

*Sanguinis Eruptionem: Abjection and Forced Feminization in the Aristomenes Episode of Apuleius' Metamorphoses*

In book one of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, Aristomenes tells Lucius about two witches, Meroe and Penthia, who cut open the throat of his friend, Socrates, to replace his heart with a sponge as punishment for his infidelity to Meroe. I suggest that this should be read as a rape: Socrates is made to experience the sexual maturing of a young girl through *menarche*, precedes a violent loss of his virginity from the newly created vulva (Met. 241-42). In this inversion of the Roman sexual hierarchy, Socrates becomes both physically and socially feminine as Meroe takes on a masculine, penetrative role. Within the context of the novel, this serves as a portent against Lucius' pleasure-seeking (Von Franz 1992), as both Socrates and Lucius transgress into femininity and partake in sexual indulgence (Keulen 2003).

Assaf Krebs argues that in this scene, both the body and the sexual hierarchy are dissolved, and he suggests a phenomenological reading geared toward the transformed bodies, including Socrates' transformation to feminine, then masculine, and back to feminine (Krebs 2018). The sexually dense language in this scene does indicate gendered changes in Socrates' body that blur the hierarchy between the masculine and feminine, as Socrates is physically feminized through the creation of a vulva in his neck and replacement of his heart with a sponge (Krebs 2018). However, I suggest that the attack is better understood as a rape wherein Socrates is *only* forcibly feminized, never to return to his masculine state, indicated by the first burst of blood comes from the wound, signaling menstruation. This is an inversion of the hierarchy with respect to both his sexual and social status, rather than a dissolution. I argue that Socrates should be read as having a feminine coming of age, with the stages of the attack mirroring a girl's progression from *menarche*, loss of virginity by rape, and a further progression to womanhood

when his heart is replaced with a sponge, which gives him Hippocratic feminine flesh (trns. Lefkowitz and Fant). This ritual is then completed when Socrates dies, which represents not only his social death as a male, but also the close link between defloration and death for young women (Franzen 2009).

My reading of this episode expands upon the theoretical framework proposed by Kelsey Schalo (2020), where she applies Foucault's Penetrative model in tandem with Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject to discuss the "empowerment of the abject" (Schalo 2020) in female sexuality within *Metamorphoses*, is particularly expressed through the witches. Kristeva's theory addresses menstrual blood, saying that it "stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate" (Kristeva 71). The witches rape Socrates through weaponization of the abject not only to empower themselves to the masculine, as Schalo argues, but also to punish Socrates into the feminine. The tumultuous relationship between the sexes is communicated to Lucius through the threat of abjection, which is a consequence that he faces because of his over-indulgence.

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