Lying Eyes? Autopsy, Credibility, and the Senses in Apuleius, *Met*. 1.4

I. The parrot and the crow (*Fl.* 12.7-8)

id vero, quod didicit, ita similiter nobis canit vel potius eloquitur, ut, vocem si audias, hominem putes: nam corvum quidem si audias, id est crocitare, non loqui. **verum enimvero et corvus et psittacus nihil aliud quam quod didicerunt pronuntiant… denuo repetit eandem cantilenam.**

In fact, what [the parrot] has learned, it sings (or better, speaks), in such a similar way to us that if you hear its voice, you might think it’s human. But if you hear a crow, that’s croaking, not speaking. **But actually, both a crow and a parrot pronounce nothing other than what they’ve learned… [The parrot] repeats the same old song again and again**.[[1]](#footnote-1)

II. Alexander the Great’s decree (*Fl*. 7.5-7)

sed cum primis Alexandri illud praeclarum, quod imaginem suam, quo certior posteris proderetur, **noluit a multis artificibus vulgo contaminari**, sed edixit universo orbi suo, ne quis effigiem regis temere assimularet aere, colore, caelamine, **quin saepe solus eam Policletus aere duceret, solus Apelles coloribus deliniaret, solus Pyrgoteles caelamine excuderet**; praeter hos tris multo nobilissimos in suis artificiis si quis uspiam reperiretur alius sanctissimae imagini regis manus admolitus, haud secus in eum quam in sacrilegum vindicaturum.

But this above all is exceptional about Alexander: in order that he might be more faithfully known to future generations, **he didn’t want his image to be generally contaminated by many artists.** So, he proclaimed to his entire world that no one should reproduce at random the king’s likeness in bronze, color, or bass-relief; **rather,** **only Polycleitus could fashion his image in bronze, only Apelles could copy it in colors, only Pyrgoteles could mold it in relief.** Except for these three (the most famous by far in their arts), if anyone else, anywhere, should be found putting his hands on the most sacred image of the king, Alexander would punish him for nothing short of sacrilege.

III. The degeneration of Philosophy (*Fl*. 7.9-10)

**quod utinam pari exemplo Philosophiae edictum valeret, ne qui imaginem eius temere assimularet, uti** **pauci boni artifices**, idem probe eruditi omnifariam sapientiae studium contemplarent, neu rudes, sordidi, imperiti pallio tenus philosophos imitarentur et disciplinam regalem tam ad bene dicendum quam ad bene vivendum repertam male dicendo et similiter vivendo contaminarent.

**If only an edict of a similar sort existed for Philosophy, so that no one could reproduce her image at random, but** so that **just a few good artists**, likewise finely trained in every way, could contemplate the study of wisdom. That way, uncultured, dirty, ignorant men would not copy the philosopher up to his cloak nor pollute the regal discipline, invented for both speaking and living well, by speaking badly and living likewise.

IV. The plasticity of rhetoric (*Fl*. 9.7)

meum vero unumquodque dictum acriter examinatis, sedulo pensiculatis, **ad limam** et lineam certam **redigitis**, cum torno et coturno vero comparatis.

You examine sharply my smallest utterance, you weigh it diligently, **you narrow it down to a file** and a sure thread, you compare it with the workman’s wheel and the tragedian’s boot.

V. Plato’s methodology (*Pl.* 1.3.187f.)

nam quamuis de diuersis officinis haec ei essent philosophiae membra suscepta, naturalis a Pythagoreis, rationalis atque moralis ex ipso Socratis fonte, unum tamen ex omnibus et quasi proprii partus corpus effecit et, cum principes harum familiarum impolitas sententias et inchoatas auditoribus tradidissent, **eas hic, cum ratione limando tum ad orationis augustae honestissimam speciem induendo perfectas atque etiam admirabiles fecit.**

For although these limbs of his philosophy had been gathered from different workshops – natural philosophy from the Pythagoreans, logical and moral from the very fountainhead of Socrates – nonetheless, from them all, he made one body, as if he had given birth to his own offspring, and, while the fathers of these philosophical families had delivered unpolished and unfinalized opinions to their audiences, **Plato made them perfect and even wondrous, by sharpening [or polishing, filing down] them with *ratio* and dressing them up in the most distinguished kind of sublime *oratio*.** (Trans. adapted from Fletcher)

VI. The prologue’s many promises (*Met*. 1.1)

at ego tibi **sermone isto Milesio** varias fabulas conseram, **auresque tuas benivolas lepido susurro permulceam**, modo si papyrum Aegyptiam argutia Nilotici calami inscriptam non spreveris inspicere, figuras fortunasque hominum in alias imagines conversas et in se rursum mutuo nexu refectas ut mireris. exordior… fabulam Graecanicam incipimus. **lector intende: laetaberis.**

But I’ll weave for you various stories **in the Milesian style**, and **I’ll soothe your welcoming ears with clever whispering**, provided you don’t scorn to look at an Egyptian papyrus inscribed by the sharpness of a pen from the Nile. You’ll marvel at the forms and fortunes of men, changed into the guises of others and then restored back to themselves again by a common bond. I begin… We’re starting a Greeky story. **Pay attention, reader: you will be entertained**.

VII. Lucius reproaches a stranger (*Met*. 1.3)

“tu vero crassis auribus et obstinato corde **respuis quae forsitan vere perhibeantur**. minus hercule calles pravissimis opinionibus ea putari mendacia quae vel auditu nova vel visu rudia vel certe supra captum cogitationis ardua videantur; **quae si paulo accuratius exploraris**, non modo compertu evidentia, verum etiam factu facilia senties.

“You there, with the thick ears and stubborn heart, **you’re spitting out stuff that could turn out to be true!** Damn, you’re not so sharp, with your opinions all crooked, if you think things false which seem novel to hear or unusual to see or really difficult for the mind to grasp. **If you look into this stuff a little more closel**y, you’ll find that these things are not only obvious to figure out, but also easy to do.”

VIII. Two anecdotes of swallowing (*Met*. 1.4)

ego denique vespera, dum polentae caseatae modico secus offulam grandiorem in convivas aemulus contruncare gestio, **mollitie cibi glutinosi faucibus inhaerentis et meacula spiritus distinentis minimo minus interii.** **et tamen Athenis proximo et ante Poecilen porticum isto gemino obtutu circulatorem aspexi equestrem spatham praeacutam mucrone infesto devorasse**; ac mox eundem invitamento exiguae stipis venatoriam lanceam, qua parte minatur exitium, in ima viscera condidisse. et ecce pone lanceae ferrum, qua bacillum inversi teli ad occipitium per ingluviem subit, puer in mollitiem decorus insurgit inque flexibus tortuosis enervam et exossam saltationem explicat, cum omnium qui aderamus admiratione.

Just last night in a friendly competition, while I was striving to gulp down a rather large morsel of cheesy polenta, **I was *this close* to dying from the softness of the sticky food, which clung to my throat and blocked my breath’s course**. **But recently in Athens, in front of the Stoa Poikile, I saw, with my own two eyes, a street artist swallow a really sharp cavalry sword with a deadly point.** Soon after that, the same guy, with the encouragement of a small contribution, buried a hunting lance (pointy end first) into the very depths of his insides. And look, there’s more – above the metal part of the lance, where the staff of the upside-down weapon advanced through his throat towards the back of his head, a beautifully effeminate boy lifted himself up and unfolded with winding curves a slack and boneless jig, to the wonder of all present.

IX. The ass’s feast (*Met*. 10.16)

novitate spectaculi laetus dominus aedium duci me iussit, immo vero suis etiam ipse manibus ad triclinium perduxit, mensaque posita omne genus edulium solidorum et illibata fercula iussit apponi. **at ego, quamquam iam bellule suffarcinatus, gratiosum commendatioremque me tamen ei facere cupiens, esurienter exhibitas escas appetebam.** nam et **quid potissimum abhorreret asino** excogitantes scrupulose, ad explorandam mansuetudinem id offerebant mihi, carnes lasere infectas, altilia pipere inspersa, pisces exotico iure perfusos. interim convivium summo risu personabat.

The master of the house, delighted by the spectacle’s novelty, ordered that I be led (more like he guided me himself to the triclinium, with his own hands), and with the table set up he ordered every kind of whole food and untouched dish to be laid out. **Even though I was already pretty stuffed, because I wanted to make myself pleasing and quite agreeable, I hungrily attacked the displayed dishes.** They carefully considered just **what thing might be most disgusting to an ass**, and then offered it to me in order to test my tractability: meats flavored with laserwort, plump hens sprinkled with pepper, fish marinated in exotic sauce. Amid all this the dining hall echoed with sidesplitting laughter.

Bibliography

de Jong, I. 2001. “The Prologue as a Pseudo-Dialogue and the Identity of Its (Main) Speaker.” In *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius’* Metamorphoses, edited by Ahuvia Kahane and Andrew Laird, 201–12. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dowden, K. 2006. “A Tale of Two Texts: Apuleius’ *sermo Milesius* and Plato’s *Symposium*.” In *Lectiones Scrupulosae. Essays on the Text and Interpretation of Apuleius’* Metamorphoses *in Honour of Maaike Zimmerman*, edited by Wytse H. Keulen, Ruurd R. Nauta, and Stelios Panayotakis, 42–58. Ancient Narrative, Suppl. 6. Groningen: Barkhuis.

Fletcher, R. 2014. *Apuleius’ Platonism: The Impersonation of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harrison, S. J. 2000. *Apuleius: A Latin Sophist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

James, P. 1987. *Unity in Diversity: A Study of Apuleius’ Metamorphoses with Particular Reference to the Narrator’s Art of Transformation and the Metamorphosis Motif in the Tale of Cupid and Psyche*. Hildesheim: Olms.

Lee, B. T. 2005. *Apuleius’ Florida: A Commentary*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Merkelbach, R. 1962. *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike*. München: Beck.

Miller, W. I. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press.

Moreschini, C. 2015. *Apuleius and the Metamorphoses of Platonism*. Turnhout: Brepols Publishers.

Perry, B. E. 1967. *The Ancient Romances. A Literary-Historical Account of Their Origins.* Sather Classical Lectures, 37. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shumate, N. 1996. *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius’ Metamorphoses*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Winkler, J. J. 1985. *Auctor and Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius’ Golden Ass*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Zimmerman, M. 2000. *Apuleius Madaurensis, Metamorphoses. Book X: Text, Introduction and Commentary*. Groningen: Forsten.

1. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)