

The Poetics of Mutilation in Apuleius' Tale of Thelyphron (*Met.* 2,21-30)

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1. Introduction

Dismemberment and mutilation of human and animal bodies occur throughout Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*; these and other forms of corporeal fragmentation are employed in the narrative not merely to underline the atmosphere of horror and the cruelty of the fictional world which the hero Lucius inhabits and in which he experiences adverse adventures as an animal with a human mind; more importantly, their function is to anticipate events in the narrative, to comment on the (dis)continuity of a character's personal identity after their physical change, and to act as a rhetorical metaphor, mirroring the text's style and structure.¹

Thelyphron's tale, which appears early in the novel (*Met.* 2,21-30), is a masterpiece of the literature of 'the fantastic',² and contains events of dark magic, metamorphosis, necromancy, adultery, and mutilation presented by the narrator Thelyphron through different perspectives: first through the perspective of himself as the hero Thelyphron, who is hired as guard of a corpse with the task of protecting it from thieving witches, and who apparently succeeds in his mission; then through the perspective of the resurrected corpse who accuses his wife of adultery and poisoning, and at the same time reveals the mutilation inflicted on his guard by the deceitful witches during the night. A key element of the story that is not revealed to the audience or to the reader before the narration of the corpse is that both the guard and the corpse share the name Thelyphron. Because of its peculiar structure and its loose ends, the tale has often been considered a product of contamination of different stories, to the extent that even those scholars who

¹ Benson 2019, 157-167, König 2008, 137, 139, 142-143, Winkler 1985, 172-173.

² Todorov 1970/1975. Cf. Bouquet 1990.

acknowledge Apuleius' complex narrative technique and sophisticated literary artistry do not deny the possibility of an (ingenious) re-elaboration of a now-lost hypotext.³ Thelyphron as victim of witchcraft has his face mutilated and reconstructed, but the implications of this facial operation—it will be argued through a close reading of the episode—have so far received little attention in Apuleian studies.

Corporeal fragmentation is strongly emphasized in the tale both through references to the mutilation of corpses performed by the Thessalian witches and through the focus of the narrator Thelyphron on the bodily parts of the dead man and on the bodily parts of Thelyphron himself as protagonist. Physical fragmentation operates also at a different level, and forms the means by which Apuleius expresses broader aesthetic and literary views, which are in turn based on the well-known premise—celebrated through Aristotle (*Poet.* 8,1451a30-5) and Horace (*Sat.* 1,4,62)—that an artfully composed (poetic) text resembles a coherent body and that the dismemberment of a body parallels the violation of the unity of a text.⁴ Thelyphron's prosthetic operation transforms his face; we argue that this physical change corresponds to the multifaceted literary character of the tale, and we discuss how the intertextual background of the aforementioned transformation raises questions about literary composition and artistic creation.

2. *The rhetorical gesture of the narrator Thelyphron*

The macabre atmosphere of Thelyphron's tale is deliberately set in stark contrast with its setting, an opulent and magnificent banquet in which the guests (including Lucius, the hero of the novel) enjoy themselves and respond with laughter at the terrifying story.⁵ Lucius' aunt, the hostess Byrrhena, asks her nephew to recount his impressions of Hypata (2,19,5-6), and praises her town in a rhetorical style.⁶ Lucius, however, despite his satisfaction so far with his stay in Hypata, expresses

³ For an overview of the relevant scholarship and for further suggestions see Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 417-422; Graverini 2003, 189-190; Anderson 2007, 189-191. Mayrhofer 1975, 80 explains the 'strange and disquieting quality' of the inserted tale with reference 'to a technique common to most stories of the supernatural, and to a tone peculiar to Apuleius, a mixture of hilarity and distress'.

⁴ Most 1992, 406-408; Rimell 2002, 157 discusses this concept with reference to Petronius.

⁵ For the contrast between the tale and its setting see Ferradou 2003. In fact, there are also comic elements in the plot of the tale and in the hero's characterization; see Bajoni 1990.

⁶ Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 291-292. Byrrhena's role as hostess associates her with emblematic figures from epic, either female (Arete, Dido, Helene) or male (Evander, Menelaus); see Harrison 1997, 58-62. Ciaffi 1960, 55 argues for a connection between Byrrhena and Trimalchio (*Sat.* 28,6).

apprehension about the actions of witches in the area, who steal bodily members from corpses (2,20,2 *reliquiae quaedam et cadaverum praesegmina* 'remnants and cuttings of corpses')⁷ even before their actual burial takes place.⁸ Lucius seems to be well informed about these magical practices and his gruesome observation about the dismemberment of corpses provokes a comment made by one of the guests, to the effect that in their land not even the living are safe, referring to the case of a man whose 'face was completely mutilated and disfigured' (2,20,4 *ore undique omnifariam deformato truncatus est*). This causes an outburst of laughter at the expense of another guest who—in vain—tries to distance himself from the group (2,20,5).

The person in question is Thelyphron, the narrator of the ensuing story. Even before his story is told, the internal audience (and the reader) is made aware of his facial mutilation (*ore ... deformato*), without any further reference to the disfigured part of the face or any description of his appearance (the latter will be made clear at the end of the story: 2,30,9 *capillis hinc inde laterum deiectis aurium vulnera celavi, nasi vero dedecus linteolo isto pressim adglutinato decenter obtexi* 'I have let my hair grow long on both sides to hide the scars of my ears and I have tightly attached this linen bandage for decency's sake to conceal the shame of my nose'). However, an account of his bodily posture is given when he assumes the role of narrator: he reclines on one elbow, extends his right hand, keeps his two smaller fingers bent, and projects the others with the thumb upright (2,21,1-2). The narrator Lucius, in slow motion, invites us to direct our attention first to the elbow, then to the hand, and finally to the fingers of Thelyphron, who soon will take over from Lucius the role of narrator and tell his own story. Lucius introduces Thelyphron by zooming in on parts of his body. Thelyphron's gesture, explicitly associated in a narratorial comment with oratory (2,21,2 *ad instar oratorum conformat articulum* 'shaping his fingers to resemble an orator's'), has been interpreted as a mockery of the formulaic techniques that one would witness at schools of rhetoric and as an important detail in his character-portrayal: before he even commences his narrative, Thelyphron is presented as a pretentious, conceited, and silly person, since his posture is inappropriate for a public speaker.⁹ Within the

⁷ The text of the *Metamorphoses* is from the OCT edition by Zimmerman 2012. Translations from the *Met.* are by J.A. Hanson, Loeb Classical Library.

⁸ The practice is confirmed at 3,17,4-5 (Pamphile's *feralis officina*), on which see Grave-rini & Nicolini 2019, 357-358, Costantini 2021, 204-205.

⁹ Quintilian believes that the common gesture for an orator in the preface (*exordium*) of his speech is the following: the middle finger of the right hand should be opposite the thumb, while the other fingers should be projected (*Inst.* 11,3,92). For the position of the thumb see Quint. *Inst.* 11,3,119. The ambiguity of Thelyphron's gesture is pointed out by Davies 2010, 68 n.34. Corbeill 2004, 48-49 argues that Apuleius' intention was to parody

context of our analysis of the episode, Thelyphron's gesture constitutes a fine example of corporeal fragmentation singled out by the narrator and will be the first in a series of cases where pointing with the fingers and touching play an important part.

3. *The body of the hero Thelyphron*

The section of the narrative which contains the 'autobiographical' adventure of Thelyphron does not include any explicit references to his physical appearance. He himself mentions that he was very young (2,21,3 *pupillus*) when he left his country, Miletus (surely a reference to the type of stories known as *Milesiae fabulae* which his own tale is meant to echo),¹⁰ in order to attend an Olympic spectacle (an allusion to the fact that both at 2,20,5 and at 2,30,8-9—namely, both before and at the end of his narrative—Thelyphron himself is a *spectaculum* for the amusement of others). Unfortunately for him, he ends up in Thessaly (at Larissa), an area closely associated in literary tradition with the practice of witchcraft, and while looking for a job he hears an old town-crier in the market seeking a volunteer to guard a dead body (2,21,5).¹¹ This announcement provokes the immature and naïve Thelyphron's ironic response (2,21,6), but a passer-by demands that he be quiet, since, on account of his young age and his foreign origin, he is unaware that in this very area 'witches are always taking bites out of corpses' faces' (2,21,7 *ora mortuorum passim demorsicant*) so as to use them in their magical art. The passer-by's words allude to Lucan's famous description of the Thessalian witch Erichtho (6,565-568 *oscula figens / truncavitque caput compressaque dentibus ora / laxavit siccoque haerentem gutture linguam / praemordens* 'while kissing [the dead body], she mutilates the head and opens the closed mouth with her teeth; then, biting the tip of the tongue that lies motionless in the dry throat ...', transl. J.D. Duff, Loeb Classical Library), and clearly function as a sinister warning for Thelyphron (but also for Lucius who is listening to Thelyphron's

Thelyphron's bodily posture and to foreshadow his inability to realize what truly happened on the night he guarded the corpse. According to Zimmerman 2008, 149, 'Thelyphron's studied attitude may suggest that he is here at the dinner as a specially invited professional *fabulator*', while for Bajoni 2000 the gesture is apotropaic.

¹⁰ For his Milesian origin as a pointer to the 'Milesian' literature see Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 311-312.

¹¹ On the superior knowledge of the town-crier (that is, he knows more than the rest of the characters in the tale), see Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2015, 93-99, who discusses in detail the role of the town crier in the episode in which Lucius is sold to Philebus (*Met.* 8,24-25).

story).¹² The epic allusion stresses the seriousness of the looming danger which Thelyphron (like Lucius) unwisely underestimates, and to which he (again, like Lucius) will foolishly expose himself soon. The witches' macabre practice of biting off (*demorsicant*) pieces of the face of dead people, which will then be used as aids to their witchcraft, is significant also from a 'metaliterary' perspective, since in this passage Apuleius the author too 'nibbles at' literary pieces from previous poetic works that portray witchcraft—namely, Lucan's famous epic portrait of Erichtho—and incorporates them, in a cross-generic fashion, into his novelistic work.

In what ensues, the passer-by's detailed description of the animal forms which the witches take when approaching dead bodies reveals their fraudulent tricks (2,21,2-3).¹³ At the same time, however, his words function proleptically, since the passer-by foretells parts of the narrative that follows. He exhibits superior knowledge when compared to the ignorant Thelyphron, who is totally unaware of the manner in which the witches put their plans to action. In fact, the passer-by stresses to Thelyphron that he considers the payment too small for such a challenging task, especially since, if the body of the deceased is not delivered intact the following day, the guard will be punished by having the same part of the flesh that has been removed from the corpse cut off of his own face (2,22,6 *de facie sua*). The comment is important because it foreshadows the mutilation to be performed by the witches on the face of the guard (not of the corpse) Thelyphron.

Yet none of these warnings discourages the frivolous Thelyphron, who arrogantly presents himself to the town-crier as a tough and vigilant man, sharp-eyed like the 'lynx-eyed' King Lynceus from the Argonaut saga and with alert eyes situated all over his body like the many-eyed giant Argus, guard of Io (2,23,4 *certe perspicaciorem ipso Lynceo vel Argo et oculeum totum* 'more keen-sighted indeed than Lynceus himself or Argus, and every bit of him an eye'). The role of the mythological references in the passage is twofold. First, they give Thelyphron's words an air of amusing pomposity and provide an opportunity for comic intertextuality (cf. Pl. *Aul.* 555 *Argus ... oculeus totus fuit* 'Argus ... completely covered with eyes', transl. W. de Melo, Loeb Classical Library); on the other hand, the reference to Argus hints at the eventual failure of Thelyphron's mission and at his mutilation while asleep: Apuleius' learned audience knows well that

¹² For the allusion see Korenjak 1996, 152-153. Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 315 discusses the irony of the situation, since at the time of the narration Thelyphron himself is *ore undique omnifariam deformato truncatus* 'his face was completely mutilated and disfigured' (2,20,4).

¹³ Frangoulidis 2002, 167 and Murgatroyd 2004, 493-494 ascribe these words to the town-crier.

Hermes, having cast a spell on Argus who thus fell asleep, beheaded him.¹⁴ In Thelyphron's case (and in Apuleius' writings) perspicacity of vision (*perspicacitorem*) does not imply perspicacity of the intellect; on the contrary, the guard Thelyphron will easily be deceived by the witches. Likewise, in Apuleius' rhetorical retelling of the Aesopic fable of the vixen and the crow (*Soc. Prol. 4*), the vixen praises the gullible crow as a bird 'impetuous in flight, perspicacious in sight (*oculis perspicax*), and tenacious in bite' (transl. J. Hilton in Harrison–Hilton–Hunink).

When Thelyphron is taken to the dead man's house, he demonstrates how sharply eyed he is when he immediately notices the widow's beauty (a telling sign of his gullibility and superficial interests in life), and this despite the fact that he enters into a dark room (2,23,7).¹⁵ The action of the story is now transferred to a different location, namely the room where the corpse is laid to rest, covered in white linen shroud (2,24,2). The focus of the narration is on the dead body and its integrity, which is confirmed by the seven witnesses who are present. What their eyes see is also described by the widow who calls the witnesses to direct their attention to her dead husband's face. We are told (in the form of a list) that the nose is untouched, as are the eyes and ears, and so is the mouth as well as the chin (2,24,3 *nasus integer, incolumes oculi, salvae aures, inlibatae labiae, mentum solidum* 'nose whole, eyes unharmed, ears sound, lips untouched, chin solid'). In a nutshell, the whole face is in one piece.

Thelyphron continues to behave in a silly fashion; underestimating the seriousness and sombreness of the situation, he asks the lady of the house to provide him with an oil lamp, olive oil, wine, and food, thus giving the impression that he is preparing a feast for himself. But the widow firmly declines and brings him back to reality (2,24,6-7). Her observation that Thelyphron is 'asking for dinners and leftovers' (2,24,6 *cenae et partes requiris*) foreshadows in a punning manner the imminent mutilation of his bodily parts (*partes*). The wordplay, based on the polysemy of the noun *pars* (see *OLD* s.v. 1c and 6), is supported by the fact that earlier the widow had focused her attention on her dead husband's face.¹⁶ It is clear that both the town-crier and the dead man's wife appear to mention details which will play a significant role later in the plot.

¹⁴ For the function of these mythological examples see Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 325; for artistic representations of these figures see Cueva 1999, 55.

¹⁵ Her beauty alludes to the attractiveness of the widow in the 'Milesian' tale of the Matron of Ephesus in Petronius (*Sat.* 111-112). On the comparison of the episode with Petronius, see e.g. Ciaffi 1960, 100.

¹⁶ This point may be added to the list of instances (discussed by Murgatroyd 2004) of irony, narrative prolepsis, and clever play in the tale of Thelyphron.

When Thelyphron is left alone with the corpse, he rubs his eyes to prepare himself for the death-watch, while at the same time he sings a song to cheer up (2,25,1). This preparation, expressed in military terms (2,25,1 *obarmatis ad vigiliis* 'armed [my eyes] for their guard duty'), shows his determination to succeed and his readiness to perform his duty, as he is given the opportunity to prove how well he can use his eyes. While he keeps watch, however, a weasel appears before him, but he abruptly sends it away. Then he mysteriously falls into deep sleep and appears to be as still as a corpse (2,25,5 *ne deus quidem Delphicus ipse facile discerneret duobus nobis iacentibus quis esset magis mortuus* 'even the god of Delphi could not easily have decided which of the two of us lying there was more dead'). His alert eyes, of which he was so proud earlier, are now shut, and his seemingly 'lifeless' condition (2,25,6 *inanimis*) renders him helpless and in need of protection. In other words, the roles are now reversed and Thelyphron who used to be the guardian needs to be guarded.¹⁷

Morning comes and Thelyphron wakes up terrified on account of his dereliction of duty; he runs to the corpse and, with the help of the oil lamp, examines the face; he is relieved to see that it is intact (2,26,2). The widow arrives and, upon checking that all is in place, orders a servant to pay Thelyphron and informs him that she now counts him as a friend of the family (2,26,4). Satisfied with the unexpected outcome, Thelyphron declares that he would be willing to offer his services to her also in the future (2,26,5). His careless comment is misinterpreted as ominous and offensive by the servants, who beat him violently. His jaws (*malas*), his shoulders (*scapula*), and his ribs (*latera*) are punched and stomped on, he is kicked, his hair (*capillos*) is pulled, and his clothes (*vestem*) are ripped off (2,26,7). The servants use their elbows, fists and feet to beat Thelyphron's body. The scene displays a physical proximity which emphasizes the ferocity of the punishment inflicted on Thelyphron and a strong focus on his bodily parts: the list starts with his face, continues with his shoulders and ribs, and concludes with his hair and garments; the physical violence inflicted on Thelyphron threatens his bodily integrity and causes him disgrace. It should be stressed that Thelyphron—careful narrator that he is—deliberately refers to the blows he received on his face (2,26,7 *pugnis ille malas offendere* 'one pounded my jaws with his fists') without, however, mentioning his nose or ears. In this way, the surprise ending of his story is not spoiled for his audience.

The detailed description of Thelyphron's suffering at the hands of the servants contains also important literary allusions. It has been argued that the servants are portrayed as warriors from epic, while the vocabulary of physical violence points

¹⁷ Unlike Aristomenes in Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses* (1,19), Thelyphron's 'transition' to death takes place through sleep.

to elegiac and comic contexts.¹⁸ Moreover, by dramatizing his situation Thelyphron considers himself dismembered and torn apart (2,26,8 *laceratus atque discerptus* ‘torn and mangled’) just like Pentheus and Orpheus. As in his earlier use of famous mythological figures, Thelyphron the narrator obviously (and comically) exaggerates, since the only “mutilation” which he as protagonist is aware of relates to the fact that the servants pulled his hair (*capillos distrahere*). Yet it is noteworthy that both of the mythological characters mentioned here were decapitated: Agave appears with her son’s head nailed on a pole, and Orpheus’ head continues singing mournfully even after the Thracian Maenads have torn him to pieces. It is thus possible to argue that Thelyphron as narrator subtly and consistently draws the attention of his audience to his head, since this will play an important role at the denouement of the tale.

Thelyphron’s ears, which by the end of the tale will prove to be wax substitutes for the real sensory organs, become the means through which he will hear carefully the continuation of his own story. Having been thrown out of the dead man’s house, he later sees a weeping old man who accuses the dead man’s widow of murdering her husband, that is, his nephew. The crowd rises against her, but she protests and pleads innocent to these charges. The old man then asks a young Egyptian priest, Zatchlas, to resurrect the corpse of the old man’s nephew so as to reveal the true account of events. Zatchlas performs the ritual of necromancy and the resurrected dead man speaks and begins to unfold how he died, confirming that he was poisoned by his adulterous wife. Upon hearing his words, the widow boldly and shamelessly denies the accusations (2,29,6). The phrase *uxor egregia* ‘his fine wife’ (2,29,6), with which the narrator Thelyphron ironically characterizes the widow, alludes to Deiphobus’ equally ironical description of Helen of Troy as *egregia coniunx* ‘this peerless wife’ (transl. H.R. Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library) in his encounter with Aeneas in Book 6 of the *Aeneid* (6,523).¹⁹ Deiphobus’ account includes Helen’s betrayal during the sack of Troy and his own horrible death while asleep in his bed chamber; his body in the Underworld still bears the marks of the mutilation of his face and hands, of his nose and ears: *Atque hic Priamiden laniatum corpore toto / Deiphobum videt et lacerum crudeliter ora, / ora manusque ambas, populataque tempora raptis / auribus et truncas inhonesto vulnere naris* ‘And here he sees Deiphobus, son of Priam, his whole frame mangled and his face cruelly torn—his face and either hand—his ears wrenched from despoiled temples, and his nostrils lopped by a shameful wound’

¹⁸ For the epic allusion see Verg. *A.* 7,520-521 and Graverini 1998, 126. Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 353 adduces other verbal parallels from comedy and elegy.

¹⁹ Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 382-383. For a detailed discussion of the Virgilian echoes in Thelyphron’s story, see Graverini 1998, 123-145, Ottria 1997, 196-198.

(A. 6,494-497, transl. H.R. Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library). The epic reference creates suspense for, and paves the way to, the unexpected ending of the tale. Thelyphron's attentive audience and Apuleius' erudite readers cannot but suspect that the allusion to Deiphobus is relevant to the development of the story, but in reality they are misled in their expectations because, as will soon be revealed, the person who suffered the facial mutilation at the hands of the witches is not the dead man, the husband of the 'egregious wife', but his guard, who bears the same name with him.

4. *Prosthetics and Poetics*

The mutilation of Thelyphron's face is presented as an event that happened by accident: the original intention of the witches was to cut off the ears and nose of the dead man (called Thelyphron), but since the guard (whose name was also Thelyphron) was the first to respond to the witches' call, he came at the door, put his face through a hole on the door, and had his nose and ears severed (2,30,5 *per quoddam foramen prosectis naso prius ac mox auribus vicariam pro me lanienam suscitavit* 'there was a hole through which he had first his nose and then his ears sliced off; he brought on himself the butchery intended for me'). At the same time, however, this accidental event can also be seen as evidence of the witches' power to punish those who doubt them (cf. 2,21,6-7, 2,23,4), as was the case in the tale of Aristomenes and Socrates in Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses*. Thelyphron's adventure, though, unlike Aristomenes' tale, does not result in a tragic death; the protagonist survives with his face disfigured.

The mutilation of a person's nose and ears is a form of punishment which occurs both in literature and in real life in many cultures from antiquity until recent times; its purpose is not only the administration of justice or the enactment of vengeance by causing physical pain to a person found or considered guilty of, for example, treason or adultery, but also their expulsion from the community.²⁰ The witches succeed in achieving the latter, since Thelyphron declares that he never returned to his hometown, Miletus (2,30,9). The practice of mutilation of mostly sensory organs, which is evidenced also on statues of gods, emperors, and people of authority and high status, aims both at depriving them from their 'ability' to see or hear and at ridiculing or dishonouring the god or human represented by the statue.²¹ In ancient medical theory the nose is often connected to the human

²⁰ On the mutilation of the nose and ears in ancient and modern cultures see Bradley & Varner 2015, Loktionov 2017, Frembgen 2006.

²¹ Varner 2004, Loktionov 2017, 278-279.

genital organs; consequently, cutting off someone's nose may be interpreted as their emasculation (cf. the practice of mutilation of the nose and ears as one of the forms of punishment inflicted on adulterers);²² this association of mutilation and emasculation may also explain in a punning fashion the hero's Greek name (Thely-phron/Θηλύ-φρων, 'effeminate').²³

Although modern scholarship on Apuleius has rightly emphasized the inter-textual significance of Thelyphron's mutilation,²⁴ little attention has been paid to the fact that the witches chose to substitute Thelyphron's ears and nose with prostheses made of wax (2,30,6 *ceram in modum prosectarum formatam aurium ei adplicant examussim nasoque ipsius similem comparant* 'they shaped some wax into ears like the amputated ones and fastened them on him in a perfect fit, and made him a wax nose like his own'). Scholars have wondered about the motivation of the witches, which is not clear from the puzzling comment of the dead man who explains it as part of the deception staged by the witches (2,30,6 *utque fallaciae reliqua convenirent* 'to put the proper finishing touch on their trick'). Substituting stolen bodily parts with artificial ones squares with magical practices attested elsewhere in the ancient novel (for instance, in Petronius' *Satyrice* 63, witches steal the body of a dead boy and leave a straw doll in its place) and enhances the 'surprise effect' at the end of the story.²⁵ The use of wax is entirely appropriate in ancient magical practice (cf. its use, for instance, in curse tablets or magical figurines);²⁶ moreover, in Thelyphron's narrative its purpose is twofold: it forms the actual material of which the artificial nose and ears are constructed *and* it neatly connects the prostheses with the rest of Thelyphron's body. Thus, in carefully shaping the prosthetic ears and nose and in attaching them with precision (*examussim*) onto Thelyphron's face, the witches are represented as diligent artists, expert craftsmen, and consummate physicians, who put their mimetic skills to action in order to deceive. In their actions, they imitate nature itself (*in modum prosectarum ... aurium, naso ... similem*) and create a new face for Thelyphron, a face that combines real and artificial bodily parts to perfection, so that everyone

²² Ingenkamp 1972, 337-42.

²³ For possible interpretations of the hero's name see Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 304 with discussion of earlier literature, Nicolini 2011, 104, and O'Brien 2004.

²⁴ Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 390, Graverini & Nicolini 2019, 308.

²⁵ Stramaglia 1990, 209 n.183 = 2003, 108 n.183, Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 391-392, Ogden 2002, 141, Graverini 2003, 196, Graverini & Nicolini 2019, 308-309. On the other hand, Krabbe 2003, 173 compares our episode with the ending of Book 8, another situation in the *Met.* involving butchery (*laniena*) and substitution of bodily parts (8,25-9,1).

²⁶ For the use of wax in witchcraft in an agonistic context and in love magic see Faraone 1991, 7 and 1999, 7, 12, 50-53, Ogden 2002, 140.

(including Thelyphron himself)²⁷ is deceived by the artistic result until the infidelity and crime of the widow are exposed and the falsity that underlies the gruesome truth is revealed.²⁸ 2,30,7 *his dictis perterritus temptare formam adgredior. Iniecta manu nasum prehendo: sequitur; aures pertracto: deruunt* 'I was terrified at his words and started to test my appearance. I put my hand up and grasped my nose: it came away; I rubbed my ears: they fell off'.²⁹

The prosthesis underlines the element of metamorphosis in the story: the witches have the power to transform not only themselves into animals but also Thelyphron's face by means of the wax substitutes.³⁰ In a metaliterary reading of this episode Thelyphron's new face stands for an "intertextual collage", where the prostheses indicate the process of multiple adaptation of previous literary intertextual and intratextual material (for example 'Milesian' narrative, Virgil's Deiphobus, Ovid's Argus, Lucan's Erichtho, Petronius' witches, Apuleius' Meroe and Panthia), while the trick (*fallaciae*) played by the witches mirrors the technique of Thelyphron the narrator to mislead (and entertain) his audience (and Apuleius' readers) through intentionally limited focalization.³¹

The passage under discussion also raises the issue of verisimilitude in works of art and recalls the description of the statuary depicting Actaeon and Artemis at the atrium of Byrrhaena in Lucius' first visit to his aunt's mansion (2,4). This ecphrastic sculpture (as has often been observed) foreshadows the hero's metamorphosis on account of his curiosity for the occult (cf. 2,5,1 *'tua sunt ... cuncta quae vides'* "everything you see ... belongs to you"). As has been pointed out several times in Lucius' narrative, the work of art in question in many of its details rivals the work of nature (for instance 2,4,7 *uvae faberrime politae ... quas ars*

²⁷ Cf. Boxall 2020, 16: 'Why can Thelyphron himself not feel that his nose and ears are not his? How can he be deceived by the likeness of the prosthetic nose, or the 'perfect fit' of the prosthetic ears? An answer to this question is that narrative, in joining consciousness to its prosthetic extensions, also, and at the same time, marks the distance that opens between them, producing a specific form of prosthetic ground that intervenes between the living and the dead, between origin and copy, mimesis and prosthesis.'

²⁸ James 1987, 77: 'Thelyphron's nose and ears are as superficial as the widow's love and loyalty towards her husband. When the reality behind the appearance comes to light, all, even peripheral, illusions are shattered.'

²⁹ Hanson retains the mss. reading *fortunam*, which he prints with a capital F, and translates 'and started to test Fortune'. For the correction see Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 393. I follow all modern editors who change *fortunam* to *formam*; for the significance of the term *forma* in this episode see below.

³⁰ For the prosthesis as 'metamorphosis' cf. the story of Pelops and his ivory shoulder in Ov. *Met.* 6.401-411. The story involves dismemberment, restoration of the body and substitution of a lost body part; see the commentary by Rosati 2009, 311-314; Elsner 2007, 127 discusses the significance of the ivory material and its relation to the poetics of deception.

³¹ Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 392 and 420.

metapoetic undertones and evokes the poet's efforts to compose his works,³² it may be argued that the phrase *formam temptare* in the Apuleian passage of Thelyphron expresses the authorial process of handling and trying out forms of speech, styles of composition, and literary designs.³³

As Ovid relates in the *Ars Amatoria* and in the *Metamorphoses*, wax in the hands of an ingenious creator such as Daedalus becomes the material with which wings, his technological achievement, are attached to the body, and the means by which Daedalus and his son Icarus escaped from Crete (Ov. *Ars* 2,47 *imaque pars ceris astringitur igne solutis* 'the base is bound with wax softened in the fire' transl. J.H. Mozley, Loeb Classical Library; *Met.* 8,193 *tum lino medias et ceris alligat imas* 'then he fastened the feathers together with twine and wax at the middle and bottom'). Young Icarus is excited with his father's invention and touches with his finger the material that will cause his death (*Ars* 2,49 *tractabat ceramque puer pinnasque renidens* 'with beaming face the boy handled the feathers and the wax'; *Met.* 8,196-197 *ignarus sua se tractare pericla, / ore renidenti ... / ... flavam modo pollice ceram / mollibat ...* 'little knowing that he was handling his own peril, with gleeful face would ... now mould the yellow wax with his thumb'). The malleability of the wax that aids both Daedalus and the witches to achieve (to an extent) their goal links the unnamed Apuleian witches with the renowned Daedalus. Icarus' cheerful attitude (*renidens*) is contrasted with Thelyphron's feeling of terror (*perterritus*). More importantly, both tales speak of artistic failure and literary fame; the witches' art seems powerful, but their magic is ineffective and limited. Daedalus faithfully imitates reality (*Met.* 8,195 *ut veras imitetur aves* 'so that they looked like real birds' wings'), but his son disobeys his father's advice and flies close to the sun and to his death. Thelyphron as a victim of moulded wax may seem a reduced comic version of Icarus; however, both Icarus and Thelyphron are immortalized through literature and through repeated storytelling.

Wax as one of the common features linking the Apuleian and Ovidian passages discussed above³⁴ is also the material on which literature is (re)written down (*tabellae ceratae*), while its malleability resembles the way in which language as well as style in rhetoric can be (re)shaped (Cic. *de Orat.* 3,177 *sed ea [sc. verba] nos ... sicut mollissimam ceram ad nostrum arbitrium formamus et fingimus* 'but we ... shape them and mould them [sc. words] at our discretion, like the softest wax'; cf., in our story, 2,30,6 *ceram ... formatam*); this process produces a variety

³² Hallett 2009, 114-117.

³³ See *OLD* s.v. *forma* 6c, 10c, 15b.

³⁴ For the reception of Ovid's *Met.* in Apuleius see e.g. Mazzoli 2007, Von Albrecht 2011, Harrison 2014.

of style and aims at both the pleasure and the persuasion of the audience (ibid. 3,178 *sic institutam nostram sententiam sequitur orationis genus, idque ad omnem aurium voluptatem et animorum motum mutatur et vertitur* ‘thus the style of our oratory follows the line of thought we take, and changes and turns to suit all the requirements of pleasing the ear and influencing the mind of the audience’, transl. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library; cf. the opening of the Apuleian *Metamorphoses* at 1,1).³⁵ But wax, most importantly, also stands for continuity and change (of the soul), presented through the language of metamorphosis, in Pythagoras’ speech in the last book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: 15,169-172 *utque novis facilis signatur cera figuris / nec manet ut fuerat nec formam servat eandem, / sed tamen ipsa eadem est, animam sic semper eandem / esse, sed in varias doceo migrare figuras* ‘And as the pliant wax is stamped with new designs, does not remain as it was before nor preserve the same form, but is still the self-same wax, so do I teach that the soul is ever the same, though it passes into ever-changing bodies’.³⁶ Like Ovid, Apuleius employs the wax imagery, but he does this literally, not metaphorically, and his purpose is to write about the process of literary and artistic creation in a tale of metamorphosis of everlasting literary fame.

Conclusion

Thelyphron’s story is transplanted and, as it were, artificially added onto his body; it becomes part of him. The witches shape Thelyphron’s form so that it surpasses the limits of human physicality and unites with wax.³⁷ Essentially, flesh and wax become one and the same on Thelyphron’s face, and form a work of art which requires the audience’s imagination in order to be fully visualized (the narrator Thelyphron himself covers his missing nose and lets his hair grow long in order to cover also his missing ears).³⁸ On the other hand, the artificial and thus temporary lifespan of these prosthetic bodily members does not discourage Thelyphron from repeatedly narrating his story. On the contrary, the erudite reader forms the impression that the artificial ears and nose have, as it were, inspired the gullible Thelyphron to become a skilled narrator, who time and again relates his

³⁵ For the metaphor elsewhere in Latin literature and its Greek background see Wisse, Winterbottom, Fantham 2008, 259.

³⁶ Hardie 2015, 508 discusses the versatility of wax as a symbol in Ovidian poetics.

³⁷ Examples of ‘prosthetic imagination’ in ancient Greek literature are discussed in Noel 2019. Bliquez 1996 presents literary testimonia and material evidence on dental prosthetics and extremity prosthetics in the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman worlds.

³⁸ Compare Van Gogh’s ‘Self-portrait with Bandaged Ear’ (1889), now in the collection of the Courtauld Institute of Art.

experience in a sophisticated manner for the entertainment of others. Thus the narrator's upright thumb, a questionable rhetorical gesture at the beginning of the story, is transformed, intertextually and intratextually, into Pygmalion's fingers feeling the warm body of his creation, Icarus' finger touching the wax that will soon cause his death, and Thelyphron's fingers with which he touches his nose and ears, and discovers the truth about his mutilation.

If Thelyphron's tale is also meant as a warning to those interested in magic, it may be argued that Thelyphron himself becomes a human amulet with an apotropaic function for the banqueters in Byrrhaena's symposium.³⁹ And yet, in spite of the fact that Thelyphron is standing before Lucius as living proof of the evils of magic, this does not impress Lucius. In Book 2 of the *Metamorphoses* Thelyphron loses his nose and ears, while in Book 3 Lucius will be transformed into a donkey, and will acquire big ears and a long nose.⁴⁰ Book 2 begins with the hero Lucius doubting his ability to distinguish between appearance and reality around him (2,1,3-5). By the end of the book he ought to have realized that neither the human senses nor the sensory organs themselves are trustworthy.⁴¹

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³⁹ Kelley 2007, 31-46, Trentin 2011, 195-208, Stahl 2011, 721-724. This practice appears to be documented by the grotesque figures made of terracotta, which have been discovered in the Mediterranean—mainly, in Asia Minor and Egypt. It relates to the representations of ugly, disfigured faces and bodies, caricatures of actors or representations of pathological diseases: see Mitchell 2013, 275-297. On the kind of laughter provoked by a person's disfigurement cf. Quint. *inst.* 6,3,7-8 and Van Mal-Maeder 2001, 302.

⁴⁰ Frangoulidis 2002, 172.

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