

The Laughter Festival as a Community Integration Rite in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

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In 2.32 Lucius returns late at night from Byrrhene's dinner party to Milo's house, accompanied by his slave. In his drunken state he sees what he thinks are three robbers trying to break into Milo's house, and kills them one by one with his sword. The following morning Lucius weeps as he envisages his likely prosecution for the murders. There is a marked contrast between this hung-over remorse and the drunken bravado of the previous night. The protagonist's differing perceptions of the same event may be considered as plots, and tie in neatly with the novel's key theme of metamorphosis. The Hypatans take advantage of Lucius' pessimistic scenario and stage a mock trial, during the course of which Lucius acts out two roles: the accused criminal begging for mercy and the orator, defending the heroism of his deed.

Lucius' unwitting performance in the festival acquires the ritual function of *dokimasia*, trial, in rites of passage, in this case celebrated in the public space of the theatre. Lucius is an outsider staying in Milo's home, which is located outside the city limits: *extra pomerium et urbem totam*, 'outside the city-limits and the whole town' (1.21). The Hypatans offer Lucius the splendid opportunity of staying in their town by testing his abilities to generate laughter. Although Lucius passes the test and the Hypatans make him patron of their city, offering to cast his image in bronze, he shows reluctance to accept these high honours. The refusal to integrate into the Hypatan community on Lucius' part may be explained by the fact that their Laughter god has offered him sorrow instead of joy.

Scholars have traditionally interpreted the Laughter Festival as a scapegoat ritual.¹ Habinek offers the most illuminating discussion in this regard, but interprets the festival as a rite of communal identity in which Lucius plays the *pharmakos*—a marginal figure, whose presence in the town threatens harmony, and whose expulsion ensures communal identity.² Such a *pharmakos* ritual is informed by a centrifugal movement out of the city, whereas at Hypata the opposite spatial direction is taken: from Milo's home, outside the city limits, to the theatre, the figurative centre of the city. My aim in what follows is to counter the prevailing view of the Laughter Festival as a scapegoat ritual and argue instead that the narrative of *Met.* 3.1–12 represents a kind of integration rite enacted in the theatre. In this public space, Lucius and all other participants engage in the performance of ritual roles,³ the outcome of which leads not to his expulsion from the Hypatan community, but rather to a proposal for integration into it. That being said, there is a major difference between Lucius and all other characters involved in the festival: the former acts unwittingly, while the latter are conscious of their roles.

After the end of Thelyphron's tale, Lucius' aunt Byrrhene informs him that the Laughter Festival is due to take place the following day, and advises him to find some witty way to celebrate this great god (2.31). Lucius promises to do his best, taking leave of the dinner party in a drunken state. The torch held by his accompanying slave blows out the moment he leaves Byrrhene's house, thus rendering his account of events unreliable. Upon his arrival at Milo's house, Lucius sees three 'men' beating on the door; he mistakes them for robbers and cuts them down with his sword. These 'robbers' later turn out to have been wineskins animated by Pamphile's magic. As narrator,

¹ James 1987, 87 and 97, n. 1; and McCreight 1993, 46–47. On the other hand, Robertson 1919, 110–15, interprets the festival as a ritual drama of the carnival type.

² Habinek 1990, 54; Bartalucci 1988, 50–65; Finkelppearl 1998, 91–92, compares Lucius to Sinon in Vergil's *Aeneid* 2 in their common role as scapegoats. For the ritual of *pharmakos* see Burkert 1985, 82–84. Tatum 1979, 49, considers Lucius' experience in the festival as a replay of the misadventures previously suffered by Aristomenes and Thelyphron, but does not develop the point any further.

³ Penwill 1990, 5 points out the theatrical substructure in the narrative. Zimmerman 2000, 25–26 compares Lucius' performance in the theatre at Corinth, averted at the last moment, to his performance in the Laughter Festival. She also nicely points out that, given the fact that Lucius' performance is averted at the last moment, one may say that it is replaced by the *spectaculum* in Cenchreae.

Lucius compares his encounter with the bandits to that of Hercules' slaughtering of Geryon: *in vicem Geryoneae caedis*, 'in the manner of the slaughter of Geryon' (2.32).

On the morning of the Laughter Festival, the Hypatans take advantage of the protagonist's guilty conscience and put him on mock trial, charging him with triple 'murder'. The previous night Lucius has killed three 'men'. As a common criminal, then Lucius must undergo a ritual 'catharsis' before his integration into the Hypatan community and their 'fellowship of Laughter'.⁴

The complete lack of historical evidence relating to Laughter Festivals⁵ bears out Byrrhene's earlier remark to Lucius that the Hypatans are the only people in the world who celebrate this rite (*quo die soli mortalium sanctissimum deum Risum hilaro atque gaudiali ritu propitiamus*, 'on that day we alone in the world seek to propitiate the most sacred god Laughter with merry and joyful ritual' 2.31). However, the narrative in question may offer some useful insights into the motivation for the festival. It appears to be an institutionalised ritual of integration in which the entire community participates, thus symbolising its cohesion as a group. The procedure seems to involve some sort of a mock trial, the literal equivalent of *dokimasia* that informs rites of passage. The Hypatans most probably prefer to set up either strangers or fools (ideally both, like Lucius) precisely because such people are ignorant of the rite and can thus ensure a triumphant celebration for Laughter.⁶ Lucius' credulity in believing that the courts are functioning as normal on what has clearly been described to him the previous night by Byrrhene as a public holiday helps characterise him as completely foolish.

The performance of this mock trial begins when the magistrates, the lictors and a mob of citizens burst into Milo's house to arrest Lucius and take him to court to face murder charges. Lucius surrenders to the lictors

⁴ Intratextually, Lucius' re-evaluation of the events of the previous night recalls Aristomenes in the eponymous tale (Book 1): Lucius is convinced that something which did not happen did occur, whereas Aristomenes tries to persuade himself of the opposite regarding the events with the witches that took place the previous night in the inn. The connection between the two episodes is reinforced as both Lucius and Aristomenes are under the spell of magic.

⁵ See Schlam 1992, 43.

⁶ One may recall Fotis' earlier remark in 2.18 that the Hypatans are hostile to foreigners, (perhaps because they prefer to set them up in the festival and thus ensure its success): *'tibi vero fortunae splendor insidias, contemptus etiam peregrinationis poterit adferre'*, 'envy of your fine fortune, as well as contempt for you as a foreign visitor, could cause you to be ambushed.'

without resistance, therefore implicitly acquiescing to the role of criminal as he is led around the town.⁷ Lucius' arrest signals the transition from the private space of Milo's house, outside the city limits, to the public space of the city, first of the streets, then the forum and finally the theatre.

The fact that Lucius is led around town, thus prompting self-comparison to an animal, has been taken by some scholars as evidence for his role as *pharmakos* (*lustralibus ... hostiis*, 'sacrificial animals' 3.2; also a few lines later: *velut quandam victimam* 'like a sacrificial victim' 3.2).⁸ This reading is clearly in alignment with Lucius' reading of the events. However, there are two features that militate against this view: (1) Lucius is led through the city-streets, unlike the *pharmakos* who is driven through the city gates and then chased across the boundaries;⁹ and (2) Lucius is handsome, whereas the *pharmakos* is a figure who is chosen on account of his ugliness.¹⁰ Only after his metamorphosis into an ass is Lucius truly ugly. In the context of this interpretation, Lucius' comparison of himself to an animal may be interpreted as designed to foreshadow his imminent metamorphosis into an ass through magic and his subsequent misadventures (Books 3–10).

In his capacity as narrator, Lucius describes the entire crowd as laughing at him throughout the procession to the forum. The laughter suggests enjoyment and approval of the protagonist's performance, given that the Hypatans are aware of his innocence.¹¹

When the procession reaches the forum, the magistrates take their seat in the lofty tribunal, *sublimo suggestu* 'on the lofty dais', and thus assume the role of *judices*, 'judges' (3.2). The forum is so overcrowded that the procedure is moved to the theatre, as there is serious danger of a genuine disaster, which would be most unfitting at a Laughter Festival. At the same time, the civic space of the theatre serves as the most appropriate setting for the enactment of this staged trial. It may further be taken as a metaphor for the city

⁷ For the sacrificial language in the Laughter Festival, see McCreight 1993, 46–52.

⁸ Bartalucci 1988, 58; also Robertson 1919, 113–14. In this context, Lucius' lavish dinner at Byrrhene's house the night before the festival may correspond to the ritual detail in which the *pharmakos* is fed lavishly before his expulsion from town. On this point see Burkert 1985, 82.

⁹ Burkert 1985, 82.

¹⁰ Burkert 1982, 82.

¹¹ For an assessment of the (sadistic) laughter in the festival, see Shumate 1996, 83–86. For an excellent discussion of the theme of laughter and humiliation in the Laughter festival see also Lateiner 2001, 226, 231, 239, 243 and 247.

itself, since the entire community is gathered there (3.2). Lucius emerges as all the more stupid for failing to take note of this change of venue, particularly if one considers that his aunt has already informed him about the festival and hinted that he will be called upon to play a role.

In the performance proper, the crier calls for silence and asks the watchman to come forward to deliver his speech. The reference to the water clock is designed to reinforce the verisimilitude of the events. The watchman then assumes the role of prosecutor (*accusator* 3.3), and delivers the accusation in accordance with the form prescribed in rhetorical textbooks: an *exordium* (3.3.2–3), a *narratio* (3.3.4–8) and a *peroratio* (3.3.9).¹²

In the *exordium*, the prosecutor points out the importance of the case and asks for the punishment of the murderer. The *narratio* relates the facts of the case. The previous night, it is alleged, the defendant killed three men and then entered a house. The prosecutor dutifully ensured that he was brought to justice the next day, which coincided with the holiday. In the *peroratio*, the prosecutor appeals to the judges to punish the murderer, whom he specifically characterizes as *peregrinus*, foreigner. This punishment would take the form of expulsion from the town.

When the crier then calls upon the accused to defend himself, Lucius bursts into tears, not so much because of the accusation, but out of his own foolish sense of guilt. Still, he musters some courage, which he attributes to divine inspiration, and presents his case in terms of the heroic nature of his deed (3.4).

Scholars have interpreted Lucius' defence in the trial as evidence for his dual role as *auctor* and *actor*: he creates a speech and proceeds to deliver it to the audience at the trial.¹³ This role as *auctor* becomes even more apparent when he devises the two plots, one for the morning of the Laughter Festival and the other for the night before it. During the festival Lucius acts out two roles, first as criminal in the procession and then as orator in order to defend his innocence in the performance of the 'trial'. These two roles seem to correspond to his two differing perceptions of the same event that took place the previous night outside Milo's front door.

Moreover, Lucius' defence in the 'trial' exhibits a rhetorical structure, consisting of an *exordium* (3.4.3–4), a *narratio* (3.5–6.1–3) and a section of

¹² van der Paardt 1971, 47. The reference to the text is to the Budé edition of Robertson and Vallette 1940–45.

¹³ Finkelpearl 1998, 89.

proofs (3.6.4–5), like the watchman’s speech before it.¹⁴ In the *exordium* Lucius does not deny the charge of killing three men, but argues that the accusation against him is unreasonable. In the *narratio*, he relates the facts of the case (as he wants them to be understood by his audience). Lucius represents this encounter with the robbers he saw trying to break down Milo’s door as a duel, thus lending an epic dimension to the scene. Through his intrepid action he has protected his host’s house from robbery and thus views himself as worthy of public praise (*salute communi protecta ... me ... laudabilem publice credebam fore* ‘having ... protected ... public safety ... I trusted that I would be ... praiseworthy in the public eye’ 3.6). In retrospect, the community of Hypata will praise Lucius not for ridding society of criminals, but for his skill in generating laughter and hence duly honouring the god of Laughter. In the closing section of his speech, Lucius refers to the esteem in which he is held among his own people as well as to the absence of any sinister motive for committing the crime.¹⁵

When Lucius is sure that he has won over the audience with his defence, he stares at them, but discovers to his amazement that everyone, including his host Milo, has dissolved into laughter.¹⁶ One way of interpreting Milo’s response is as that of informed spectator: he is aware of the positive development that awaits his guest, and is thus in a position to enjoy the excellent performance in the ‘trial’.¹⁷

Following this, two women appear in the orchestra (3.8) to act out the roles of the widows and mothers of the dead men. The reference to their black dress must be interpreted as ‘costume’. In their turn, they deliver an emotional appeal to the court, seeking the defendant’s blood in order to placate the dead (3.8). They further identify Lucius as *latro*, ‘robber’, thus switching around the charge. As we would expect in this staged trial, their appeal is successful.

¹⁴ van der Paardt 1971, 64. The reference to the text is to the Budé edition of Robertson and Vallette 1940–45.

¹⁵ In Cicero’s *Pro Milone* 9, the orator mentions the law of the XII tables, according to which anyone could kill night robbers carrying weapons without legal penalty on grounds of self-defence.

¹⁶ Penwill 1990, 3, observes the error of the Hypatans in ignoring the role of magic in the animated wineskins. See also Finkelpearl 1998, 90.

¹⁷ Shumate 1996, 87, views Milo both as a trickster figure who laughs at Lucius’ expense, and as Lucius’ only friend in the crowd. Smith 1989, 130, characterizes Milo as “an ominous and disturbing character.”

The elder of the magistrates (another actor in this ‘trial’ plot) orders that Lucius be severely tortured in order to reveal the identity of his accomplices, since his slave has run off and is unavailable for cross-examination. Here there is an element of *talio*: the magistrates intend to wipe out Lucius and his gang, just as Lucius has done earlier when he had killed the three ‘men’, in order to protect both Milo’s house and the community of Hypata. Lucius undergoes the worst kind of humiliation, taking the place of his slave and facing the prospect of corporal punishment, which was forbidden for Roman citizens, let alone nobles of his stature.

At this point, the older of the two women appeals to the citizens to pull off the shroud over the corpses, on the grounds that the horrific sight beneath will lead them to call for an even more severe punishment. Lucius’ refusal to lay the ‘corpses’ bare reveals his unwillingness to gaze on the havoc he wrought the previous night. Under pressure from the lictors Lucius is forced to remove the shroud, only to discover that his ‘victims’ were wineskins, pierced in the place where he struck them the night before outside Milo’s house. It is only then that he fully perceives the illusion of events.

The people in the audience respond with uncontrolled laughter and congratulate Lucius as they exit the theatre. Their laughter is more intense at this moment since nobody represses it, thus signifying their earlier masked assumption of the role as spectators in the performance of this ‘trial’.

When Lucius perceives the illusion of his creation, he portrays himself as figuratively dead (3.10). His ‘rebirth’ occurs only when Milo approaches him and leads him home ever inconsolable after his humiliation during the festival.¹⁸ The walk home through Hypata’s narrow streets contrasts with the earlier parade through the main streets, throughout which Lucius was the object of public attention and ridicule (3.2). The fact that Lucius plays the part of defendant in the festival, albeit unwittingly, offers him a rare opportunity to integrate into the community. Everything depends on his skill in generating laughter and thereby assisting in the festival celebrations.

The ensuing entrance of the magistrates into the private space of Lucius’ room, in stately attire, signals the abandonment of their earlier role of *judices* in the enactment of this staged trial. Their speech performs the function of explaining every aspect of the rite to him (3.11). First, the magistrates reveal their awareness of Lucius’ noble birth and learning, while encouraging him

¹⁸ For the theme of rebirth, from either presumed or real death, see Zimmerman 2000, 23, together with n. 83.

to dispel his grief.¹⁹ The reference to the protagonist's origins only serves to stress his foolishness in failing to comprehend that he has merely fallen victim to a mock trial without further repercussions. The magistrates proceed to define the annual celebration as *lusus*, a 'public holiday' which the entire community celebrates in honour of the god Laughter. The success of this *lusus*, they explain, depends on its novelty value, in this way implicitly making a 'literary' comment on the novel aspect of Lucius' creation. Third, the magistrates assure Lucius that the god always takes the *auctor* and *actor* under his protection, never letting him experience grief (*auctorem et actorem*, 'producer and performer' 3.11): Lucius can be seen as the *auctor*, since he unconsciously devises his two plots and then performs the roles of criminal and the orator in the 'trial', defending the heroism of his 'deed'. Later in 3.12 Lucius admits that he has been the creator of the laughter in the theatre: *quem ipse fabricaveram, risum*, 'laughter which I myself had manufactured'. Finally, the magistrates inform Lucius that the city has decided to proclaim him patron, *patronus*, and to cast his image in bronze: '*at tibi civitas omnis pro ista gratia honores egregios obtulit; nam et patronum scripsit et ut in aere stet imago tua decrevit*', 'and the city has unanimously offered you special honours in gratitude for what you have done' (3.11).²⁰ The awarding of exceptional honours to the foreigner Lucius for his brilliant performance in the festival, so alien to the role of *pharmakos*, signals his integration into the Hypatan community with the new social status of 'honorary citizen'.

In his reply, Lucius pretends to acknowledge the import of the distinctions conferred upon him, but tactfully declines the offer of a statue, proposing instead to have it cast in the form of his superiors, perhaps because, unlike Lucius, they were aware of their roles. The fact that Lucius views himself as a victim rather than an honoured guest explains his refusal of the exceptional honours conferred. Later, Lucius puts on yet another act in his reply to Byrrhene's slave, who comes to Milo's home to invite him to dinner for a second time. Lucius' feigned reply to both the magistrates and Byrrhene's slave is set in remarkable opposition to his earlier unwitting per-

¹⁹ Harrison 2000, 215–19 collects evidence in the text which reveals Lucius as a sophist in the making.

²⁰ Kenney 1998, 228, observes: "in the real world *patronus* was a sort of ambassador, a man of substance and influence appointed to watch over the city's interests at Rome. Lucius' appointment, like the statue which he tactfully declines, is purely honorific."

formance in the Laughter Festival. Moreover, his reluctance to return to Byrrhene's house makes clear his terror of further ridicule, and in retrospect explains why he turned down the honours offered by the Hypatan magistrates.

In Hypata Lucius has two completely opposite experiences. As listener of the Thelyphron tale in the controlled space of Byrrhene's house, he can join with her guests in laughing at the disfigured man's misfortune. On the other hand, during the Laughter Festival, in the open space of the procession, in the public streets and the theatre, he finds himself in the position of the victim and is reduced to tears. The community of Hypata seems to enjoy sadistic laughter at the expense of individuals who have fallen victim to them. This feature is set in remarkable contrast to the reaction of the crowd at Kenchreae (in Isis' festival) who do not laugh at Lucius' misfortunes when he enters the procession in the form of the ass and then regains his human form amidst the amazement of all participants in the procession.²¹ Yet in rejecting the honours bestowed on him by the Hypatan magistrates, Lucius also loses the guarantee that the god will never let him suffer grief (3.11).

This turn of the plot takes place in the narrative sequence following the Laughter Festival. Fotis explains to Lucius the contribution played by witchcraft in his ordeal in the Laughter Festival. Moreover, in her explanation Fotis also emerges as an inferior witch in comparison to her powerful mistress Pamphile. Lucius, however, fails to perceive this. Instead he asks his

²¹ There are a number of intriguing parallels between the Ploiaphesia festival and the Laughter Festival. First, in encouraging Lucius to enter the procession in the Ploiaphesia, Isis (11.5) may recall Byrrhene, who advises her nephew to think of something witty and take part in the Laughter Festival the next morning (2.31). Second, like the Laughter Festival, all participants in the procession of the Ploiaphesia festival engage in role-play, as they are expected to act according to the demands of the ritual of the ceremonial launching of Isis' new ship (11.7–11). Finally, the priest who encourages Lucius to assume a more cheerful disposition and enter Isis' fellowship for even greater protection (11.16), brings to mind the similar exhortation of the magistrates, who encourage Lucius to dispel his grief and offer him high honours (3.11). These parallels, however, are designed to reinforce the stark contrast between the two episodes: in the Laughter Festival Lucius is ridiculed. His foolishness foreshadows his later metamorphosis into an ass. By contrast, in the Ploiaphesia festival Lucius turns from ass to man, to the amazement and admiration of the crowd (11.13). This difference, in turn, explains why Lucius has turned down the offer of integration into the Hypatan community and gladly integrates himself into the Isiac fellowship: the Hypatans' god of Laughter offers Lucius sorrow, whereas Isis grants him joy and the prospect of a happy life under her protection.

mistress to change him into an owl, after secretly watching Pamphile transform herself into the very same bird so that she can fly to her Boeotian lover (3.21).²² Fotis agrees to change Lucius into a bird only after obtaining assurances that he will not run away from her. He then undresses and rubs himself with Fotis' ointments, thus mimicking Pamphile's previous performance. Far from becoming an owl, however, Lucius is transformed into an ass.²³ Here there may be a latent play on the fact that the owl is a symbol of wisdom, while the ass is one of stupidity: Lucius asks to be changed into the former, but ends up the latter. Lucius' metamorphosis into an ass marks the end of his affair with Fotis, whose misuse of magic ointments has led to the disastrous turn in events.

One way of interpreting the Laughter Festival is as that of a trial to test Lucius' foolishness, so that in successfully passing it he can rightfully turn into an ass, an animal renowned for its stupidity. Moreover, his tears and sorrows in the theatre hint at the sufferings that are in store for him in the near future.

Later a group of robbers really do break into Milo's house, steal goods and remove Lucius/the ass from town to their mountain lair. If we are to believe the spy of the thieves in Book 7, the Hypatans blame Lucius for the attack on Milo's house. The fact that the Hypatans accuse Lucius of the theft in Milo's house further argues against the notion as *pharmakos*: the *pharmakos* is a figure to whom the entire community is indebted after his expulsion from town, thus allowing the continuation of the order.²⁴ Only after his metamorphosis into an ass Lucius could somehow be seen as a *pharmakos* figure: he is truly ugly by that time, and is forcefully removed from town against his own will, although not in ritualistic terms, to live with a group of social outcasts. Thus Lucius' experience in Hypata which is not originally intended to resemble the *pharmakos* ritual, ends up being so perhaps owing

²² Despite their tremendous powers, witches are comic figures, given that they are unable to exercise control over their lovers: Pamphile, for instance, cannot control her Boeotian lover, just as earlier Meroe is unable to make her lover Socrates stay with her.

²³ In the novel, metamorphosed characters retain those personality traits that underlined their individuality as humans. Thus all ex-lovers and opponents of Meroe retain the aspects that distinguished them as human beings when metamorphosed into animals: her unfaithful ex-lover turns into a beaver because that animal cuts off its genitals and thus saves itself from its pursuers; an inn-keeper turns into a frog swimming in his own wine; a lawyer turns into a pleading ram, and so on (1.9). Moreover, the witch Pamphile, who practices her arts at night, appropriately turns herself into an owl, a nocturnal bird (3.21).

²⁴ Burkert 1985, 84.

to his refusal to integrate into the Hypatan community and to his foolish interest in magic. Lucius' forced departure from town marks the beginning of the long sequence of his asinine adventures in the novel, in which he suffers all manner of trials and tribulations (Books 3–10).

The presence of certain themes from the narrative of the Laughter Festival in Lucius' subsequent adventures as an ass renders the latter a mirror of the former in several ways. First, in his asinine adventures everybody is privy to a joke except for him, just as was the case in his ordeal in the Laughter Festival. Secondly, Lucius is reduced to the status of a complete outsider, just as he was a foreigner in Hypata. Finally, Lucius is reduced to his animal state by the same kind of misguided overconfidence he displayed towards magic before his painful experience in the Laughter Festival. In this way, Lucius' ordeal in the Laughter Festival may be interpreted as foreshadowing his subsequent adventures as an ass.

To sum up, the *peregrinus* Lucius' movement from Milo's home, outside the city limits, to the theatre, the figurative centre of the city, argues in favour of an integration rite. In the performance of the rite, all participants act out ritual roles: Lucius unwittingly plays roles both as criminal and defendant in order to prove the heroic nature of his deed, the wineskins appear as robbers, the magistrates perform as judges; the two women play the widows and mothers of the 'dead men', and so forth. The town-magistrates bestow exceptional honours on the protagonist for his brilliant performance in the festival. Lucius, however, not only shows reluctance to accept the honorific offer of integration, but also continues to display the same naive overconfidence towards magic as before his ordeal in the Laughter Festival. This insistence leads to his transformation into an ass, an animal known for its ugliness, and to his forced removal to the uncivilized space of wild nature by a gang of robbers, thus marking the beginning of his woeful adventures in the novel.²⁵

²⁵ I wish to thank Stephen Harrison, Maaike Zimmerman, John L. Penwill and Ben Petre for helpful suggestions. The text of Apuleius is quoted from Helm's Teubner edition (1992). All Latin translations are from Hanson's Loeb edition (1989). An analysis of the Laughter Festival from the Greimasian perspective of Roles and Performances appears in my recent book, *Roles and Performances in Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Frangoulidis 2001).

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