

KIRICHENKO, A., *A Comedy of Storytelling, Theatricality and Narrative in Apuleius' Golden Ass*

Bibl. d. klass. Altertumswiss. Heft 127

2010. XII, 248 pp. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter. € 45.-

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For Kirichenko Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is a book which not only does not provide a master narrative but also purposefully refuses to do so, asking its readers to enjoy the work's contradictions rather than trying to solve them. His own book in a way imitates this reading of the novel. In accordance with his concept of Apuleius' intentions, Kirichenko has written a book which, intentionally and especially in its second part, is not coherent in itself, but contains contradictory interpretations that push further the potentially open nature of the novel itself. It is a challenging and thought-provoking book, and contributes much to our understanding that improvised performance and theatricality are central themes of the novel, and especially crucial in the characterisation of its protagonist. The book falls into three sections, the first of which aims at laying out the basics. The introduction (pp. 1-7) starts out conventionally with a contrast between the *Onos* and the *Met.*; it begins with an interesting summary of the *Onos* as a straightforward type of story, and the episodic nature of its middle part, where Loukios is a donkey, is analysed as a series of scenes in which the donkey changes owner just to find himself eventually in life-threatening situations from which he escapes only to end up as the property of yet another temporary owner. The final episode, just before Loukios turns back into a human being, is no different, and the donkey finally escapes from this tight spot by eating roses. The story has an easily accessible moral, a warning against excessive curiosity. In contrast to this, the story of the *Met.* is less straightforward, with additional inserted tales and the unusual Isiac ending, which complicates matters and, instead of answering questions, raises a few more, including the issue of the meaning of the text. This complicated plotline, Kirichenko argues, is mirrored in the depiction of Lucius, whose portrayal vacillates from that of a young man about town from Corinth interested in magic (but I cannot see why Lucius is supposed to be "astronomically rich" [p. 17], unless we are to infer this from his ability to pay a rather extortionate sum for his fish-dinner in *Met.* 1) to that of a character who functions as a foil for the author himself (*Met.* 11,27). Kirichenko draws the conclusion from these discrepancies that the novel itself is meant to be contradictory and to go against any classical as-

sumption of coherence of plot, where sophistication and base entertainment sit side by side comfortably.

Chapter 1 (pp. 11-44) lays the groundwork for this interpretation by analysing the presence of mime and other popular theatre in the plot. Kirichenko starts with the premise that the *Philogelos* is a good example of absurd mime-humour, and identifies Milo, as well as Pythias and Lucius in the fish-trampling episode in *Met.* 1,25, as characters reminiscent of the humour of the *Philogelos* and thus of mime. However, he does not engage much with the secondary literature pertaining to both of these scenes, and concludes that the sole purpose of the fish-trampling scene in the narrative is to introduce this kind of humour. Likewise, Kirichenko argues that Milo in *Met.* 1,23 is portrayed as a normal host, eager to satisfy his guest's wishes, whereas it is only Lucius' *scholasticus*-character that blindly continues to see Milo as stingy. I cannot quite follow this argument, since Milo at the end of *Met.* 1 has still not provided dinner for Lucius but instead has tired him out by asking for information about pretty much everyone in Corinth. I can find no evidence for Milo persistently offering food to Lucius in *Met.* 1,26, since the latter is sitting in front of an empty table, and Apuleius does not mention at all that this situation changes during the conversation. It does, however, change in the subsequent books, when, for example, Milo offers Lucius dinner after the humiliation at the Risus festival – but that is not explicitly mentioned by Kirichenko.

Kirichenko compares Apuleius' technique of adding elements to an existing plotline to the technique of mimographers (or rather of *magodoi* and of *hilarodoi*) burlesquing known plots. This interesting argument has wide-ranging implications for Kirichenko's interpretation of the novel, and would have benefited from the presentation of more evidence on the matter; the problem of working with mime-material without actually quoting much from the numerous fragments of Laberius and other mimographers is an obvious issue here. Although it is often accepted that mime and New Comedy share some characters and possibly plot elements, it is far from clear to me that mime consisted of burlesquing tragic or comic plots. Some mime-plays may have done so, but the adultery mime, for instance, would not have fitted this scheme. Still, the idea that Apuleius' rewriting and his adding material undermine the straightforward narrative and causality of the original story is surely correct. Crucially for the credibility of his case Kirichenko often does not distinguish between different types of mime, throwing Herodas together with the *Moicheutria* and the *Charition* mime, and referring to Catullus the mimographer alongside Theocritus and Sophron, whose stories and charac-

ters, Kirichenko claims, share similar characteristics (cf. p. 20 f.). Similarly, he could have distinguished more clearly between, on the one hand, mimes written for performance and literature and, on the other, genres inspired by mime but not written for performance, for example the poems of Theocritus. Furthermore, Kirichenko does not distinguish between the mime-like elements already found in the lost Greek original of the *Met.* and those that Apuleius himself may have added to its plot: the *Charition*-mime and the story of Charite, which undeniably share some intriguing parallels, find a parallel in the *Onos* and thus very likely in the lost Greek original, but the adultery stories of *Met.* 9 are more likely to be Apuleian additions. The question remains whether there is any distinction in the character of mime-adaptation between those two types. Kirichenko shows the similarities which exist between the extant mime-scripts and the adultery stories in *Met.* 9, and between the flurry of jealous women in *Met.* 8 and *Met.* 10 and the depiction of dominant women in Herodas' *Mimiamb* 5 and the *Moicheutria*-mime. None of this is particularly controversial. He also links the Thessalian witches and their treatment of Lucius, Socrates, and Thelyphron with the witches in, among others, Theocritus' *Idyll* 2, thus arguing for a subgenre in mime which dealt with magic. If an extended depiction of sacrifice is indeed related to mime, Kirichenko could have looked at the harrowing slaughter of a young man in Lollianos' *Phoenikika*, another novelistic text with comparable features. He also argues for mime influence on some scenes which have been linked with the so-called Milesian Tales. Although any attempt to work out the generic characteristics of mimes, as well as of Milesian Tales, is extremely problematic, since no complete exemplars of either have survived and much that is said about the latter is conjectural, it is odd that Milesian Tales do not get a mention at all in the context, for instance, of Thelyphron's tale, where Kirichenko uses the titles of mime-plays attributed to Laberius (*Necyomantia*) and to Catullus (*Phasma*) to point to mime, despite the fact that we know nothing about their content (cf. Panayotakis 2010, 303 on *Necyomantia*, which was, however, clearly published too late for Kirichenko to take account of). Lastly, just as Winkler 1985, so Kirichenko makes much of the baldness of Lucius in Rome in *Met.* 11, associating his continuous duping throughout the novel with that of the mime-character *stupidus*. Therefore, Kirichenko explains the last scene of the novel, Lucius' proud display of his bald head in public, as a final manifestation of his gullibility. In addition, the shows and the spectacles that are scattered throughout the *Met.*, from the Risus-festival in *Met.* 3 to the spectacles in the theatre of Corinth in *Met.* 10, are all taken to be associated with mime, specifically with Theocri-

tus *Idyll* 15 and Herodas *Mimiamb* 4, and with what Kirichenko terms a “comedy” by Epicharmus about visitors to Delphi, which he claims to be another subgenre of mime.

Furthermore, Kirichenko ought to have distinguished more clearly between mime and pantomime: for example, on p. 52 ff. Lucilius’ sarcastic advice to a pantomime-dancer that he should have died like the character he had been portraying in his dancing (*AP* 11,254) is set side by side with the “actor” dying for real in the *Laureolus* mime; on p. 175 the idea of a pantomime-dancer performing several roles successively is used to back up the concept of a single mime-actor performing an improvised monologue; on p. 191 Kirichenko sees a parallel between Petr. 68 (Habinnas’ boy) and the “sympotic mime” in Xen. *Symp.* 9,2-7. Since Kirichenko has such an all-encompassing concept of mime and casts his net so widely, he is easily able to find parallels between mimes and the *Met.*, although some of the instances remain somewhat unspecific and incidental (p. 40 ff.).

In chapter 2 (pp. 45-68) Kirichenko tackles the issue of life imitating art and vice versa, including the ekphraseis and spectacles in the novel. This involves casting the web of parallels even further. He interestingly argues that Apuleius’ portrayal of both owes much to the depiction of mythological spectacles in the Roman arena and in the theatre for their authentication. Especially the famous *Laureolus*-mime, probably ending with the execution of Laureolus on the cross, which could be staged by executing a condemned man for real on stage, is compared to the robber stories of *Met.* 4, which typically end with an unsuccessful robbery and the gory death of the robbers’ leader, and which underlie, Kirichenko argues, also the Risus festival scenario and Tlepolemus’ rescue of Charite. The tale of Thrasyleon for Kirichenko has a theatrical setting, as the bear is kept for a spectacle. The Risus festival in a way stops short of being a complete re-enactment of a “fatal charade”, in which two competing scenarios are enacted: one where the “fatal charade” is brought to a realistic bloody end, which would result in Lucius’ execution (the *Laureolus* paradigm, as it were), and the other where the overlap is incomplete (something happens that does not agree with the enacted drama: Lucius is saved). This, Kirichenko argues, is a “transformation of a fatal charade into a mimic farce” (p. 56), a problematic argument, if indeed the execution of the criminal is part of a confirmed mime performance. Lucius’ role is then equated with that of the *actor secundarum* (*partium*) of mime, with the night watch guard being the *archimimus*, and with Lucius improvising his defence-speech in reaction to the *archimimus*’ exposition of the plot, thus making the audience laugh at his mimicking. Unde-

nably the Risus festival enactment has a theatrical nature, from its setting to the role-playing, and the improvisation required by Lucius and some of the other participants may echo mime-theatre, but any parallelisms with a mime-plot would need more exploration and explanation. Kirichenko then turns to the parallels between the stories of Lucius and Aristomenes (p. 59 f.), and then between Lucius and Thelyphron (p. 61 f.), in themselves well known, to support his theory that Lucius acts as the *mimus secundarum* throughout books 1 to 3, with some of Lucius' adventures not exactly mirroring but contradicting the paradigms set up by the inset tales (for example, Pythias is introduced to mirror Socrates, but then acts differently, causing the story to move from parallelism to contrast). The points where stories that do not make much logical sense (such as the Risus festival) are stitched together are purposefully left visible, Kirichenko argues, in order to make the reader realise the shattering of the illusion of fiction and reflect on the multitude of contradictory meanings found in the text. This chapter has many interesting things to say about the relationship between the inset tales and the main narrative, and how both types of stories interact. The discussion of the Charite tale in relationship to the inserted robber tales in book 4 (where, for example, Tlepolemus "mimics" their plot structure in his own attempt to rescue Charite), and again to the story of *Cupid and Psyche* is very illuminating. Kirichenko manages to show a widespread compositional structure in the *Met.*, where the main narrative reflects and responds to the inset tales, engaging with them and contradicting not only them but also the outcomes for their characters. Especially interesting is Kirichenko's analysis of the adultery tales (p. 66), where the tale of the Miller's Wife (9,27), part of the main narrative rather than an inset tale, unexpectedly ends with the death of the miller, although the preceding adultery tales would have led the reader to believe that there would be no serious consequences for all involved. The pattern is repeated at the end of the *Met.* itself, as Lucius' rescue through Isis reflects and contradicts the expected ending of the *Onos* story. However, if Kirichenko here engages with previous literature, again he chooses not to show this.

Part II, "Multiple Plotting" (pp. 71-159), offers five contradictory scenarios of Lucius' life and forms a postmodern approach to the novel to demonstrate that Lucius' character is contradictory and incoherent. Leaving the issues of theatricality and mime behind for a moment, each new "plot" contradicts and modifies the preceding ones. The first "plot" (chapter 3, pp. 71-85) considers Lucius' biography as a healing narrative, which Apuleius here follows even to the point of the multiple initiations that have so often caused

consternation amongst modern scholars, with Lucius' untimely *curiositas* being one of the ailments from which he needs healing. Lucius is not punished, Kirichenko argues, because of his misplaced interest in magic, but because it is premature, unsanctioned and uninvited, before he has achieved the right level of initiation, after which curiosity in the mysteries of Isis is permitted. Consequently, the Thessalian witches are not "anti-Isises", but instead minor figures who prepare Lucius for his sanctioned encounter with the real divinity in *Met.* 11.

Chapter 4 (pp. 87-105), the second "plot", looks at Lucius' life as philosophical biography, and starts by destabilising the conclusions of the previous chapter: it would have been unusual in paganism to adhere to only one deity, forsaking all others, whereas ancient philosophies claimed just this type of exclusivity. Kirichenko argues in this chapter that Lucius' conversion contains some features of conversion narratives pertaining to a certain school of philosophy, for example those found for Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* or in Dio Chrysostom's *Or.* 13: amongst other parallels, Socrates' interest in natural philosophy is reflected in Lucius' interest in magic. Stoic or Cynic diatribes, in particular, are set out as parallels for Lucius' life story, especially since the Isiac religion in *Met.* 11 is here apparently echoing Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, described more similarly to Plutarch's portrait of a philosophical school than to the actual Egyptian religion.

Chapter 5 (pp. 107-121) deals with Lucius' biography as philosophical myth and starts with the well-known myth of the Soul in Plato's *Phaedrus* and its reflection in *Cupid and Psyche*, which in itself is a higher abstraction of the story of Lucius. This Kirichenko combines with Plato's aversion to fiction in the *Republic*, where Plato only allows socially useful fiction. Both *Cupid and Psyche* and, by extension, the *Metamorphoses*, fall not only into this latter category, as they serve to illustrate a philosophical point, but also into the category of the Old Wives' Tales (cf. Pl. *Rep.* 377c). This irreconcilable dichotomy (p. 111) is lessened, Kirichenko argues, because of Plato's belief that fiction is permitted if it is employed to illustrate a philosophical argument, as it does in the *Phaedrus*. He finds some remarkable parallels between the *Met.* and the description of fiction in the *Phaedrus* (recapping his argument from Kirichenko 2008). The answer to this dichotomy can be found in Plutarch's *De audiendis poetis*, an argument reprised from Kirichenko 2007, where Plutarch allows for a much wider set of literature to be useful for the philosopher. Lucius' story reflects the development of the philosopher as illustrated in Plutarch.

Chapter 6 (pp. 123-41) concentrates on seeing Lucius' story as a "Lucianic Satire" which contrasts the venerable founders of religions and philosophical schools with their degenerate contemporary followers (for example, in *Piscator* and in *Philopseudeis*), and exposes pseudo-philosophical charlatans (for instance, in *Alexander*). Points of comparison between Lucian's satirical works and the novel of Apuleius include the priests of the Dea Syria on an obvious level, and Lucius on a more subtle level, because of the latter's credulity and his final decision to join an oriental mystery cult, when he himself becomes a religious charlatan. In Kirichenko's view, consequently, the Egyptian gods portrayed in the novel are all portrayed as "rapacious vultures who against all odds continue to rip off the poor unsuspecting dupe even after they have appropriated his entire fortune" (p. 139). Again, some interesting points are made, but the way in which they are expressed could have been subtler and less tendentious.

The last of the often contradictory reconstructions of Lucius' life story, chapter 7 (pp. 143-59), analyses it as Aristophanic comedy, starting with the story of Socrates in *Met.* 1. Some of the parallels look odd: for example, on p. 143 Kirichenko argues that Apuleius' Socrates was in *Met.* 1,13 "expressly forbidden to cross a river", whereas it is in fact the sponge the witches had put into Socrates' chest that is addressed. Kirichenko continues that the comic portrayal of Socrates in Apuleius is in the spirit of Aristophanes, and that the *Clouds* form a major influence on Apuleius' portrayal of Lucius. Like Strepsiades, Lucius is curious and easily duped. Socrates' name in *Met.* 1 is primarily a marker for the reader. The scenes Kirichenko uses to illustrate this are Lucius' arrival in Thessaly and his initiation, which apparently repeat the pattern of an Aristophanic comedy. This argument is made possible by aligning Lucius at times with different characters in the *Clouds*, namely by letting him take on the roles of Strepsiades, Pheidippides, and Socrates. I have to say, though, that I fail to see a link between Lucius' care for his horse in *Met.* 1 and Pheidippides' interest in horses in the *Clouds* (p. 147)! Furthermore, although witches pulling down the moon is a feat mentioned both in *Clouds* 749 ff. and in *Met.* 1,3, the same process is said to be the most common power of Thessalian witches (also mentioned in, among others, Prop. 1,19, Hor. *Ep.* 5,46, Tib. 1,243). This does not suggest to me, as Kirichenko argues, that Aristophanes' Socrates makes philosophical statements which are identical to dodgy Thessalian magic, or that Milo's house and later Isis' temple recall Socrates' *phrontisterion*. The argument that Socrates' prayer to the Clouds (*Nub.* 269-71) bears some resemblance to Lucius' prayer to Isis (*Met.* 11,2) would have benefited from closer ex-

amination of the typical prayers and hymn structures which underlie both texts. The link between Pheidippides' and Lucius' rhetorical powers (*Met.* 11,28 ff.) is perhaps more convincing.

These five scenarios, often contradictory, sometimes mutually exclusive, sometimes supporting each other, are allowed to stand next to each other in the volume; potentially many more could have been added, and Kirichenko purposefully avoids weighing one scenario up against the other, or even passing judgement on which scenario is more likely than the others, basically creating a postmodern approach to Apuleius' novel, which raises questions and titillates with answers, but refuses to offer even an attempt at a meta-narrative or an explanation. What Kirichenko has however skilfully done is to demonstrate how his interpretation of Lucius as a composite and incoherent character works, which is important for what follows, because this inconsistency, for Kirichenko, is part of the improvisatory, mime-like, nature of the character.

The third major section, "Narrative" (pp. 163-226), falls into two chapters. Chapter 8 (pp. 163-199) returns to some of the premises which were argued for in the first section and then were left behind, namely the concept of viewing the structure of the *Met.* from the perspective of a mime-performance, but seen as a narrative of continuous fiction rather than as an actual theatrical performance. Discrepancies in the novel, involving simple storytellers telling sophisticated stories, such as the old hag who narrates the tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, are explained through the role many narrators (such as Aristomenes, Thelyphron, and the prologue-speaker) have within the novel as improvising entertainers, not unlike mime-actors telling tales of entertaining fiction. All these narrators wear masks, as it were, behind which the true narrator is hiding, a narrator who is not always in control of his own text but is forced (by the author) to improvise like a mime-actor. In this performance of Lucius as the actor of his own story, Kirichenko argues, the inset tales are scripted, whereas the main narrative is improvised (p. 174), and the narrator or narrators basically recreate improvised solo mime-performances. This is an intriguing argument, but the influence of the lost Greek *Metamorphoseis* is unaccounted for, although it too was a source (certainly) for the main narrative and (most probably) for some of the inset tales; the dichotomy Kirichenko argues for here between scripted and unscripted content needs to be explored and explained more: could some of the narrator's contradictions be explained by the concept of *fingierte Muendlichkeit* ("scripted orality")? Kirichenko then sets out similarities between erotic mimes (predominantly, adultery mimes) and Milesian tales, in which the



adultery motif also features. Both of them he sees on a continuum of subliterary genres that can also include the tales of robbery or magic in the *Met.* Thus all the inset tales in the *Met.*, according to Kirichenko, allow themselves to be exploited by a solo mime-performer appropriating these tales into his own improvised performance. Kirichenko follows Jensson 2004 and others in assuming that Milesian Tales consist of various stories that had been inserted into a main narrative, were told possibly to a listener (like Lucius) by a first-person narrator on a journey, and conflated oral and written modes of story-telling. Next he reminds his readers that there are many similarities between episodes in Petronius and mime, ranging from single scenes to the novel's prosimetric nature, but he expands the comparison by classifying some of the poems in the *Sat.* as of a quasi-choral nature, since they comment on a situation or generalise it (for example, the poem in *Sat.* 18 generalises Quartilla's vengeful attitude). Both extant Latin novels, Kirichenko concludes, represent the experience of a mime-performance by a single mime actor, but they do so in continuous narrative.

Chapter 9 (pp. 201-26) places the novel into the wider context of the rhetoric of the Second Sophistic. Kirichenko sees close parallels between Apuleius as an entertainer and his fictional creation Lucius who turns orator in *Met.* 11,28 in Rome. Rhetorical performances, such as the ones Apuleius was wont to give, share with Kirichenko's interpretation the stress on improvisation. His remarks on the novel's prologue as a *prolalia* in the narrator's voice followed by a character speech from Lucius are interesting for our understanding of the prologue, but again Kirichenko could have taken more time to engage with possible objections to his tripartite structure of Apuleius-narrator-Lucius, mirroring an orator speaking first in *propria persona* and then as a character from mythology or as a declamatory stereotype. Kirichenko thus reconstructs a performance context for mimes improvised by a single orator taking over all the roles, and consequently a performance context for the *Met.* as a fictional representation of this situation. He traces the use of figured speech in the Second Sophistic, where the actual meaning differs from what is being said, and compares this with the two Latin novels – Tlepolemus' tale told to the robbers and Charite, for example, bears radically different meanings for each audience. Similarly, Kirichenko concludes, the narrator of the *Met.* portrays his story on several, contradictory, levels, often implicitly contradicting Lucius' interpretation of events, although we see them through his eyes, but manufacturing an even more complicated scenario, as Lucius is not a merely oratorical construct but a complicated and contradictory character. There are some interesting points here, which would

have been enhanced by examples from the novel (the only reference is to the interpretation of *Met.* 11, which is in itself too fraught with controversy); instead, he discusses two cases in which figured speech is said to subtly undermine the obvious message: *Florida* 3 (Marsyas) and the *Apologia*, where it turns into a widespread defence strategy.

Because of its post-modern structure, which in some ways imitates what Kirichenko sees as Apuleius' method in the *Metamorphoses*, this is a difficult book to get to grips with. Kirichenko has thrown a lot of balls into the air for his readers to catch, involving improvisation found in rhetoric, mime and the *Satyrica* in sections I and III, together with contradictory approaches to understanding the novel in section II. The multiple plots and contradictory interpretations lack authorial endorsement, and no narrative is privileged by Apuleius, who allows several, occasionally mutually exclusive, interpretations to stand next to each other. This, Kirichenko concludes, underlies our difficulties with Apuleius' novel and our attempts to understand its protagonist who is no coherent character but a construct of contradictory forces, and the reader, trying to make sense of the novel, ultimately fails in doing so. Although Kirichenko has shown the wide ranging performative aspects of the novel and its feigned orality, he requires from his readers several leaps of faith. As it stands, the book offers valuable and intriguing insights into Apuleius' writing methods and makes some good points, but they frequently stand on shaky legs. For a book that won a prize for the development of theory in the field of classical philology (Heidelberger Förderpreis für klassisch-philologische Theoriebildung 2009), the volume is remarkably light on engagement with theoretical literature and makes basic assumptions about the nature of mime, pantomime, and Milesian tales which needed to have been disentangled and discussed to a much greater extent.

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