

R. MAY: *Apuleius and Drama: The Ass on Stage*
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This is an impressively well referenced and detailed treatment of the use of drama in key works of the 2nd century CE orator and writer Apuleius, with the major part of the book focusing on the novel *The Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses*.¹ *Apuleius and Drama* is packed tightly with information and insights about Apuleius' cultural milieu and his distinct use of dramatic genres, especially within his fictional narrative of Lucius, the man turned into an ass and restored to human shape at the festival of Isis. All the chapters and their full footnotes deserve close reading in this illuminating interpretation of author, texts and contexts, but scholars of the *Metamorphoses* will take particular interest in M.'s conclusions on the nature of the novel.

M.'s book falls naturally into two unequal halves. Her introduction is a survey of selected scholarship on the novel with a logical emphasis on literary commentaries that deal with Apuleius' mixing of genres within his prose narrative and his other more identifiable intertextual strategies. M.'s methodology is not so much new as nuanced in comparison with other commentators on Apuleius' use of drama in the *Metamorphoses* in that she both expands the evidence of the novel's interaction with comic and tragic plays and suggests a deliberate strategy of 'genre crossing' on the author's part.

M.'s contention is that Apuleius creates a unity in his work by the playful use of dramatic genres and Comedy is uppermost amongst these. This makes the novel, ultimately, a comic one but with the genre of Comedy re-configured and reinvigorated along the way. No doubt, scholars will continue to strike their own paths when it comes to finding generic timbres in Apuleius' novel and stimulating studies, as M.'s book is, are bound to keep the academic community on their toes. Throughout my resumé of M.'s content and approach I shall engage with a number of her points in a spirit of constructive dialogue. No commentator on Apuleius has the last word and I am indebted to M.'s book for motivating me to re-enter the ongoing exchange.

¹ I noted only a few typographical infelicities: 'mine' for 'mime' on p.77 n.29. 'dissociate' for 'dissociate' on p.105, 'constartly' for 'constantly' on p.121 and 'wich' for 'which' on p.332.

M. writes in her introduction (p. 13) about the Latin novel as a site for the interplay of genres. It is not an entirely mischievous question to ask how secure a genre the Latin novel is in itself when only two examples survive (and one of those, Petronius' *Satyricon*, is by no means complete and still has scholars puzzling over how to categorise it as a literary genre.) The not unreasonable analogies drawn between Greek prose narratives (usually the roughly contemporary Romances) and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* do not really resolve the issue of how the Latin novel might be characterised.

When scholars talk of the Latin novel, they are usually talking about Apuleius' narrative. The *Metamorphoses* has in part become a measure for all subsequent novels and helped to form the genre while simultaneously being measured against those novels for purposes of definition and categorisation. Thus M. is not alone in drawing upon Bakhtin's theory of the ever adaptable and developing form of the novel (pp. 8–9) and approaching Apuleius' work as one that accommodates other genres but makes them metamorphose into each other, thus 're-accenting' them.

According to Bakhtin, this is how the post classical novel appropriates, parodies and reformulates the genres in its own open literary form. It is worth noting that literary critics of post-classical prose fiction tend to identify Sterne's 18th century work, *Tristram Shandy*, as the first self-conscious novel. Ironically, however, these critics can itemise features that are a ready 'fit' for Apuleius' techniques.²

M. resists the temptation to apply Henry James' famous definition of the novel as 'a loose baggy monster' to Apuleius and, indeed, that might not be a helpful metaphor with so many scholars now subscribing to the opinion that Apuleius wrote a thematically coherent and tightly structured narrative. For M., the skilful but sometimes unexpected transformation from one dramatic register to another in the *Metamorphoses* and the novel's overall generic fluidity contributes to the Protean nature of the work. In this respect, M. follows some scholarly traditions in suggesting that the preferred though less popular title of *Metamorphoses* implies not just narrative content but authorial technique.

Chapter 2 discusses the cultural context, both the intellectual milieu and the staging of plays for popular consumption, in which Apuleius operated. M. then goes on in Chapter 3 to analyse elements of drama and theatrical entertainment in Apuleius' philosophical and rhetorical works. The *Apologia* as a 'Courtroom Drama' receives special attention in Chapter 4 and the *Metamorphoses* comes under scrutiny in the next seven chapters, covering

² For instance, B. Stonehill, *The Self Conscious Novel* (Pennsylvania 1988), 30–31.

the novel's prologue, the Aristomenes story, Lucius as a comic player in a theatrical setting, the Risus festival, Cupid and Psyche as 'A Divine Comedy,' Charite's episodically expressed story, the adultery tales of Book 10 and Isis, Lucius's saviour in Book 11 as *Dea ex Machina*.

M. states that her 'concern is not so much with reconstructing a conscious attempt by Apuleius to create a novelistic genre out of existing genres, but with the playfulness with which he uses these genres, primarily comedy, to create a certain sense of unity in his own work' (p. 10). This is a refreshing departure from approaches (my own included!) that defend the novel's coherence almost exclusively on thematic grounds without due attention to its 'architecture', its structural principles. To my mind, M. also comes to more satisfying conclusions about Apuleius' rationale for manipulating and confusing genres in the narrative than recent stimulating and sophisticated contributions from established scholars in the field. For instance, several of the articles in the recently published *Caeculus* also address and conjure with Apuleius' genre games but still tend to move only cautiously beyond intertextuality for intertextuality's sake.³

If we go with the flow of what is a powerful and persuasive reading of the novel as essentially comic by virtue of its manifold devices from dramatic genres, then much of M.'s interpretation of the narrative's constituent parts fall neatly into place. M. does not regard commentaries upon Apuleius' use of epic or elegiac devices as counterclaims. Rather, she is intent upon subsuming the author's intertextual strategies into a creative interaction with Comedy's own universalising tendencies. As Comedy itself is a self-conscious genre that comes equipped with its own playful inclusiveness of other 'lower' and 'loftier' literary forms, it is an eminently suitable model for Apuleius' novel.

In her overview of theatrical elements in Apuleius' other major works, (Chapter 2) M. demonstrates that his sustained dialogue with dramatic genres chimes in with the tastes of the times. Apuleius is attuned to the linguistic, aesthetic and philosophical preferences of his era, assuming a knowledge and ready recognition of his references to the plays of Menander and Plautus

³ See L. Graverini, S. Harrison, V. Hunink, W. Keulen and M. Zimmerman in *Caeculus 5: R. R. Nauta (ed.), Desultoria Scientia: Genre in Apuleius' Metamorphoses and Related Texts* (Leuven 2006). These articles (based upon papers delivered at the fifth Fransum Colloquium, held in 2002) focus on Callimachean resonances in the Prologue, literary texture in the adultery tales, genre confusion in Apuleius' works generally, the mime of the excluded mistress in the first story of Aristomenes and Socrates and the echoes of Roman Satire in the novel. M.'s thesis of 2000 is cited in the general bibliography. See also Ellen Finkelpearl's review in this *Ancient Narrative* volume, pp. 141-149.

but, M. argues, he is simultaneously more expansive than his literary contemporaries in his use of dramatic texts of the past.

Although M. assumes that Apuleius' knowledge of the plays was primarily through reading the originals and absorbing much of the old poets (*veteres poetae*) from allusions and extracts in the literary works of others, she also takes into account the dissemination of dramatic texts for popular consumption. M. cautiously produces evidence for the contemporary performance of plays from the Athenian tragic corpus and from the New Comedy and Roman Comedy spectrum. With characteristic thoroughness M. takes into account the transmission of material from the comic and tragic texts, in a recognisable form, through the medium of mime.

From the outset, M. makes a convincing case for Apuleius as a manipulator of the conventions of tragedy, comedy and mime to persuade and to entertain but she claims that comedy is the most frequently employed as 'a dramatic simile of life' (p.134), a term she takes from Kokolakis and which is significant enough to have an entry in M.'s index. During the course of her discussion on Apuleius' other works she considers the distinct possibility that he wrote comedies (pp. 64–68). M. is the first to translate into English the poem attributed to Apuleius (iambic *senarii*) and probably adapted from a lost play of Menander. M.'s delightful and accomplished rendering (pp. 66–67) is a bonus in a chapter which typifies the thoroughness and sensitivity M. brings to the considerable body of scholarship Apuleius has inspired especially in the last 30 years.

M. spends the first four chapters of her book tracing the use Apuleius makes of dramatic genres within a selection of his other works, the philosophical treatise, *de Deo Socratis*, the rhetorical vignettes, *Florida*, and in his self-defence at his trial which produced a written work, the *Apologia*. In this situation when presumably *captatio benevolentiae* (getting the 'audience' on your side) had never been more important, M. suggests that Apuleius skilfully connects his adversaries with comical 'low life' figures and their attendant activities.⁴

As M. notes, this use of comedy to discredit one's opponents and entertain at the same time was famously featured in Cicero's *Pro Caelio* but Apuleius has to protect Pudentilla (the middle aged widow who became his wife)

⁴ For similar conclusions on Apuleius' theatrical flourishes in the *Apologia* see now V. Hunink, *Caeculus* 2006, 33–42. Hunink regards the Risus Festival in the *Metamorphoses* as a fusing of genres, including legal / judicial discourse, producing something new, but he also suggests that, when Petronius and Apuleius display similar techniques of parody and genre confusion, 'one might assume that it is characteristic of the Roman novel' (p.42).

and himself (the young suitor) from associations with equally comic and frequently negatively portrayed characters in a Greek or Roman comic cast. This is where fine tuning of generic elements of comic and tragic drama, the *mise en scène*, the stock characters and the roles they play, allows Apuleius to show himself and his intentions in the most favourable light.

The effect of M.'s persuasive commentary on other works prepares her reader to accept Apuleius' prose narrative as the *pièce de résistance* or perhaps we should say *coup de théâtre* in his technique of genre subversion. M. acknowledges a bed-rock of scholarship dealing with the dramatic and theatrical features of Apuleius' novel, citing those studies that have detailed direct allusions to themes and scenes from plays and mimes within the *Metamorphoses*. M. views the *Metamorphoses* as the literary location for Apuleius' boldest moves in boundary breaking between comedy and tragedy, the most apt form for blurring their relationship. As readers we believe we are in familiar territory, an apparently comic or tragic scenario, only to find our expectations about the nature and direction of various episodes and inset stories confounded.

M. is clear and confident in her central premise that the genre of drama and particularly the characteristics of comedy provide the weft of Apuleius' narrative. The Plautine undercurrents of the novel's prologue are not really in dispute but M. gives a new weighting to the conversion process from Greek source to Latin text that Apuleius heralds in his opening address to the reader. Her contention is that Plautus' re-versioning of Greek New Comedy for the Roman stage is thus encoded in Apuleius' text from the very start.

M. points to the 'metatheatrical' devices employed by playwrights and espoused by Apuleius in his novel. It is gratifying, however, that M. does start to tease out the implications of the term 'metatheatre' in this section and to distinguish between direct addresses to the audience in a theatrical context and the 'dear reader' technique of the self-conscious novel where, it could be argued, notional not actual recipients are addressed. She cites (pp. 118–119) the engagement of the 'diligent' and 'gentle' reader at *Met.* 9,30 and 10,2, suggesting that the latter case is 'metatheatrical', as it is 'asking the *lector* to consider a change of genre within the novel'.

There is a tantalising footnote (p. 121, n. 53) on other genres where apparently direct appeals to the reader are found, and these examples could perhaps have been integrated into the main text with a little more discussion. M. gives a definition of the terms 'metatheatre' and 'metafiction' with reference to work by Slater and Waugh in her footnote 60 on p. 140, Chapter 6, section 6.5. Here, M. explains that she is 'using the term "metafiction" in a

slightly different way, indicating that the characters within the novel semi-consciously are aware of the fictionality of the plot and specifically its dramatic possibilities.’ This is a welcome reinstatement of such strategies as dramatic devices in their ancient context.⁵

M. examines the technical terms of imperial theatre ranging from props and scenery to concepts of *fabula* and *persona* for their allusive function in Apuleius’ novel. The terminology of the stage, either as metaphors or as generic markers reveal the dramatic nature of the main narrative and the insert tales. By suggesting throughout the subsequent chapters that Apuleius exploits the performative aspects of the plays (Milo’s house as *domus comica*, beds, ropes, cauldrons etc. as theatrical furniture, the vivid visualisation of farcical scenes especially in Aristomenes’ story), M. reinforces the sense of theatricality in the mainframe narrative and the many related episodes.

M. does not lose sight of the theatrical nature of Lucius’ experiences as both man and ass throughout the novel. Given M.’s emphasis on the performative qualities of the novel (her secondary title is ‘The Ass on Stage’), it would be interesting to re-visit the choices and the changes made by those who created and staged the exceptionally long but highly imaginative dramatisation of *The Golden Ass* performed at the Globe Theatre through the summer of 2002. For instance, the set designs were a jumble of styles based on a long period of popular culture: fairground, music hall and silent cinema. The possibilities for farce and mime with Lucius as man and in his travails as an ass were exploited but the hero’s desperation (in a poignant performance by Mark Rylance) elevated him onto the tragic plane.⁶

Key moments in M.’s interpretation of Lucius’ adventures as a vehicle for theatrical allusions include her treatment of the Risus Festival in chapter

⁵ There is an argument that ‘metatheatre as a reflection on the nature of art and on the powers of fictional illusion in opposition to reality is a category more suitable to the sensibility of the 20th century and inappropriate for classical theatre’. (Chiara Thumiger, abstract for a thought-provoking paper entitled ‘Metatheatre between Modern and Ancient Fiction’, delivered at the Classical Association Annual Meeting, Newcastle, 2006). See also G. W. Dobrov’s *Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford University Press 2001).

⁶ *The Golden Ass*. Shakespeare’s Globe, translation Peter Oswald, Director Tim Caroll. The story of Cupid and Psyche was represented by Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre while the adultery stories were breathlessly voiced over as ‘pass the parcel’ anecdotes. Isis appeared selling ices (the play was notable for its exuberant punning) and thus teetered between the divine and the pantomimic. The character of Fotis, in New Comedy fashion, but perhaps mirroring Psyche, was redeemed as a loyal lover and slave constantly searching for Lucius in penance for her mistake.

8. The hero is manipulated into a performance and into becoming the central spectacle on the day of Hypata's religious celebrations to the god of Laughter. M. regards this fictional festival 'as a nod towards the presiding god of comedy, a none-too-serious invention possibly based on Plautus' none-too-serious deifications of the gods of laughter' (p. 206). The events leading up to the mock trial resonate with scenes and *dramatis personae* from comic plays, *anteludia* to the large scale entertainment of the mock trial taking place in a packed theatre.

M. argues that Lucius' experiences in this episode should alert us to the presence of a genre, i.e. Comedy, that 'uniquely manages to provide these diverse functions: reversal of Fortune and a happy ending are essential comic plot elements' (p. 207). She suggests that 'important themes of the novel as a whole are brought up for the first time in the Risus episode'. She links the spectacular display of Lucius in which gods are involved to the feast in honour of Psyche on her rite of passage to Olympus and immortality. Risus also prefigures Lucius' choice, as an ass, to escape from the arena spectacle in Book 10 and his joyful acceptance of public exposure in Book 11. M. does not comment on the expanding audience for the various entertainments from Aristomenes to Lucius at the festival, a point raised but not taken further by James.⁷

M. explores the shifts across dramatic genres in the fable of Cupid and Psyche. These shifts disturb its tragic patterns with comic allusions and, with hindsight, prepare the readership for the 'happy ending'. Of course, this is a disputed description of the story's resolution and Psyche's fate. Philosophically based objections have been made to this reading in the past (most notably Penwill in his article of 1975)⁸ but to be fair to M. she is consistently reading both the form and the content of the novel in terms of its dramatic texture. From the theatrical perspective, the merry feast is unequivocally joyful and produces *voluptas* all around.⁹

M. observes that the personified abstractions which Venus and Cupid bring in their wake or actually employ in their entourage are also suggested

⁷ P. James, *Unity and Diversity* (Hildesheim 1987), 79.

⁸ J. L. Penwill, 'Slavish Pleasures and Profitless Curiosity: Fall and Redemption in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*', *Ramus* 4 (1975), 49–82.

⁹ The visual pleasures for the reader are also achieved through sensuous tableaux, for instance the ecphrasid-like descriptions within the Cupid and Psyche narrative. Susanna Braund examines the 'exquisitely intense linguistic texture' of Psyche's first sight of Cupid in her chapter 'Moments of Love: Lucretius, Apuleius, Monteverdi, Strauss', in *amor: roma – Love and Latin Literature*. Presented to E. J. Kenney (Cambridge 1999), 174–198.

as companions of the love gods in the comedies of Menander, Terence and Plautus. As with *Risus*, this is a valuable alternative perspective on the role and function of these in turns corporeal and conceptual characters in the story, and of course strengthens her argument for their presence as markers of the novel's comic texture.

M. argues that Comedy, particularly Plautine, can introduce gods and lofty material into its plot-lines without compromising its identity and she uses *Amphitruo* as her example and analogy and in support of her characterisation of the fable as a story in the comic genre. This conclusion (pp. 246–248) has implications for M.'s interpretation of the Isis ending, as she accepts the prevailing assumption that the story of Cupid and Psyche functions as a *mise en abyme* for the main narrative, a story that restates or reflects the experiences of the hero Lucius. In short, the appearance of Isis, like that of Venus and other deities in the inset fable, is not necessarily at odds with the genre of comedy and its use of divine machinery.

M. identifies a similar slippage between tragedy, comedy and paratragedy within the Charite story but discusses the way in which comic timbres in this context would seem to punctuate rather than derail the tragic timbre. She notes echoes of the *toga praetexta* (Roman historical) play, *Octavia*, in the initial exchange between the robbers' housekeeper and the ultimately doomed heroine, Charite, whom fate elevates and devastates in turn. M. delves deeper for the narrative implications of the drunken old woman responding to the role of nurse in this scene and therefore playing a part which potentially has a comic and a tragic register. The function of *Fortuna* flagged up in her most negative aspects during Charite's story is fully realised in the trajectory of subsequent episodes where the vagaries of Fate lead to happy and tragic endings in turn.

In her discussion of the network of adultery stories in Books 9 and 10, M. re-assesses how and why, in spite of misleading characterisations by Lucius the narrator, these tales swerve from tragic to comic and vice versa. The scenarios alternately related and directly witnessed by the ass-hero, Lucius, are basically dramatic plots. The interventions the narrator makes as an 'actor' within them or as a commentator on them reinforces the resonances from drama. M.'s thought-provoking contribution is to demonstrate that the capricious Greek *Tyche* / Roman *Fortuna*, whose presence pervades these plots, is a familiar figure from tragic and comic plays and it is she who underscores the novel's intimate relationship with dramatic conventions.

This line of argument takes the reader seamlessly towards M.'s conclusion on the function of Isis in the final book and how this might influence

our interpretation of the novel's ending: 'Thus the sometimes rather passionate debate about "Apuleius' seriousness" is viewed from the wrong perspective: Isis could be considered not so much as the pagan answer to Christian salvation, but rather as the appropriate goddess who thanks to her characteristics as Isis-*Fortuna-Tyche* and her links with roses can dissolve the catastrophe Lucius (nearly) gets himself into' (p. 323). M. draws a distinction between perceiving the advent and epiphany of Isis (*dea ex machina*) in a comic (genre? PJ) light but which allows the goddess to keep her dignity and wrongfully assuming that she is a figure of fun and being treated irreverently. In other words Isis is comedic by virtue of the context in which she appears.

The treatment of the goddess Isis epitomises the openness of the novel genre in the hands of Apuleius. M. follows Winkler who highlighted the ambiguities and sense of comedic and parodic play in the *Metamorphoses* in a celebratory and scholarly *jeu d'esprit* style with his seminal *Auctor and Actor* of 1985. However, she is 'coming from a different angle' and suggesting that in the novel's 'deliberate play with genres, the mixing of tragedy and comedy, Isis can be both serious as a *dea ex machina* of tragedy and a comic inversion' (p. 327).

As indicated in the introductory remarks of this review, M. does not hedge her interpretative bets but concludes that the novel overall, although veering between potentially comic or tragic poles, is essentially comic: 'Without reflecting on Apuleius' piety or impiety at all, the portrayal of Isis and Osiris repeatedly appearing to the gullible Lucius is comic' (p. 327). Fair enough is my first reaction to this statement, although agreement has to be predicated upon accepting M.'s 'story so far', i.e. that drama is the determining and privileged genre in Apuleius' dialogue with a number of literary forms.

Does acceptance of this persuasively argued interpretation mean closure of debate on the nature of the novel? Far from it. M. has raised a number of issues, not least of which is the way we define Greco-Roman drama in general and evaluate New Comedy in particular. The effect of Apuleius' expansive intertextuality on his assumed reader and the reader of today is another question that never ceases to invite critical scrutiny. M. reinforces the case that Apuleius both confirms and confounds the roles of an apparently familiar stage cast of comic, farcical, tragic and paratragic characters. He interchanges genres but his continued use of comic language is, for M., the decisive factor in characterising his work as a comic novel (p. 331). Apuleius' constant addresses to his reader reinforce his rapport with his audience and

evoke a theatrical setting for the delivery of his novel. As a Roman ‘sophist’ Apuleius has produced a text for his time with the potential for public recital. M.’s conclusion anchors Apuleius into his own cultural context, a primarily performative one.¹⁰

Those taking the debate of generic influences further might wish to re-evaluate to what extent Apuleius accessed tragic and comic scenarios through a number of literary and cultural conduits. In this respect Roman epic and elegiac modes as well as Greek romantic fiction, not to mention Petronius, might have contributed to the creativity Apuleius displays in his transformation of ‘theatrical’ material. It is testament to the excellence of M.’s book that Apuleian scholars will dwell and draw upon her methodology and her conclusions in the continuing conversations they conduct and publish upon the *Metamorphoses*.

¹⁰ For Apuleius in his Carthaginian cultural context, see now Keith Bradley, ‘Apuleius and Carthage’, *Ancient Narrative* 4 (2005), 1–29.