

When the Text Becomes the Teller: Apuleius and the *Metamorphoses*

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In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the text speaks, introducing itself to its audience in its own voice. When the text tells the audience to ask the question "Who is this?" it responds by giving a "family" history and linguistic genealogy. While the text highlights storytelling through its plot and situations, it also *participates* in storytelling, making itself the primary agent of transmission. During a time when ancient Rome highlighted the performances of literary works in order to offer authorized interpretations (that is, the performance of the text would indicate to the audience how to understand it), Apuleius' text makes itself the performer and subordinates the audience to itself. This new relationship of audience to text that was created by a new use of storytelling allowed for the exhibition of and creation of a counter-culture that permitted imperial critique during the Age of the Antonines.

The *Metamorphoses*, or *Asineus Aureus*, continually plays with the concepts of making a written text "speak," with storytelling in literary form, and with the creation of an alternative hermeneutic of a mediating genre. The plot-line, a continuous wandering through the frontiers of the Roman Empire with a brief, glossed-over interlude in Rome, and the surprise ending of a conversion to the cult of Isis (the credibility of which is questionable), is full of detours and deceptions. The form continually slips from allusions to literary epic, to oral storytelling, to novelistic prose, all of which are attached to an introductory prologue that sets itself up as formally and narratologically distinct from the whole. The reader must be involved in the process of making meaning for this text and is explicitly called upon to speak at certain points. The historical situation of this work is the Age of the Antonines in the second century CE, a time period that Edward Gibbon called the "happiest period the world had ever known" (1963:14). Yet when read against Apuleius' disruptive techniques of questioning discourses of power, the perception of the calm and serene historical period creates a conflict that needs to be addressed.

Background and Cultural Context

In the Roman Empire of the second century CE, public readings of literary works became institutionalized as a method of sustaining imperial control and as a way to create willing Roman imperial subjects. Along with the importance of declamation and oratory, the practice of *recitationes*, the public performance of texts, reproduced and reinvigorated elite aristocratic

values. These readings became so important that it is possible to claim that a boy's first public performance of his literary work marked a threshold of entry into the public, political world. Describing the literary culture that such performances created, Florence Dupont writes (1999:228):

Recitationes thus constituted a practice in which the values of the old republican nobility truly were revived The practice of writing followed by a public reading was a way of preserving the unity of the Roman political class, essentially the senatorial class, as a group of peers who offered one another mutual recognition on the occasion of each *recitatio* through the celebration of common values, first and foremost a rhetorical mastery of language.

The extension of class values exhibited by such public performances created a community of writers/listeners who upheld the continuing political schema of the Roman Empire. However, this practice reproduced the formal literary world of the urban elite and did not take into account social rules distinct from those urban centers.

Outside the city of Rome and in the province of Roman Africa, where Apuleius lived as a child and young man, the relationship between the empire's city and its margins was changing. The army's Romanization urbanized the provinces and created cities replete with Roman architecture and ideology. Urbanization was so prevalent that Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia) became the second largest city in the western empire after Rome. Additionally, Rome not only came to the provinces but representatives from the provinces also made their presence felt in Rome. Senators from Africa were part of the largest provincial group from the West by the second century (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 2003:34). Michael Grant highlights that it is not surprising that the emperors of second century Rome would pursue a policy that looked toward the provinces, perhaps because they themselves were partly of provincial origin. As Grant notes, Antoninus Pius, although himself born in Italy, was originally from Nemausus (Nîmes) in Gaul, and Marcus Aurelius's family came from Córdoba in Spain (1994:156-57).

Just as the Roman army replenished its stock of soldiers through re-creating the military class from people from the provinces, the Roman elite was also working to romanize the provincial elites. Empires disseminate ideology through educational practices. Thus, for the education of the provincial elites, the Roman upper class sought to establish a community linked by common cultural works and values and therefore exported a Greco-Roman educational program (Finkelpearl 1998:135-36). This education not only formed the basis of education and acculturation for writers and orators in the Roman Empire; politicians also needed to take part in this Greco-Roman knowledge. As Ellen Finkelpearl explains in *Apuleius: A Roman Sophist* (140),

Assimilation was particularly important for those who wished to advance politically; the few Africans who advanced to senatorial rank and went to Rome would have needed to adopt Roman customs and manners and to perfect their Latin, though Septimius Severus managed to become emperor even with a strong African accent.

Roman customs and practices were dominant, despite a policy that supposedly affirmed cultural values from places other than the center.¹

Apuleius was born around 123 CE and died around 170 CE, and hailed from the Roman African city of Madauros. What is known about his background suggests that he was from a prosperous family and also a Roman citizen (Harrison 2000:5). He was well educated in the Roman style and “his name, literary culture, and education, [were] fundamentally Roman in cultural identity and [he was] a native speaker and writer of Latin” (3). He studied in both Carthage and Athens and became a professional orator, a profession well in keeping with the tenets of the Second Sophistic movement. Margaret Anne Doody, however, highlights the anxiety of difference: “Apuleius was a provincial, an outsider, an African who rose by his capacity to speak and write, but who was not a member of the nation which supplied the ruling power” (2000:437). Thus, Apuleius had an ambivalent relationship in respect to the power discourses of the Roman Empire. Educated through and with family ties to the empire, Apuleius, because he was from the provinces, did not fit in completely. Accepted and welcomed because of his talents, he was not an entirely *Roman* Roman citizen.

Written around the middle of the second century, the *Metamorphoses* is an extended work of fiction that draws upon multiple genres and appeals to both higher and lower registers of writing. The text follows the main character, Lucius, who begins the text as a traveler, but because of witchcraft performed on him by a maid named Photis is turned into an donkey, remaining that way until the final book in which he converts to the cult of Isis and undergoes repeated initiation rituals. After an intriguing prologue, which I discuss further below, the stories are arranged as episodes connected by Lucius’ journeys and encounters with various storytellers. Storytelling becomes a consistent plot device utilized throughout the entire work.

Lucius, in his human form, hears stories of a witch named Meroe who kills her ex-lover and later listens to the tale of a man who has his ears and nose eaten off and replaced with wax replicas by witches who mistake him for a corpse. As Lucius drunkenly walks home after a dinner party, he is attacked and kills three “thieves” who, after having been put on trial for their murder, he discovers were actually wineskins; he has been duped by the whole town in the Festival of Laughter. Photis confesses that it is because of her bad luck that Lucius was tricked so she lets him watch her mistress, Pamphile, transform herself into an owl. Lucius wants to

¹ Despite attempts at assimilation however, anxiety about provincial status cannot be entirely erased. Even though the Roman Empire may have been sending its cultural monuments and urban structures to the provinces and extending citizenship rights, it may not have been so easy to re-create Rome on the margins of its empire. In an essay entitled “Reflections on the African Character of Apuleius,” included in the collection *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses*, Mark Edwards states: “For all that, though the tone is not provincial, Roman Africa was a province, and the truth in such a phrase as ‘African Latin’ is that, like the Punic capital, it brings together the margins and the centre. The Latin culture of Africa is the best, if not the only, Latin culture of its time; yet its exponents know that they are not at the heart of the Roman world. It is therefore no surprise that African writers often try to be more Roman than the Romans” (2001:48). Edwards raises an interesting point in the final sentence of this passage. To what extent is the Latinity and influence of Rome present in the works of writers from the provinces simply because they *are* from the provinces? Juvenal, writing in Rome, took Rome as his subject matter but hardly in the glowing terms with which other writers treat it. Fame in the literary world would come from a work’s circulation and prestige within the city of Rome, regardless of any popularity outside the city. Knowledge of this fact could make writers who wanted to gain the city’s attention manipulate their works in order to make them more palatable to their audience.

experience the magic so he asks Photis to turn him into an owl as well. However, by misreading the vials, he is transformed into an ass instead.

To regain human form, Lucius needs only to eat rose petals; but he is stolen during the night before he can find any, and thus begin his adventures as a donkey. The thieves by whom he has been stolen are also great storytellers, and Lucius, in his animal form, hears about the heroic exploits of various dead thieves. A young woman hostage, Charite, is brought to the camp to be ransomed back to her parents. She is upset by a dream and, in order to take her mind off of it, an old woman looking after the thieves tells her the story of Cupid and Psyche, beginning the longest and most famous inset story of the *Metamorphoses*. The girl is later rescued when her husband infiltrates the band of thieves and absconds with both Lucius and Charite. Lucius is supposed to be set free because of his help in rescuing Charite, but is instead stolen again and undergoes hard labor. At this point Lucius, still in animal form, hears the story of the death of both Charite and her husband by a jealous ex-suitor.

Lucius then passes through various owners: men who sexually attack a young boy who is saved by the donkey, a mill-owner at whose business Lucius hears various stories about the infidelity of women, a Roman soldier who steals Lucius from a gardener, and later two baker brothers. Still with the sensibilities of a human despite his animal form, he eats the bakers' food, a practice that they find so amusing that they begin to charge people to watch him at the table. Eventually a woman falls in love with him and pays to have sex with him. This episode gives the brothers the idea to make this act into a spectacle. They find a condemned woman to have sex with Lucius in public. Apuleius then relates the story of how the woman was condemned. Before this spectacle occurs, however, Lucius escapes and prays to Ceres. However, it is Isis who comes to him and tells him how he will be transformed back into a man—on the condition that he will become her follower. He accepts and is eventually initiated into the rites of Isis.

The question of whether or not Apuleius is sincere in his conversion to the cult of Isis have been dealt with by scholars such as John Winkler (1985), Ellen Finkelpearl (1998), Nancy Shumate (1996), Stephen Harrison (1998), and others. Whether Lucius in the final book of the *Metamorphoses* undergoes a genuine conversion, or whether in the final scene in which he walks down the street with his shaven head he is playing the part of the Isiac priest or the Roman buffoon, has been written about extensively. Perhaps Apuleius intends this work to be read as a serious conversion tale. Perhaps he instead seeks to preserve the themes of deception and parody that are included in the rest of his work. I cannot determine exactly what Apuleius was trying to do with this conclusion of his story, but I think that this multiplicity of interpretations and the consistent open-endedness found throughout the text are its key attributes, and that they can be further explored through an analysis of the *Metamorphoses'* Prologue.

The Talking Book: The Prologue

The prologue itself initiates the storytelling program. The text states, “At ego tibi sermone isto Milesio varias fabulas conseram, auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam” (“And I will join together for you different stories in the Milesian style, so that I

might charm your kind ears with a pleasant whisper”) (1.1).² Thus, from the outset of the work the storytelling project is emphasized. Additionally, Lucius is an audience for oral storytellers in both his human and animal forms during his journey. The Cupid and Psyche episode is a recounted story, as are all the heroic robbers’ deaths, for example. Thematically, storytelling is often appealed to for entertainment, but need not be seen solely as such. For example, as Carl Schlam states (1992:44), “the pleasures are abundant and, at the same time, are subject for speculation. For interwoven into the artfulness of the narratives is an association of storytelling with re-creation and renewal, with comedy in a religio-philosophic sense.” Linking storytelling with “re-creation and renewal” ties in well with both diversion and delight from the stories, as well as the “surprise” ending of religious conversion, regardless of whether that conversion is taken as straightforward religious change or as some kind of parody. Thinking about storytelling in these two ways allows the reader to understand both the stated reason for the telling of these stories offered in the first line of the work and also to reconcile the ending with the rest of the narrative. Storytelling allows for different kinds of manipulations of text and audience to set up or follow through on the stories’ content.

Why then is there this emphasis on this type of oral literature apart from its simple thematic appeal? Dupont claims that “storytelling made an appearance where epic would not and was substituted for the latter, as a second-best” (1999:197-98). For her, storytelling and epic are integrally related, with the former an inferior form of the latter. Interestingly, Dupont writes that storytelling is present where epic *would* not go, rather than *could* not go. Something happens on the margins, on the outside of the urban aristocratic center, to make the formalized epic genre of the *recitationes* less applicable.

Oral storytelling creates a community, similarly to the way in which formal *recitationes* created an authorized community. Dupont suggests that these oral storytelling communities were produced in response to those elite, aristocratic literary communities (173). Literary culture was splitting apart, forming an aristocratic community through education and rhetors’ declamation, and a decidedly non-aristocratic culture passed through these other venues.

Storytelling culture was a minority one, located on the margins and transmitted through different forms of literature and speech. As Dupont writes, the storytelling culture was “less resplendent, a culture that has to be tracked down along caravan routes and among working women” (174). Storytelling thus creates a marginal(ized) community that can substitute for the urban aristocratic identity based on formal performance of imperial ideologies. The formal rhetorical community was located in the urban areas; the storytelling culture was not. Instead, “stories, like warrior values, had in theory at least, no need of the city in order to flourish. These stories that come from the margins of the world also belong to the margins of culture. And, of course, those margins of culture can only be conveyed through fiction” (198). Margins, center, empire, and society are all mediated through stories. Storytelling therefore does not need an urban setting as do the more formal recitations that would spread imperial values. Instead, the oral nature of the stories allows them to be itinerant, capable of moving nomadically through the provinces, rather than remaining anchored to any one particular place. This portability therefore

² All translations in this article are my own.

allows for a natural malleability that would adapt itself to different communities, as opposed to the more rigid textualized orality of the Roman cities.

Since the literary culture built around the idea of the *recitatio* did not allow for the same casualness as that of the storytelling culture, it is difficult to think about these stories in Apuleius being read aloud as part of that forum. Rather, the stories contained within the *Metamorphoses* appear to be the antithesis or antidote to such formal lectures.

The power of the spoken word is applied differently in this work than in other narratives that attempt orality. In the *Metamorphoses* words enact change through magical incantations, summon witches if their names are mentioned, and render Lucius powerless, as when he is robbed of his human speech while in animal form. Schlam comments on such power of language as follows (1992:106-7):

The stories in the *Metamorphoses* present a great range of uses of language, to summon aid or inflict harm, to praise or accuse, to inform or deceive, to comfort, amuse, and enchant. Against this tableau of the delights of language, so much a part of the entertainment offered by the novel, is also cast the question of its limits: words are found wanting that can adequately express truth of adoration.

I am intrigued by the idea of the power of language being opposed by the search for the limits of language in this text. It seems natural that a text so preoccupied with the nature of language would explore its limits as well. Similarly explored in the investigation of limits in this work are limits of literary genres as well as social or political limits. The Roman Empire was certainly invested in thinking about boundaries, and this text illustrates a preoccupation with the provinces, the geographical limits of the empire.

There is not a one-sided focus on orality, however. The text carefully maintains a tension between orality and literacy. If at some points orality is primary, at other points Apuleius conscientiously promotes the physical nature of the text as something to be read. For example, in the first lines of the prologue, the narrator professes the intention to enchant the audience's ears with his gentle murmuring. However, immediately following this claim, he focuses on the text's creation on *papyrus Aegyptiam* ("Egyptian papyrus") with a *Nilotici calami* ("reed from the Nile") (1.1). This balance of textual and oral is maintained throughout the entire work. As John Winkler puts it, "even a person listening to another read is made to think at that moment of the actual conditions of performance, rather than of the shared illusion of an imagined live narrator named Lucius" (1985:158). Some literary works staging orality promote solely the chimera of the audience hearing an oral performance. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* is not invested in this same deception. Instead, he carefully advances both sides of the dialogue.

One effect of the oral/literary duality is that the text is opened up not as a fixed document but rather as something with which the audience may participate. The readers/listeners (for at times the audience is both, switching back and forth as Apuleius' text does) need to work with the text in order to make meaning. As Winkler notes (1985:187):

The point is that the *Asineus Aureus* was originally written not to be a hermetically sealed monument, to be admired only from a respectful distance, but as an open text, one that

encourages participation—real embarrassment, puzzlement, disgust, laughter, tentative closures of meaning and surprising entrapments, mental rewriting (“Oh, he must mean . . .”) and physical rewriting.

The audience must necessarily cooperate with Apuleius in order to uncover meaning. In the *Metamorphoses*, Winkler continues, “plays tag with its readers, constantly renouncing its own authority in order to encourage reader participation” (187). One way the text encourages participation is through claiming itself as text but also promoting itself as speaker. The reader constantly negotiates his or her own position in relation to the text, asking questions of it and questioning its authority. By requiring this constant action on the part of the reader, the text opens itself up to other critical inquiry.

Perhaps most interestingly, the narrator creates a dialogue with his audience in Book 9, chapter 30:

Sed forsitan lector scrupulosus reprehendens narratum meum sic argumentaberis: “Unde autem tu, astutule asine, intra terminus pistrini contentus, quid secreto, ut affirmas, mulieres gesserint scire potuisti?” Accipe igitur quem ad modum homo curiosus iumentum faciem sustinens cuncta quae in perniciem pistoris mei gesta sunt cognovi.

But perhaps you, a careful reader, will argue thus, detaining my narrative: “How are you able to know, you astute ass, what the women were doing in secret, as you say, while you were striving inside the boundaries of the mill?” Accept thus how I, a curious man carrying the form of a beast of burden, knew what they all did for the destruction of my miller.

Apuleius provides the reader with questions in a dialogue to which he then offers answers. The reader is thereby given a specific role within the script of this text of keeping the narrator honest and therefore is invited to trust him and credit the stories further. This is a clever and insidious method of making the narration more believable. The readers have to question the text, and when they do not Apuleius provides the dialogue to force this role upon them.

The prologue of the *Metamorphoses* is brief but contains a wealth of insights into the nature of this text. I have already mentioned how the opening lines begin with both a suggestion of orality or conversation by mentioning the murmuring to delight his audience’s ears, as well as an emphasis on the written nature of the book by highlighting the physical papyrus and stylus used in putting the stories into text. After claiming that he has written this text in order that *miseris* (“that you may be amazed”), the narrator states, “Exordior. Quis ille?” (“I will begin. Who is this?”). The answer given to this question is a genealogy of texts and languages. He mentions the three Greek cities of Athens, Corinth, and Sparta and their literatures as his provenance and then claims that his first language is Greek: “Ibi linguam Attidem primis pueritiae stipendiis merui” (“There I earned the Greek language in the first campaigns of childhood” [1.1]). He then excuses his *rudis sermonis* (“raw speech”) in Latin by claiming that he had no teacher for the language and thus had great difficulty in acquiring it, admitting that he

may make mistakes. Finally, closing the prologue, he writes, “Fabulam Graecanicam incipimus. Lector intende: laetaberis” (“We are beginning a Greekish story. Reader, pay attention: you will be delighted” [1.1]).

This introductory prologue seems straightforward enough, but upon further examination several critical points are raised and a number of questions need to be addressed. First, it becomes clear that the audience is required to perform two actions. The audience must read the written text and make it a reality by speaking the words. The ancient world did not read silently,³ so these texts would be made into sound each time they were read, whether before a group or individually. The prologue is very aware of this and thus plays them together for the audience’s sake. As an example of the cooperative effort required in this text, the narrator claims *incipimus* (“we shall start”), using the first person plural ending of the verb and unifying the project of author and reader from the beginning. This move is especially interesting because the use of the first person plural accomplishes what the oral performances of other authors might wish to accomplish but so often are unable to carry out. It unites the audience in the text and the audience of the text. Often in literary oral performances, the audience is allowed to watch but not participate. But in the *Metamorphoses* the audience does not watch the audience in the text; they are unified with that audience.

Second, there is another example of the audience being solicited to question the text in these lines. After the narrator claims that he is beginning, he is “interrupted” by having to answer the question of “Who is this?” The reader is invited into the world of the text from the prologue onward, signaling how the audience will have to be involved within the text throughout the entirety of the work. The audience must question the narrator and must think independently while also engaging with the text and making it speak.

Finally, the question arises of who speaks these words of the prologue to the audience. On first glance, it seems that the narrator of the entire work would introduce himself, and thus Lucius would be speaking. However, based on what we discover about Lucius through the narration, it cannot be him. As we find out, he has quite good Latin and Greek, as his fluent defense against the charge of the murder of the men/wineskins in Latin court demonstrates, so the linguistic heritage detailed in the prologue cannot be his. Also, Lucius claims that his well-off, elite family had descended from Thessaly (and Plutarch, he adds), so the three cities mentioned earlier are not his family’s places of origin.

If the speaker of the prologue is not Lucius, is it Apuleius himself addressing the audience before he introduces the character of Lucius? Dupont cautions against equating the narrator of the prologue with Apuleius, pointing out instead that this narrator’s “history and origins make him the Greek double and negative of the Roman Apuleius” (1999:210). The narrator was born in Greece; Apuleius was from the Roman province of Africa. Apuleius’ native tongue was Latin, while the narrator’s first language was Greek. The narrator goes from Greece to Rome to learn Latin. Evidence from Apuleius’ writing suggests that he went from Madauros, his birthplace, to Carthage in order to learn Greek and philosophy. These two figures, one textual

³ The standard practice of reading aloud is evident in St. Augustine’s wonder in the *Confessions* at Ambrose’s skill of reading silently to himself in the fourth century CE.

and the other historical, should not be conflated with each other simply for convenience because the evidence does not support such a claim.

So is it the text itself that speaks to the audience? Perhaps this text is an actual “talking book” rather than a straightforward attempt at replicating the conditions of an oral performance. There is definitely a third-person narrator that is neither Lucius nor Apuleius. Katherine Clarke claims (2001:105) that “so the overall effect of this list of place names may be to locate us temporally and spatially in a long-vanished Greece, and in addition, to link this location with literary productions, giving us a cultural background for the author and the present work.” The location is kept in the provinces of the Roman Empire, but it becomes an ancestry for this text, locating it within a literary production timeline. So perhaps the narrator of the prologue is the text itself, introducing itself and beginning a conversation with the audience. Ultimately, it seems that the identity of the narrator of the opening chapter remains unclear. However, it is important to think about how the audience is to react to this uncertainty and how it colors the reading of the text that follows. The audience is invited to be soothed and delighted, and also commanded to pay attention. Thus, while they are supposed to enjoy the text, audience members must never let that enjoyment lull them into complacency. If they do, they are able to count on Apuleius to prompt them to ask the pertinent questions at different points in the narration.

I agree with Harrison that regardless of how the narrator of the prologue is read, Apuleius’s mastery of different levels of voice in the same text emerges most clearly. Further, as he elaborates, “this kind of complex presentation of narrative voice which we have identified in the *Metamorphoses* is precisely the kind of strategy which draws attention to the existence and virtuoso status of the work’s author” (2000:232-33). That passage, however, raises a number of questions in terms of this project. Apuleius has harnessed this combination of genres and this usage of orality in order to promote his artistry in particular. Instead of a political agenda, might he have a more personal one? Or is his understanding of the political system such that he uses his conception of empire in order to pull himself up? Is there something different about Apuleius’ status in the colonies that makes him and his text different?

Empire in Apuleius

In order to think about the questions concerning Apuleius’ use of radical storytelling, I must examine how the empire is portrayed within this text and about the ideological maneuvers that the genres used in this text imply. The most obvious figure to associate with the Roman imperial presence in the provinces is the Roman soldier who steals Lucius away from the gardener in Book nine, chapter 39 onward. This soldier embodies the empire on the soil of the province. He is the figure who would enforce the empire’s administration and laws. The episode with this soldier clearly portrays an empire on the decline, filled with abuses. This soldier first takes offense at the gardener’s walking by him without addressing him, although the gardener does not speak Latin and could not address him even if he wanted to. The soldier then demonstrates his bilingualism and speaks in Greek, demonstrating a proper education for a Roman citizen. When the soldier claims to need the donkey Lucius, the gardener protests and, when that does not work, pummels the soldier, who can only pretend to be dead until the

gardener goes away with the animal. The soldier confesses his beating to other soldiers who concoct a plan by which they can take revenge on the gardener. They falsify charges against him, repeatedly swearing in the name of the emperor, so that the man will be dragged away as a prisoner. Lucius is seen by one of the soldiers and taken away as well. Concerning this episode with the Roman soldier, Doody writes (2000:446-47):

[The ass] is at the very bottom of the pyramid of power of which the Romans are the apex—as we see clearly in the incident in which the wretched ass is taken by force from the poor gardener [*hortulanus*] by a Roman soldier This vivid and analytical description of colonial power’s use of casual violence is a sharp political commentary: *Asinus aureus* certainly has its political anti-imperial aspects, and the novel here shows its hand. At the apex of power is the Roman emperor (to whose bureaucracy in Rome this *miles* is sent, forcing him to sell the ass for a clear profit). At the bottom of the structure of power is the poor ass, which bears all the economic and social burdens in the most literal manner.

Doody sees this passage as strikingly anti-imperialist. This random violence utilized haphazardly by imperial agents and their false swearing to the Emperor demonstrate a condemnation of imperial practices in the provinces. Asymmetrical power dynamics, certainly present under empire although often concealed, are rendered highly visible in this episode.

Doody also cites gender issues made evident in the transformation from human to animal. For a member of the elite, such as the portrayal of Lucius suggests, to be turned into virtually a member of the slave class (in that he exists solely to provide labor for others after his transformation) would mark him as less masculine. This transformation, she claims, would be “the stuff of nightmares, what every true Roman *vir* would dread” (448). Without delving too deeply here into issues of gender, it is sufficient to realize that overt and concentrated masculinity was a facet of the Roman Empire and that a switch from an aristocratic man to a “slave” animal would indeed turn the power dynamics into which he is placed upside down. On this same path of inquiry, Doody also suggests that the character of Lucius challenges how the Roman character wanted to portray itself. She notes his curiosity, his wanderings, and his talkativeness as decidedly “un-Roman.” Building on this portrayal, she claims that “the novel, the work that is *his* (Lucius’s) story, is overtly and in all elements of its form, an anti-Roman tale” (450-51).

What makes this tale anti-Roman? Thus far I have cited the creation of a counter-culture forged through the realm of the storyteller. As opposed to the formal *recitationes* of the Antonine period in the second century and the aristocratic virtues that it would approve and promote, storytellers reproduce narratives *of* the margins *to* the margins. It is not so much anti-Roman in the sense that it seeks to oust Rome from control of the territories, but rather that it wants to revise imperialist discourses of power. This desire could evoke a reason for creating Lucius as a character who typifies the opposite of Roman values and undergoes what would be a striking humiliation in the eyes of the Roman aristocratic elite.

At this point, I think that it is necessary to think further about aspects of this text that would run counter to the dominant ideologies of *Romanitas*. Schlam claims that this text differs

from other Roman writing in the lack of moral italics linked to Roman values. There are no object lessons on Roman history and elucidatory of the aristocratic elite order. Schlam believes that this is unique to Apuleius' text and that, because of this lack, the idea of *Romanitas* is no longer the center of the work as it would have been for the *Aeneid*, for example (1992:10). I find this textual irregularity to be highly intriguing. Does the lack of *Romanitas* in this text simply demonstrate that affairs were more peaceful during the Antonine dynasty and especially under Antoninus Pius? Was there no longer the need for such forthright propaganda and instructive literature? Or is there something else going on, maybe something related to the fact that Apuleius was writing from the provinces where Rome was no longer the center of culture?

Schlam links this lack of moral italics of Roman behavior to an alternative kind of virtue. He suggests that the moral lessons included are no longer tied to the conception of public good. Instead, the focus is on "personal rather than public experience" (10). This shift is entirely different from Virgil's *Aeneid* and from how Augustus venerates Aeneas because of his placement of the public ahead of the personal. Has the Roman Empire become complacent? Perhaps everything is progressing so well that there is no longer the same vigilance in representing the protection of the *res publica* as there was earlier at a time following a series of civil wars?

Doody proposes that the form of the *Metamorphoses* shows an anti-Roman bent. She suggests that the rhymes, puns, repetition, and style all show themselves to be against the Roman order because they demonstrate "the illegitimate formulations of a style that rejects empire, masculinity, and solidity" (2000:451). While explaining the anti-imperial nature of the style in these terms may be stretching a bit, it seems clear that the style rejects solidity.

The key to reading form and political ideology in genre in this text lies in how boundaries are presented. Textual solidity is perforated in a way that distinguishes itself from other works that seek to reproduce orality. Apuleius injects a fluidity or a shiftiness in his text that opens up various possibilities for reading. He questions genre boundaries in probing how to re-create the epic in this work and how to expand the novel form in order to be able to include the epic in it. He examines how storytelling can be placed in a literary genre. He questions the boundaries of audience. He reaches through his text not only in order to give his audience an opportunity to subsume his voice, but also to provide them a voice that he listens to and addresses. In moving the center of his focus he plays with geographical boundaries. Is the central geographical site Rome, as in other Latin texts, or is Rome at the margins? Are the provinces moved to fill the void of the center or do they also remain on the margins? Cultural boundaries are made fluid through the application of the storytelling counter-culture rather than the authorized literary culture to this text. Just as one cannot imagine Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* being read in a formal *recitatio*, so the *recitatio* has no place within this text. Formal literary recitation gives way to the flood of stories told in informal settings for a variety of purposes, none of which is the furthering of Roman imperial ideals. Magic is consistently used in this work to break down boundaries; it appeals to something other than the authorized elite culture. Magic becomes a power that cannot be harnessed by empire's structure and assimilated into the power dynamic. It is a power on the outskirts of the empire and on the outside of the power structure. Therefore, magic becomes the instigator for this entire work, and for these quasi-epic wanderings performed by the man who has been changed into animal form and who travels on the outskirts of the empire.

Dupont suggests another interesting way boundaries are crossed in this text. In a section entitled “Books that were not for Reading,” she proposes that the *Metamorphoses* is a “staging post in between two kinds of orality” (1999:216). She means that Apuleius’ text was designed in such a way as to make it possible to reintegrate it into the oral storytelling culture. For this to occur, multiple boundaries have to be crossed. Initially, the oral text has to be fashioned into a written text. Subsequently, the written text has to be oralized. Finally, that oralized narrative must re-enter the oral tradition, allowing for the variations inherent in an oral literary culture. Critically, it is perhaps possible for the boundary between oral and written to be crossed both ways.

Doody writes about the idea of this exploration of boundaries in the text in the following way: “. . . but are not conquests, empires, and borders illegitimate fictions? We depend on boundaries and straight lines; bloodlines and clear borders. In [this narrative] . . . the boundaries by which we live—even the boundary between human and animal—become subject to question and dubiety” (2000:457). When borders are realized to be illegitimate, that realization has broad implications for empire. Does Apuleius’ text prompt a recognition of boundaries’ arbitrary natures? The *Metamorphoses* certainly suggests that boundaries found within the text, such as I have just mentioned, are not steadfast. With some manipulation, all of these supposedly hard and fast limits are changeable. Does this mean that the illegitimacy of empire is illustrated by the mutation of boundaries? I would not go that far at this point, simply based on changeability of what was thought to be sure. However, the idea of the *fictions* of empire and boundaries is intriguing. The literature of the Augustan Age unquestionably established and distributed the empire. The aristocratic elite, deeply invested in the invented narrative of empire because of its position at the top of the power structure, worked to disseminate this fiction. Apuleius’ work is not invested in this same project. Does it wish to dismantle empire? It seems a stretch to claim that this text would seek to take empire apart, but it does appear to expose the fiction of power and government at work on the margins of the empire.

Concerning the combination of fiction and exploration of borders, Dupont remarks (1999:202-3):

. . . the exploration of those borderlands is carried out purely by means of fiction and serves to mark out the boundaries of the world What makes it rather confusing for us is the fact that these margins of civilization are explored not through fictions from the outside . . . but from the inside: the imaginary microsocieties created by the stories and in which stories are also told are composed of robbers or emancipated slaves—social groups that really do exist but that, in these stories, are defined by a culture that is deficient, too deficient to be believable. They are fantastical representations of the majority culture. It is as though that majority culture was unable to speak of those who constituted its cultural margins, except through fiction.

Perhaps the real fiction of *Metamorphoses* is the illusion that the stories create a counter-culture. If the depiction of the non-majority in this text is an illusory representation of majority culture, what does that do to this text? Lucius makes his way through these smaller societies, but perhaps Apuleius does not create them in order to represent the margins to the margins or even the

margins to the center (Rome) but rather to create a distorted image of the margins to the anxious majority. The labyrinthine twists and turns of the narrative and the criss-crossing of boundary markers could simply demonstrate how the majority culture thinks of and represents the minorities and the margins.

To Whom is the Text Talking?

In order to clarify what Apuleius is doing, it is necessary to think about who the audience may be to whom this text is directed. Is it indeed Rome? Is it instead Carthage and therefore a provincial audience? In “The Roman Audience of *The Golden Ass*,” Ken Dowden claims that since Apuleius’ references and links to the classical tradition do not remain firmly entrenched in the provinces but rather look to Rome, perhaps his audience may be found there as well (1994:421). Since other provincial authors went to Rome to make a place for themselves in its literary culture, it may be fair to say that Apuleius would have done so as well, since Rome was where literary reputations were made. Or at least it would be shortsighted to think that Apuleius only expected to find his audience away from Rome. As Dowden argues, “in the West, Apuleius does not herald a new wave of decentralized literature. If he had been primarily addressing provincial audiences in his published work, he would be practically unique” (422). In his other works, such as his oratory defense against the charge of witchcraft, Apuleius did address the Carthaginian audience. But even when he does so, he “paints [them] in Roman colors,” describing Carthage and its literary audience in such a way that they become a “mini-Rome” (423). The African city becomes both more closely united to the Roman imperial project and seems imitative, a knock-off of the “real thing.” Because of this depiction, Dowden claims that Apuleius already sought his glory in Rome and was not interested in limiting his literary output simply to a provincial audience.

Finkelpearl, while agreeing that Apuleius was interested in the Roman audience, cannot so easily discount his interest in the provinces. She claims that simply because Apuleius portrays his audience as similar to a Roman audience does not mean that he was looking primarily to Rome. She suggests, on the contrary, that perhaps he sought to affirm that educated literary audiences do in fact exist in the provinces and Rome should not be taken as the singular center of the cultural world (1998:143).

Harrison points out that the lack of specificity in geographical place-names from the provinces and the mention of particular locations in Rome suggest that Apuleius may have been writing to a Roman audience unfamiliar with sites outside the city. For Harrison, “the vagueness of the Greek landscape of the *Metamorphoses* is a reflection of the relatively uninterested Romanocentric readership (1998:65). While I am swayed by the argument that Apuleius would have been writing in order to garner an audience for himself at Rome based on Dowden and Harrison’s evidence, I do agree with Finkelpearl that the audience outside of the imperial city cannot be entirely discounted. The question then becomes that of the significance of the audience for the *Metamorphoses*.

Perhaps this is a text from the provinces directed toward Rome. But before I can make that claim without qualification, I must consider how this text perhaps shifts the focus away from

Rome to the provinces, or at least to a counter-culture that is not urban-based and does not have a singular focus entirely on Rome and its aristocratic practices. Representing a potential counter-culture is fairly revolutionary and is able to occur because of the *Metamorphoses*' reliance upon storytelling as an intermediary between epic and novel. However, since there is not necessarily an appeal to that body as the audience for this work and since the major focus of the audience does not change, perhaps the appeal itself is different.

Historical evidence suggests that for the most part the reign of Antoninus Pius was serene. The emperor ushered in an era of peace, but that fact does not necessarily mean that everything was uniform throughout the empire. Perhaps the forced centralized government and the focus having been shifted back onto Rome produced a need for the provinces to reassert themselves. This shift would be a possible reason why the text emphasizes places other than Rome and practices other than Roman practices.

A number of Roman historians suggest that, despite the peace of the Antonine Age, this reign did in fact contain the seeds of the "decline and fall" of the Roman Empire.⁴ This shift in authoritarian practices of reading could be another marker of that transition, toward the ultimate dismantling of the empire.

In terms of literary form, as with Petronius' *Satyricon*, this is a carnivalized text. Petronius carnivalizes his imperial Julio-Claudian society in order to parody it and shake concealed ideologies free. Apuleius does much the same thing, but this process does not seem to be an end in itself. Instead, this carnivalesque text shifts sociocultural practices, a feat much more dangerous to the authority of the empire. Additionally, in terms of form, all boundaries are transgressed. Combined with the changing carnivalizing of the text, this crossing of boundaries—the act of opening up space for interpretation of limits—could point to a beginning of the fragmentation of the authority of the Roman literary culture. Breaking through limits and seeking how far boundaries can be pushed could signal the emergence of political meaning.

Through the appeal to the intermediary form of storytelling, seemingly halfway between the extremes of epic and novel, a new audience is appealed to and formed by means of this text. The epic and novel forms—one too rigid and the other too lax—could be charted onto the map of the Roman Empire, with the epic symbolizing the city of Rome and the novel representing the unconquered terrain. The middle area, that which has been inflected with Romanization (the epic) but which is still not entirely part of the aristocratic culture and instead belongs to the *barbari*, is storytelling. Hence a derivative literary culture is created, one that mirrors to a certain extent the formal nature of the *recitatio* but instead of filling the audience with Roman citizens

⁴ Michael Grant discusses, for example, aspects of internal disquiet in the Roman Empire during the Age of the Antonines. He cites the prevalence of banditry, explaining that term as understood by the Romans as "includ[ing] every revolt against authority" (1994:148). Thus, while seeming serene, domestic events beyond the superficial level were not quite placid. Further, Grant also clarifies the limits of Gibbons' understanding of the Antonines' period: "the focus on Rome but not on the provinces and the foregrounding of an exploitative wealthy elite" (1994:149). Gibbons may have had evidence to support his claim concerning the peace and happiness of the Age of the Antonines, but his evidence was not all-encompassing, according to Grant. In terms of foreign relations, Chris Scarre (1995) mentions that "there is evidence of near continuous fighting and unrest" (110). Whether that fighting was against the Dacians, in Egypt, Greece, Mauretania, Scotland, or Judaea, the Roman Empire was not always stable (1995:110). Thus both internally and externally the Roman Empire was in transition and perhaps decline.

rustles up women, slaves, thieves, and even animals. This form, then, could be the ideal genre for the provinces, at once not quite Roman enough for the epic but too trained in literary form for the novel.

This analogy must not be pushed too far. Certainly novels were being written in Greece, a cultured area, and one that was highly sophisticated. But what makes Apuleius' text different from Greek novels is its language. Just as language choice is a major issue for modern postcolonial writers in terms of audience and the production and distribution of their texts, so it is for a writer during the Roman Empire as well. A political element is infused into Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* simply by virtue of its being written in Latin. Apuleius could have written in Latin, Greek, or Punic. Although he was from the margins of the Roman Empire, as were the authors of Greek novels, he did not make his text accessible only in the language of his area. Instead, he sought the larger audience made available through the use of the Latin language.

Through content and form, Apuleius creates a different appeal that begins to show the disintegration not of Latin literature, but of the authorized point of view of the imperial reader. He involves the reader along with himself and that created reading community is integrally involved in the production of meaning. It is not possible to passively listen to this text and allow an authorized performer to lead one through it. Instead, the reader is addressed and the text makes the individual reader speak. This talking book requires participation precisely because of its mixing of epic and novel. That mixture highlights the liminal genre of storytelling—not quite epic, not quite novel—and the creation of a different kind of community of storytellers and listeners. Further, if this book is a stopgap between two different kinds of orality and prompts storytellers to re-create it (at least in pieces), then that also is entirely different. The *Metamorphoses* invites each person to make his or her own interpretation and reproductions of the text, which is certainly different from how Petronius or Virgil would want their texts to be reproduced. This difference leads to the fragmentation and the individualization of the authority of interpretation, rather than promoting an imperially authorized point of view that would seek to homogenize meaning.

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