover Meroe has supernatural powers: not only can she play various magical tricks on her lovers or people who thwart her, but she has control over the elements themselves, can lower the sky or suspend the earth, light up Tartarus itself. So far she sounds like a replica of Canidia, who in Horace's *Epode* 17 boasts she can tear down the moon by her spells, or raise the dead (*Epode* 17. 78–79). The fictional Socrates has been emaciated, prematurely aged, reduced to living as a beggar; his skin has yellowed; these symptoms are very similar to the complaints by Horace as narrator of *Epode* 17.21–25 where he complains that he has become an old man and his own health has been ruined (including the yellowed skin) by the relationship with Canidia. Furthermore the implacable Canidia in that same poem threatens to use Horace as a horse and ride around on him (74–75); Apuleius' witches similarly assume the dominant position, crouching on top of their victim Aristomenes, and urinate on him as a final reminder of their swinishness, a kind of triumph of corporal sensuality over the intellect (with the “man of excellent valor” reduced to the helplessness of a newborn baby). It is probable that a similar point is made later on in the narrative, when Fotis makes love to Lucius in the dominant position, by mounting and riding on him—a victory of *serviles voluptates* over the cloistered and helpless intellect (cf. the stories and illustrations of the “mounted Aristotle” in which a woman tricks the famous philosopher into allowing her to dominate him by riding on his back; this motif in Medieval literature and art is described in Smith 1995<sup>11</sup>).

In addition, the prominence in Apuleius of the theme of sexual jealousy causes Meroe and her partner, particularly in Meroe's nagging of her partner Socrates, to pick up comic aspects from their resemblance to virago wives from Roman comedy. The attack by the witches, for example, on Meroe's reluctant lover, resembles a scene out of farce, like a verbal battle between a married couple with Meroe in the role of a shrewish, demanding wife who thoroughly intimidates her aged husband. Good examples from Plautus are the matron Artemonia intruding on her husband in the appropriately named

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<sup>11</sup> Smith 1995, *passim*.

“Comedy of Asses,” *Asinaria*, and the trickery and taunts by Cleostrata against her erring husband Lysidamus in the *Casina*. In Plautus’ “Comedy of Asses,” its title alone suggesting the *Asinus Aureus*, the cheating husband Demaenetus and his son recline at table, drinking and cavorting with a prostitute, and the Plautine wife Artemona eavesdrops on them, apparently through a window of the house, and eventually bursts in on them much like Apuleius’ Meroe does on Socrates. In Apuleius’ version, of course, Meroe does not find Socrates sleeping with another woman, but with the wretched Aristomenes, grotesquely “turned into a tortoise.”

Plautus’ frustrated *matrona* taunts his husband for his advanced age:

*Peri misera, ut osculatur carnufex, capuli decus* “Ugh! Poor me! How the old wreck kisses! He would look great lying in a coffin.”(892); cf. Cleostrata’s taunts at her husband in *Casina* 153–155: *Acheruntis pabulum* “Food for the grave” etc. and the sarcastic *Iubeo te salvere, amator* “Good morning to you, Mr. Lover!” (969)

This taunting by Plautine wives is matched by the sarcasm of Meroe in 1.12 when she calls Socrates her “Endymion and Catamite,” mythological references to young men which call ironic attention to the age of Socrates (he is not specifically called a *senex*, but this seems implied by his decrepit physical condition as described by Aristomenes), whereas the witch herself, described as being “of rather advanced age” (*altioris aetatis*) fantasizes that she is an innocent young maiden whom the older Socrates has deflowered (*illusit aetatulam meam*).

– In the “Comedy of Asses” Artemona accuses her husband of desertion and neglecting his marital duties in bed:

*fundum alienum arat, incultum familiarem deserit* “He is sowing a neighbor’s field while he leaves his own uncultivated” (874) (cf. Meroe’s *diebus ac noctibus illusit aetatulam meam*, “by day and night he mocks my delicate age” 1.12).

– Artemona vows revenge on her husband for his insults:

*Ne illa ecastor faenerato funditat* “truly he will pay interest for that shot at me” (902) (cf. Meroe’s *me diffamat probris* “he assails my reputation with his taunts”).

And the metaphorical death of the erring husband in Plautus (911, *mortuost Demaenetus*) while he declares himself a dead man (*Nullus sum, Asinaria* 922) becomes a literal murder in the Aristomenes tale. All of these touches take us away from Greek folktale and remind us that many of the details of Apuleius’ portrait of Meroe could be regarded as patched together from Horace and Plautus. The complexity of the plot line and layers of meaning in the tale should give us pause about assuming that a Greek tale is necessarily the primary source for the Tale of Aristomenes.

#### Platonism as Source

The final complicating factor in Apuleius’ use of his material in this story is the extent to which it has been colored by Platonism. Apuleius, the self-described *philosophus Platonicus* and author of learned treatises on Plato and Socrates, often alludes to the writings of Plato in his many works,<sup>12</sup> though curiously, he never mentions Plato by name in the *Golden Ass* (see below). The *Golden Ass*, or parts of it, can be read as a Platonic allegory, with frequent references to the *Phaedrus* in particular as a subtext; sometimes however, the meaning of such references can be hard to read, since they are disguised behind a façade of irony and absurdity.<sup>13</sup> Philosophy to Apuleius is a part of the general culture, and the *Phaedrus* in particular is frequently drawn on as a source in 2nd century AD Greek literature.<sup>14</sup> Such irony and absurdity seem constantly to threaten to discredit the serious intention of the Platonic paraphernalia; as a consequence it is by no means clear, as is often assumed, that these references to an idealistic philosophy are meant to inspire the reader positively, or that the subtext of the novel is a kind of propaganda for Platonism.

We must beware, therefore, of any assumption that the presence of Platonic elements in the Tale of Aristomenes, or any other, is a guarantee that a

<sup>12</sup> Sandy 1997, 252–255.

<sup>13</sup> Winkler 1985, 126.

<sup>14</sup> Dillon 1977, 307; Trapp 1990.

moralistic reading of Platonism lies behind their inclusion. Harrison, speaking of the fictional “Socrates”, is correct as far as he goes:

This [the fate of Socrates] could be presented as a serious moralizing lesson for Lucius, about to face similar erotic dangers in Hypata, but the entertaining black comedy overcomes any didactic element, especially since Lucius (as usual) fails to heed the cautionary tale.<sup>15</sup>

It seems easiest to argue that the “serious moralizing element” in the tale of Aristomenes, as later in that of Thelyphron, does work in its lesson, but it is a soberingly negative one. Before the powers of black magic, legal innocence is of no use; if accused, you will be convicted anyway by a corrupt jury, as the historical Socrates was (cf. Lucius’ outburst in Book 10.33 against the “vultures wearing togas,” and compare Petronius *Sat.* 14), moral purity and Platonic idealism, much less cleverness and caution, are no guarantee against ruination by the violent forces beyond your control. Idealism and caution are plowed under and suffer along with ignorance and vice.

The characters and events in the Tale of Aristomenes cannot be fully discussed without mention of their connection with Lucius, the narrator who forces the story out of Aristomenes and is connected spiritually both with him and his companion Socrates. Aristomenes himself, well-meaning but ineffectual, prefigures the later misadventures of Lucius in his doomed efforts to confront and control the power of witches; the disreputable Socrates by his grotesquely pitiable state foreshadows the bizarre and disastrous consequences of Lucius’ surrender to sensuality and black magic, and the fate of this namesake of the most famous of philosophers also seems to imply the helplessness of philosophy to cope with the dark powers.

The desire which motivates the young Lucius in the first part of the novel is both sexual and philosophical; indeed the connections between these two desires are underlined, to give just one of many possible examples, by the echo of *Felix et <certo> certius beatus* in 2.7.6 (Lucius’ longing for Fotis) in 11.16 *Felix hercules et ter beatus*, a phrase used by the crowd in the context of their approval of Lucius’ receiving the favor of Isis. Lucius’ desire to be a bird, as expressed to Fotis, is one of wishing to leave behind earthly restraints, to be *domus omnes procul* (3.23). He regards birds as denizens of the air, perhaps thinking of Plato’s *Timaeus* 40 A1 where, of the four kinds of entities,

<sup>15</sup> Harrison 2000, 256.

the one directly below the gods is “the kind that has wings and travels through the air.” If Lucius had read Apuleius’ *De Deo Socratis*, however, he would have known that “birds cannot be regarded as the proper inhabitants of the air, being in fact earthly” (318).

Lucius establishes his (flawed) philosophical credentials at the start of his journey by his claim to kinship in Thessaly with Plutarch (who was actually from Chaeronea) and his nephew Sextus (1.2).<sup>16</sup> This reference to a prominent Platonist might seem to have an increased significance since it occurs at the start of the novel, and moreover Plato himself and Platonism are never named anywhere in the *Golden Ass*.<sup>17</sup> The opening sentence of Apuleius’ narrative brackets Thessaly, the land of witchcraft and magic, on either side of the two philosophers. But the glitch thrown at us by the apparent geographical mistake casts a shadow over the validity of the reference. As Plutarch is dislodged in Thessaly,<sup>18</sup> and his philosophy implicitly pitted against witchcraft, so will the pale replica of the “philosopher Socrates” in the oncoming tale be reduced to squalor as he sits in rags on the ground, having become the pitiful slave of an oversexed witch whose powers have completely baffled him.

Lucius describes to his travel companions how he choked on *polenta*, a cheese pudding sometimes listed as the diet of philosophers (presumably because it is compatible with their austere lifestyle), Plaut. *Curc.* 295, Persius 3.55. As is frequently the case in Apuleius’ allusive style of narration, a small and seemingly trivial or even absurd detail can have wide symbolic implications and in this case, the choking prepares us for the tone of the story which lies immediately ahead. Lucius chokes on the food of philosophers in the context of a symposium, when moreover the choking is caused by his greediness in trying to keep up with his companions (thus implying a moral flaw incompatible with philosophical serenity). This incident is the equivalent of Aristophanes’ “hiccup” in Plato’s *Symposium* (185C–E), a hiccup which, like the buffoonery of his later story, was a humorous reminder that the jokester Aristophanes is shallow, rather out of sync with the loftier philosophizing of Socrates and his patroness Diotima. In 2.10, Fotis calls Lucius *scholasticus* (a young and inexperienced student, divorced from real life: see examples in *OLD* 2) who will get indigestion if he tastes her honey. Lucius’ dabbling in philosophy leaves him unprepared for the real world (cf. Seneca *Cont.* 7. Par.

<sup>16</sup> See Scobie’s commentary and Dowden 1994, 428–429.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison 2000, 254–255.

<sup>18</sup> Sandy 1997, 253.

4). Among the details which suggest a tie-in between Aristomenes and Lucius are the former's choking on a piece of bread, out of fear, in 1.19, which has an ominous echo of Lucius and the cheese-pudding. The fictional Socrates then tops them both by not only choking, but dying, after he has eaten a large quantity (*bonam partem*) of cheese. Aristomenes the "cheese-merchant" ironically serves his friend "Socrates" a big portion of the food of philosophers, which he cannot even swallow. The choking of all three characters is a warning that in trying to combat witchcraft with the maxims of Platonism, they have more than met their match.

Lucius' intellectual credentials are real, but will severely be put to the test by the sensuous temptations of the world, including the power of magic and the lure of sex. These are not really separate drives. A Thessalian witch like Meroe is associated with pure appetite, including heavy drinking, vengefulness, macabre violence, and nymphomania. Such witches reduce their victims to sexual beings, like the fictional Socrates, and punish them when they try to escape; their victims lower themselves to become slaves of the witches, or, in Lucius' case, behave inappropriately to their social station<sup>19</sup> by falling in love with a slave, which in Fotis' case is a double danger since she is linked to the occult through her service to the witch Pamphile.

Of those who have studied the Platonic elements in the Tale of Aristomenes, R. Thibau is particularly adept at searching out allusions, though not all of his examples are equally plausible. His detailed analysis lies behind some of the following analysis, as does the work of van der Paardt and Muenstermann.<sup>20</sup>

(1.2) On the road to Hypata the companion of Aristomenes breaks out into a guffaw, and asks him to stop telling such monstrous lies.

The laughter and incomprehension are those of the non-initiate. Thrasymachus in Plato *Rep.* 337, who breaks out into a guffaw and laughs sardonically at the irony of Socrates; but later Thrasymachus is so trapped by Socrates' arguments as to be reduced to sweating and embarrassment. Such a reaction can be compared with that of non-initiates in Christian literature: the mob at Athens "scoffs" at the preaching of Paul, *Acts* 17.32, Tertullian's accusers laugh at his preaching in the *Apologeticus*, 18.4 and 23.13. Thus the tale has the nature of a "sacred story" containing elements so fantastic as to be unintelligible to a non-initiate, as indeed the powers of witches in this novel seem like

<sup>19</sup> Sandy 1997, 246.

<sup>20</sup> R. Thibau 1965; van der Paardt 1978; Muenstermann 1995, 8–22.



an old wives' tale but are all too deadly and real for those whom they touch. At various times in the novel, Apuleius conveys both sides of the Platonic message. In Plato himself, after the *Symposium*'s positive account of Eros, *Republic* 9.571–580 shows us plainly the dangers to be found on the erotic road. As for Apuleius' fictional Socrates, he is in some respects the antithesis of the Greek philosopher who in the *Gorgias* (491D) urges temperance and self-mastery over the pleasures and desires that are in oneself. The Aristomenes tale in its early stages gives evidence of being Platonic in its moral framework, particularly in the moralizing against the fictional Socrates for abandoning his family for a prostitute:

*'Pol quidem tu dignus' inquam 'es extrema sustinere, siquid est tamen novissimo extremius, qui voluptatem et scortum scortum lari et liberis praetulisti.'*

“By heaven” I said “you deserve to suffer the worst—if indeed there is anything worse than your most recent condition—since you preferred the pleasures of Venus and a leathery old whore to your own hearth and children.” (trans. Hanson)

This little speech seems to have significance as Tatum says as “the only explicit condemnation of *voluptas* ever made [in the novel] until the priest in 11.15 mentions Lucius' ‘servile pleasures’”,<sup>21</sup> it is also given prominence as part of the opening tale of the novel, which could be seen as having the nature of a program piece. Yet Aristomenes' reproach of Socrates for neglecting his family is hardly to be accepted without irony, like so much else in the novel, because it is based in part, as we explore below, on Crito's misguided reproach of the philosopher Socrates for rejecting the offer of his friends to smuggle him out of jail.

At the start of the tale (1.6) Aristomenes, who is ironically named for his “excellent valor,” meets his equally ironically named friend Socrates, a once respectable man now humiliated by his addiction to lust. The philosopher Socrates, in contrast, (at least in the Platonic corpus) was known for his ability to resist such temptation, even the advances of the beautiful Alcibiades, as Harrison,<sup>22</sup> points out. Apuleius' description of the fictional Socrates as *paene alius lurore*, “almost a different man due to his pallor,” may be, as Thibau

<sup>21</sup> Tatum 1969, 494.

<sup>22</sup> Harrison 2000, 256.

suggests<sup>23</sup> a humorous glance at the vast distance between this disreputable character and Plato's Socrates.

One hesitates, however, to conclude that Apuleius intended the two "Socrateses" to be opposites from one another, since the philosopher Socrates was also sometimes lampooned as pale, unkempt, and dirty,<sup>24</sup> and the fictional character evidently embodies these memorably humorous physical characteristics of his namesake. Nor is the historical tradition consistent on the issue of Socrates' supposed abstemious and pure style of living, as in later antiquity the stories about Socrates start to grow more sensational. Theodoret in his *Graecarum Affectionum Curatio* 12.63–65 reports a tradition preserved by Porphyry that the historical Socrates was prone to anger and a slave of pleasures (ταῖς ἡδύπαθείαις δεδουλοῦμενον) and that he frequently had affairs with married women and women of common origin (so Porphyry *Historia Philosophiae* frg. 14.) Thus Apuleius' account of the fictional Socrates as dissolute may not be so far outside the mainstream of the tradition as it was current in late antiquity; one might compare also the story reported by Nietzsche in which Socrates concurs with the judgment of a physiognomist passing through Athens, who remarked that Socrates was a monster, containing within him every kind of foul lust and vice.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the attacks by Meroe and her sister Panthia on Socrates could be in part inspired by the story that Socrates' two wives Xanthippe and Myron sometimes joined their forces in attacking him for laughing at them (Theodoret and Porphyry op. cit., Jerome *Adversus Jovinianum* 1.48, cf. Meroe's phrase *illusit aetatulam meam*) and that Meroe's urinating on Aristomenes matches Xanthippe's throwing of dirty water on her husband's head (Diogenes Laertius 2:36 [1:166–167], an indignity which the philosopher turns into a joke, saying that he knew that after thundering, Xanthippe would rain, lit. "make water;" by the time the story is told by Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, the water has actually become "pisse," Chaucer, *Wife of Bath's Prologue* 729).

Apuleius' Socrates has lost everything, first by being stripped by bandits on his way to Larissa on a business venture (1.7; a frequent fate of travelers in the *Golden Ass*) and later, through his relationship to the witch Meroe, has been reduced to the straits that Diotima ascribes to Eros in Plato's *Symposium* (203C7–D3), "tough and shriveled and shoeless and homeless, always lying in

<sup>23</sup> Thibau 1965, 106.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Dover's edition of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (Oxford 1968) xxxiii–xxxiv.

<sup>25</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* trans. R.J. Hollingdale, London 1968, 40–41.

the dirt without a bed..." (compare also Diogenes Laertius 2.37, where Xanthippe tears the cloak off Socrates' back in the market-place.) The fictional Socrates is accused of neglecting his children and causing a disgrace to his townsmen (1.6); the philosopher Socrates is charged by Crito with the same crimes in his choice of suicide over escape from prison (*Crito* 45C sqq.). Apuleius' Socrates, confronted with his disgrace, covers his head with his tattered remnant of a cloak, recalling *Phaedrus* 237A–242E, where Socrates wants to avoid looking at Phaedrus while he speaks because he feels shame for praising the inferior Eros based on desire alone (the gesture by the fictional Socrates also perhaps foreshadows his own death by recalling *Phaedo* 118A, 26). This lower, tyrannical Eros is exemplified in Apuleius' fictional character (see also Plato *Rep.* 9.573–575). Looked at from a different point of view, Apuleius' Socrates, "who knows only the inferior form of love" (Muenstermann 1995, 15) has settled for the *Venus vulgaris* discussed by Apuleius himself in *Apolo-gia* 12.411–415, based on Plato's *Symposium* 180D.

Meroe's trick of turning her lovers into various animals (beaver, frog, ram) once she is finished with them,<sup>26</sup> may reflect the passage in Plato's *Republic* (620 A–C) where souls who are passing into the upper world may choose the forms of various animals which reflect their character; the croaking frog swimming in a vat of wine is suited to the congenial, wine-bibbing innkeeper, while the ram fighting cases in court suits the aggressive lawyer (1.9). Meroe's transporting the home of another enemy to the top of a jagged mountain (1.10) recalls Plato *Rep.* 9.578E where a man is transported to a solitary area by the gods along with his whole family, and is forced to become flatterer to his own slaves in order to be released. Those who "beg for mercy" to Meroe are comparable to the slaves of their appetites in the Platonic allegory, just as Meroe herself embodies the power of reckless and unrestrained indulgence in sex, drinking, and physical force; to surrender to her is to lose control over one's own life.

Aristomenes' attempt to help Socrates, however, is counter-productive and leads to his death. When he urges him in 1.11 to come away with him before dawn and escape the witches, the intention to leave is supernaturally telegraphed to Meroe and she comes seeking revenge, a chilling reminder of the all-pervasive power of the witches. Aristomenes is echoing Crito's advice to Socrates in *Crito* 46A to steal away from his persecutors in the dead of night. Plato's Socrates refused the offer, and sacrificed his life to preserve his virtue;

<sup>26</sup> As van der Paardt says, 1978, 82.

but ironically, the fictional Socrates would have had a better chance of preserving his life if he had heeded his namesake, the philosopher of the Platonic dialogue, and refused to be part of his friend's plan to escape from prison.<sup>27</sup>

The bursting in of the two witches causes Aristomenes' bed to flip over on him and cover him; thus he metaphorically repeats the fate of Meroe's lovers, and is changed into an animal, namely a tortoise (1.12). Despite the shock of the moment, Aristomenes laughs at the thought of his transformation, and even allows himself to engage in a Platonic reflection: he observes that certain emotions and their contraries, like tears and laughter, are closely related. The model for this is Socrates' reflection in the prison cell, *Phaedo* 60B, when the fetters from his legs are removed, about how the pain in his leg has been closely followed by pleasure, this illustrating the close juxtaposition of opposites.

Meanwhile both Aristomenes and Socrates bounce back and forth between life and death—metaphorically in the former case, since the witches are on the verge of killing him, but when he ends up on the floor drenched with urine he is like a newborn babe, whereas Socrates is first murdered and then suddenly discovered alive again. Such brushes with death followed by rebirth have parallels in the Greek novels (see esp. Achilles Tatius 3.15), but in Apuleius we may be closer to the lesson of Socrates in the *Phaedo* 72B, that “the living are generated from the dead as much as the dead from the living.”

Finally, Aristomenes and Lucius sit down to refresh themselves under a plane tree (clearly recalling the episode of Phaedrus and Socrates from *Phaedrus* 229A), and eat bread and cheese. Socrates begins to look pale—and Aristomenes persuades him to drink from the stream, whereupon he dies (just as the philosopher died from a drink).<sup>28</sup> Thus the comically named Socrates dies due to his tawdry love for a witch, in a setting which recalls the speech the philosopher Socrates made in praise of love.

The ambiguity of Lucius' tirade against the murder of the philosopher Socrates in 10.33 (when Lucius is rudely told that his philosophy is that of an ass) is a final roar of laughter by the reader against the braying of the ass who is trying to lure us into accepting his neat categories of thought. Socrates can be either a disreputable derelict or a saintly martyr, and philosophy itself can act as a φάρμακον that may be remedy or poison.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Thibau 1965, 106–107.

<sup>28</sup> Again noted by van der Paardt 1978, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida 1981, pp. 99 et passim.

In our final judgement about the tale of Aristomenes, it is useful to add that in some respects it puts us in mind of the situation reported as background in Apuleius' *Apology*, in the sense that in each work the main character is threatened with being condemned by hostile and unsympathetic adversaries for a crime which, with great indignation, he denies having committed. Again in both works, superimposed on the legal wrangling is a philosophical veneer, which in the *Apology* is treated with confidence and even brashness, but has acquired far greater subtlety and ambiguity in the novel. In his *Apology* Apuleius uses his wide knowledge of literature and philosophy, especially his command of Platonism (whom he identifies in *Apology* 65 as both a "teacher for life and a chief advocate in court," *ut vitae magistro, ita causae patrono*) to toy with the small-minded prosecutors who are out to frame him on a false charge of bewitching his wife to marry him. The Tale of Aristomenes shows us rather a world in which intellectual posturing has little effect, magic is no false charge but a horrifying reality, and the powers of evil have the upper hand: the witches prevail, and the forces of justice will be helpless to stop the real culprits, while there is a real threat that an innocent man will be condemned. Aristomenes, the man of "excellent might" is unprepared for the forces of witchcraft; Socrates himself, the man of saintly virtue, is reduced to a slave of his bodily appetites. As a program piece for the novel as a whole, the Tale of Aristomenes is a grim warning of the unleashing of dark forces in the world.

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