

This is the first volume dedicated to the topic of characterisation in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, the Latin novel from the second century CE. The subject has not been ignored in recent scholarship on individual characters in the work, but the lack of an earlier general overview of the topic reflects the general history of scholarship on the *Metamorphoses*. Literature on Apuleius' novel until the 1960s centred around the issue of his general literary quality, and some key scholars held distinctly low estimates of Apuleius' talents. Since 1970, most critics have seen Apuleius as a conscious and effective literary artist, and this is reflected in the emergence of this volume.

The volume's contributors are a distinguished collection of international scholars, many of whom have worked together on the long-established *Groningen Commentaries on Apuleius*, a project which is currently coming to completion. No ideological line has been imposed, and contributors have been free to offer their thoughts on how the text of the novel presents particular characters, including divine ones. The volume covers the whole of the novel and all the significant characters, and will constitute a substantial contribution to the interpretation of the most important Latin novel to survive complete from the ancient world.

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Characterisation in Apuleius'
Metamorphoses

Stephen Harrison

Characterisation in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*

NINE STUDIES



Edited by

STEPHEN HARRISON

dicite, Pierides: non omnia
PIERIDES
possimus omnes

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in Apuleius'
Metamorphoses

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CHAPTER SIX

THE ROBBERS AND THE OLD WOMAN (*METAMORPHOSES* BOOKS 3.28-7.12)

LUCA GRAVERINI

1: Robbers in the *Metamorphoses*

The role of robbers and outlaws in the plot of the *Metamorphoses* becomes more and more important from the first book to the long story of Charite and Tlepolemus, and in the recapitulation of Lucius' adventures offered by the priest Mithras at 11.15.3 they come first in the list of Lucius' persecutors. Their first appearance is rather discreet: at 1.7.6 Socrates tells his friend Aristomenes that he has been "set up by monstrous bandits and stripped of everything",¹ but we are not given any further detail. Robber bands are clearly perceived as a serious threat in the narrative world: when Aristomenes asks the inn-keeper to let him out in the middle of the night, he refuses because "the roads are infested with robbers" (1.15.2); then, at 1.23.2 Milo says that he cannot adequately furnish his small house for fear of burglars.² At 2.15.3 a band of bandits attacks the Chaldaean Diophanes and his fellow travellers, and his brother gets killed. At the end of Book 2, Lucius mistakes three animated wineskins for "robbers, and very bloodthirsty ones at that" (2.32.3); the blunder is made easier by darkness and Lucius' drunkenness, but also by the feeling that one always has to guard against the threat of outlaws: at 2.18.3, Photis had warned him that

¹ Translations from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* are by Hanson (1989), occasionally with slight adaptations.

² Milo's remark is clearly an exaggeration, coherent with his comic depiction as a *miser*; nevertheless, it contributes to reinforce the idea that robbers pose a constant threat - cf. *GCA* (2007) 406, ad loc.

the streets of Hypata are often raided by “an insane gang of young aristocrats”, and therefore it is not impossible to see “people lying murdered everywhere out in the street”.

1a: Robber gangs: plot-motors, between reality and fiction

At this point, we need to consider shortly to what extent this dangerous narrative world is the free product of Apuleius’ fantasy, or a faithful representation of real life in his times. There has been a wealth of studies in recent years trying to assess the degree of historicity of Apuleius’ fiction;³ this kind of research involves major methodological and practical problems,⁴ but it now allows us to safely assume that there is a solid basis of reality to Apuleius’ account of the robbers, although he tends to exaggerate their cruelty and their influence on everyday life.⁵ This exaggeration is connected with an evident effort, on Apuleius’ part, to aggrandise his robbers and give them an epic/heroic status.

As we have seen, the first two books do not go very far in the way of giving any robber a well-developed personality: robbers are not individual characters but only *factiones*, “gangs”, and we do not know anything about them except the fact that they are, indeed, robbers. Their first tentative characterisation occurs in Book 3, when the three wineskins Lucius ‘killed’ at the end of Book 2 become the *corpus delicti* in his farcical trial: the opposing parties describe them as terrible bandits⁶ or innocent young citizens,⁷ but understandably enough the wineskins/robbers remain anonymous. Several literary genres are exploited in chapters 3.1-9 to provide the narration with a noble patina: epic,⁸ rhetoric,⁹ tragedy and

³ Most recently and thoroughly Riess (2000-2001) and (2001); a classic study is Millar (1981). More references in Riess (2000-2001) 260 n. 1.

⁴ There are obviously problems regarding the amount of available historical evidence and its statistical representativeness; even more important are the issues one has to face when trying to use a work of fiction as the source of socio-historical data.

⁵ See e.g. Riess (2000-2001), esp. 270-271.

⁶ 3.5.2: *saeuissimos latrones*; 3.5.6: *extremos latrones*; 3.5.8: *barbari prorsus et immanes homines*.

⁷ 3.8.3: *miseremini indigne caesorum iuuenum*; 3.9.4 on their *forma* and *aetas*.

⁸ Most notably the unequivocally Homeric beginning of the book, on which see Harrison (2003) 244.

⁹ See e.g. van der Paardt’s commentary [(1971) 63-64] on Lucius’ defence speech at 3.4.3-6.5.

comedy,¹⁰ historiography.¹¹ However, at 3.9.9 we discover (if we did not suspect that already) that all this literary display was only leading to a spectacular anticlimax: in fact, the whole trial was just an elaborate practical joke at Lucius' expense in honour of the god Risus.

Although this first characterisation is nothing else than a hoax, we do not have to wait much to see 'real' bandits in action. Shortly after the *Risus* festival they make their dramatic entrance into the novel (3.28.1) and take Lucius-ass away from Hypata, starting off the long series of his vicissitudes. Whether fake or real, robbers are one of the most efficient plot-motors in Apuleius' novel; in this, the *Metamorphoses* follows the tradition already established by the Greek novels, crowded with robbers, pirates, kidnappers, and all sorts of criminals, who constantly persecute the main characters, condition their actions, and make them move through vast geographic areas and down the social ladder;¹² in Apuleius, as we have seen, Mithras appropriately mentions them first in his list at 11.15 of forces in the service of blind Fortune, the almighty goddess that governs the plot of Books 1-10.

1b: Towards a more detailed characterisation: epic models and their novelistic adaptation

Far from always staying mere narrative devices, in some cases the robbers become more fully fledged characters, both collectively and individually. Their sudden appearance at Milo's house is described in terms that suggest the sudden attack of a well organised army:

Nec mora cum ui patefactis aedibus globus latronum inuadit omnia, et singula domus membra cingit armata factio, et auxiliis hinc inde conuolantibus obsistit discursus hostilis. Cuncti gladiis et facibus instructi noctem illuminant; coruscat in modum ortiui solis ignis et mucro. (3.28.1-2)

"Instantly the doors were forced open and a troop of robbers invaded the

¹⁰ See May (2006) 182-207.

¹¹ See e.g. the direct speech of one of the 'robbers' quoted by Lucius at 3.5.3-5, with Graverini (1997) 270-271; or the use of expressions like *dirigitur proelii acies* at 3.6.1, with van der Paardt (1971) ad loc.

¹² Cf. MacKay (1963) 147. He traces the origin of the 'pirate motif' to Euripides' *Hypsipyle* (148), but one might also go back to Odysseus' 'Cretan' stories in the *Odyssey* (see 1d in this chapter).

whole place, an armed band occupied every part of the house, and some of the marauders blocked off the help that came swarming up from every direction. The men, all armed with swords and torches, lit up the night, the fire and steel flashed like the rising sun.”

Globus is a strictly military term;¹³ the idea of a clash between opposing armies, or of the siege of a big city, is also reinforced by such expressions as *inuadit*, *singula domus membra cingit armata factio*, *auxiliis*, and *discursus hostilis*.¹⁴ The use of this kind of language, that is clearly reminiscent of historiography, might convey the idea of a certain ‘realism’ (although a rather magniloquent one) in the description of this scene.¹⁵ Apuleius, however, goes beyond the characterisation of these robbers as an army, and even provides them with a kind of poetic and epic nobility in the final phrase: for the bright glare of the swords compare e.g. Turnus who *strictumque coruscat / mucronem* (“brandishes his naked blade”) in Vergil, *Aen.* 10.651-652.¹⁶ The small house of the stingy Milo appears to grow larger during their attack too: it now has *membra* (“wings”) and even an army (the *auxilia*) to defend it,¹⁷ while the word *gazae* is used for his treasure at 3.28.3, which might remind the reader of Troy’s treasure in Vergil, *Aen.* 1.119 and 2.763.¹⁸ The novel, as it seems, always seizes an opportunity to use exaggeration and magniloquence.

This is confirmed at 4.6 by the description of the robbers’ hideout, a cave on the side of a steep mountain. Of course, a robbers’ den has to be hidden and hard to reach, but its sophisticated *ecphrasis* as a *locus horridus* also introduces the reader into a literary space that is clearly

¹³ *ThLL* 2055.3-5; cf. van der Paardt (1971) ad loc.

¹⁴ For *discursus* see *ThLL* 1369.13-74 (*praecipue militum huc illuc uagantium*). More examples from Lamachus’ story in Book 4 are provided by *GCA* (1977) 208-9, *Appendix 1: military terms in the robber episode*.

¹⁵ On the army-like organisation of robber gangs see Riess (2001) 43; on the fact that many robbers were actually former soldiers, Riess (2001) 72-76, and Garraffoni (2004). This kind of organisation of bandits, in any case, is typical in the ancient novel: see e.g. the *boukolois* in Achilles Tatius 4.11-18; or Theron recruiting his ‘army’ in Chariton 1.7.

¹⁶ *Trnsl.* Fairclough (1950). Apuleius is following an established epic tradition here: the association of *mucro* with the verb *corusco* or the adjective *coruscus* became standard in post-Vergilian epic (see e.g. *Sil. It. Pun.* 2.242 and 17.458; *Stat. Theb.* 1.614; 9.542; 10.774).

¹⁷ On this contradiction see van Mal-Maeder (1995) 104-115.

¹⁸ The word means *stricto sensu* “opes regiae” or “opes ciuitatum”: see *ThLL* s.v. *gaza*, 1721.60-1722.26.

connected with tragedy and, again, epic.¹⁹ Nothing good, and nothing low or trivial, is likely to happen in such a place. In fact, as soon as another band joins the first one in the cave, a banquet takes place which is worthy of the Lapiths and Centaurs (4.8.5): a parallel proverbial for its barbaric excesses, but still a form of epic aggrandisement not at all inappropriate for a group of outlaws who live on the fringe of society.²⁰ Then, in keeping with the epic tradition, a retrospective narration of past battles and adventures takes place at the end of the banquet.

Despite these lofty traits, it is also evident that the robbers cannot consistently live up to their heroic models, and often fall back on a more prosaic, everyday ‘reality’. For example, one of the robbers who had attacked Milo’s house exposes the low nature of the other band’s exploits: “you, honest robbers, with your petty, slavish pilferings, are just junk-dealers creeping timidly through baths and old ladies’ apartments” (4.8.9). Can robbers like that rightly aspire to mythic grandeur – even to that of such savage and heinous characters as the Lapiths and Centaurs?

In fact, there are several textual indicators in the three following stories of Lamachus, Alcimus and Thrasyleon showing that they do. Their names already hint at their ambitions:²¹ Lamachus was a famous fifth-century general, Alcimus means ‘the strong one’, and Thrasyleon is ‘Lionheart’.²² The description of their deeds also owes something to epic models: Thrasyleon’s stratagem to sneak into Demochares’ house, for example, has long been recognised as a sort of re-enactment of the taking of Troy through Odysseus’ trick of the Wooden Horse.²³

Yet, in another way, the answer to the same question is obviously that epic loftiness does not suit them at all: nothing can really make us forget that these are common robbers and not great generals of the past or mythical heroes. The problem is not their lack of success: an epic or tragic hero can indeed fail, like Hector; and failure is actually the norm for the hero’s antagonists, like the Cyclops. It is not the fact that they are involved

¹⁹ For a thorough analysis of this description and its models (especially Vergil and Seneca) see Schiesaro (1985).

²⁰ It is also somehow justified by geography: the original mythical banquet was like our robbers’ den located in Thessaly.

²¹ Those who raided Milo’s house remain anonymous, but their spokesman is described as the strongest of all: 4.8.6 *unus, qui robore ceteros antistabat* – a sort of Ajax. On this kind of characterisation see 1c in this chapter on Haemus.

²² Cf. Walsh [(1970) 158] on these names. For Haemus (‘the bloody one’) at 7.5.6 see Nicolini’s chapter in this volume.

²³ See Finkelpearl [(1998) 92-96] with further literature.

in trivial and unheroic deeds either: that can also happen to an epic or tragic character, like Ajax when he slaughtered the flock of sheep. Apuleius' robbers are motivated by the hope of material gain, but again this is also true for many epic characters: in Book 10 of the *Iliad* a second-rate hero like Dolon seems to risk his life more in order to obtain a rich reward than to prove his valour, and even Odysseus and Diomedes extend their dangerous espionage mission to capture Rhesus' horses. There certainly is a quantitative difference: failures and petty motives, that only occasionally appear in epic literature, are prominent features of Apuleius' robbers. However, on a more fundamental level, the problem is simply that, as robbers, Apuleius' characters cannot but be a representation of a contemporary and lowly socio-historical reality that his readers know very well: a reality that is irremediably inconsistent with epic and myth.

1c: Parody and the rules of the genre

Apuleius' robbers are complex characters. They are just robbers, and not always particularly successful ones at that, the dregs of contemporary society; yet, through their words, names, physical features, moral qualities and actions they often remind the reader of a lofty, mythic, ancient and irrecoverably lost literary world. This contrasting and unstable characterisation has often been interpreted in terms of parody and humorous discrepancy between *uerba* and *res*; the idea of 'epic inversions' that produce comic effects is also often suggested.²⁴ This can certainly be the case in some places: for example, there is an unmistakable comic side to the story of Alcimus defeated by a cunning old woman at 4.12, and the grisly and very high-flown description of his death "gives a theatrical emphasis to his sorry end".²⁵ Nevertheless, it would be misleading to imply that epic traits applied to lowly characters are always meant to produce comic effects: this kind of characterisation is also due to other, perhaps more important reasons.

First of all, we should take structural necessities into consideration. Through Books 1-3 the main character Lucius becomes more and more clearly a sort of epic hero, who in some cases adopts but in other cases

²⁴ See e.g. Frangoulidis (1991) and (1992); Loporcaro (1992); Harrison (2002) 45-7). For a caveat against the excessive use of parody as hermeneutic category in Apuleius, especially if we consider it as an essentially comic device, see Lazzarini (1985) 131-133.

²⁵ Westerbrink (1978) 67.

subverts the epic honour-code (for example, at 3.19.6 he “does not long for his return” to stay with his lovely Photis).²⁶ the antagonists of such a character all too naturally share the same dynamic of adoption of epic values and unwillingness or impossibility to really behave according to them. The robbers, of course, fall short of ‘real’ *uirtus*, but this is also true for Lucius, who falls short of Odyssean *prudencia*.²⁷ As Warren Smith puts it, “the robbers see themselves in a world of kings, generals, and battles rather than one of low crime”;²⁸ but then again, also Lucius sees himself as the scion of a noble family of philosophers who is embarked in a sort of ‘quest for knowledge’,²⁹ only to find himself metamorphosed into an ass. Both Lucius and his antagonists aspire to epic grandeur but are brought down by the hard contact with ‘reality’.

This hard fall from the heights of epic literature does not necessarily (with emphasis on “necessarily”) create effects of parody, inversion, or humorous contrast between *uerba* and *res*. For example, the story of Thrasyleon cannot be described in these terms. The actions of Thrasyleon and his band (4.12-21), more than the language Apuleius uses to describe them, evoke epic models, and in particular Vergil’s *Iliouperisis*.³⁰ The reader clearly feels that something is out of place there, but it is certainly not, or not only, a dissonance between *uerba* and *res*. Through both words and actions, the text suggests an epic model, and this model is perceived by the reader at the same time as appropriate and inappropriate: there are some analogies in the narrative pattern, but Odysseus is an unattainable model for Thrasyleon – the epic hero is inevitably ‘larger than life’, the robber is not. ‘Epic inversion’ would not appropriately describe the situation, either: there might be something grotesque in Thrasyleon’s story, his band is certainly not successful, but there is real cunning and courage in his actions. Finally, in spite of some out-of-place magniloquence, there is also pathos in these chapters, which makes it difficult to read them as a sustained parody of their epic model.³¹ There is no clear and humorous

²⁶ Cf. Graverini (2012b) 151-152; see also Graverini (2014) for a more general outlook on the adoption/subversion of epic codes by novelistic characters.

²⁷ 9.13.4-5. This seems to change in Book 11: see Graverini (2012a) 92-96.

²⁸ Smith (1994) 1595.

²⁹ Winkler [(1985) 257] was the first to suggest that “the very structure of the *astale* is a parody of the theme of a restless quest for a revelation”; see also Graverini [(2012a) 89-94] for a critical revision of this idea.

³⁰ The parallel is clear enough, but the verbal connections are surprisingly few and subtle; see above, n.23.

³¹ The ancient idea of parody was certainly different from the modern one (see

inversion of epic codes in this story: rather, we can detect a complex web of analogies and differences.

This imperfect parallelism with epic literature is not limited to the robbers, and is a generic feature of the ancient novel itself. Ancient prose narrative was in many ways an heir of the epic tradition,³² nevertheless, the novel creates its own literary space in the world of reality and verisimilitude, and cannot leave it for long to enjoy the freedom allowed by myth, which is the realm of epic and tragedy. The novel can only emulate epic in some ways and to a limited extent, but this does not imply that the epic identity be completely lost: there are some changes an epic hero necessarily has to undergo to adjust to a novelistic environment, and some established strategies a writer can adopt to make this adjustment easier. The metamorphosis from epic-style to novelistic is a smoother process than the simple, outright inversion of some traits (brave to coward, noble to vile, and so on), and it does not necessarily result in a stark black-and-white characterisation that could only be interpreted as parody.

This is clearly shown in the description of the robber who is characterised in greater detail – and who, paradoxically enough, is no robber at all. Tlepolemus takes on the name of Haemus, ‘the bloody one’, and infiltrates the gang of bandits who have kidnapped his fiancée Charite. He is introduced and described at 7.5.2-3:

... immanem quendam iuuenem... nescio an ulli praesentium comparandum – nam praeter ceteram corporis molem toto uertice cunctos antepollebat et ei commodum lanugo malis inserpebat – sed plane centunculis disparibus et male consarcinatis semiamictum, inter quos pectus et uenter crustata crassitie relucitabant.

“... an enormous youth... hardly to be compared with any of those present. In addition to the general massiveness of the build, he stood a whole head higher than all of them, and a beard was just beginning to overspread his cheeks. But he was half-clothed in a veritable patchwork, ill-fitting and badly stitched together. Among those rags his chest and belly glistened, packed with muscle”.

Westerbrink [(1978) 72 n. 1] for literature on this subject), but in both cases some degree of comic and humour is involved. Quintilian, for example, considers it as a means of producing *urbanitas* at 6.3.97; cf. 8.6.74 for the connection of *urbanitas* with laughter.

³² Of course, there is a vast literature on this subject. See e.g. my chapter 1.4 (pp. 36-39) in Graverini-Keulen-Barchiesi (2006), with further literature at p. 58.

Caterina Lazzarini³³ has thoroughly analysed this passage and found that there is an internal tension between the defining traits of this character. Haemus is tall, big and strong, almost described as a second Ajax (cf. *Il.* 3.226-227) or a new Turnus (*Aen.* 7.783-784); but he is also very young, so much so that he is only beginning to grow a thin beard. This contrast between heroic exaggeration and extreme youth is often explained as epic inversion having parodic intent.³⁴ Yet, as Lazzarini notes, the topos of the first *lanugo* on the hero's cheeks is also an epic one:³⁵ the closest parallel is in the *Aeneid*, where Vergil describes Cydon's squire and lover Clytius (10.324-325), but compare also Hermes in Homer, *Il.* 24.348 (cf. Apul. *Apol.* 63) and the two sons of Iphimedeia, extremely tall and large but still beardless in *Od.* 11.307-320. More parallels could be provided,³⁶ but it is clear enough that Haemus' juvenile features are still within the domain of epic, a niche epic that leaves some space to pathetic and erotic, rather than heroic and warlike elements. Haemus freely mixes virile, Ajax-style strength with features that are typical of minor epic characters, and will be fully developed by elegiac and erotic poetry.³⁷

In fact, Haemus/Tlepolemus is repeatedly characterised as having both epic and elegiac features: his introduction as a warlike hero and at the same time as a youngster not yet completely grown into a man could be considered as an appropriate prelude to his genre-crossing and even gender-crossing capacities.³⁸ He goes so far as cross-dressing at 7.8.1,³⁹

³³ Lazzarini (1985) 154-160.

³⁴ See e.g. Frangoulidis [(1992) 73], who emphasises the “comic tone of the narrative”, followed by Riess (2001) 256 n. 43; Lazzarini herself [(1985) 156] sees a “parodic element” in Haemus' contrasting description.

³⁵ Lazzarini (1985) 156; see also Nicolini [(2000) 219, ad loc.] for further (“even then my beardless cheeks glistened with the smoothness of boyhood”).

³⁶ For a collection of passages see Kenney [(1990) 150] on Apul. *Met.* 5.8.4; Nicolini [(2000) 219] on *Met.* 7.5.4; add Valerius Flaccus' description of Pollux at 4.232-235 and see also below, n. 47. The squalor of the rags Haemus wears can be considered an instance of the tragic *Telephusmotiv* according to Lazzarini (1985) 156 and n. 71.

³⁷ On *lanugo* in erotic contexts see Theoc. 6.3; 11.9 (Cyclops); 15.85 (Adonis); Calp. Sic. 2.87; Ov. *Am.* 1.14.23; *Her.* 15.85; *Met.* 9.398; 13.754; Mart. 1.31.5; 2.61.1; 9.36.5; 10.42.1.

³⁸ On characters provided with contrasting features see also Nicolini, Chapter 7 in this volume, which points out that the composition of Tlepolemus' character is as much a patchwork as his clothes, and suggests that such contrasts can also be explained as adaptations to different narrative contexts and as the result of the influence of different models.

when he needs to seek refuge from a persecutor, Plotina, who in turn disguises herself as a man. He also does a short stint as a cook and waiter, apparently becoming a comic character at 7.11.3.⁴⁰ When he conquers the brigands he appears as a reincarnation of Odysseus taking Troy or killing the Cyclops.⁴¹ Finally, the episode of his murder at the hands of Thrasyllus in 8.4-5 plays on the different conventions of the harmless and elegiac small game hunting and of dangerous, epic big game hunting.⁴²

A learned and blasé reader might certainly smile at this particular *mélange*. Nevertheless, this is not epic inversion or parody, but a more sophisticated process of transformation which is not mainly intended to provoke amusement: selection of minor characters and less manly features, gender shifts, and contamination of genres are among the techniques all ancient novelists use to adjust epic characters to a novelistic world. This transformation and adaptation strategy is typical of the genre, and was already a standard in prose narrative long before Apuleius.⁴³

1d: Greek and Latin fictional outlaws

We can support this view by comparing a scene from a Greek novel that is not usually considered as having a strong parodic or comic vein. In Chariton 3.3.17-18 and 3.4.8-9 the pirate Theron tries to conceal his true identity from his captors by telling false stories; in both cases he pretends to be a Cretan, victim of adversities and treason. This is a lie of course, but not a casual one: Odysseus, back in Ithaca, resorts to very similar false narratives, and like Theron he repeatedly claims to be a Cretan fallen into disgrace (*Od.* 13.256 ff.; 14.199 ff.; 19.165 ff.). The fact that Theron mentions Cephalonia (3.3.18) as a landmark in his travels can be considered as a not-too-subtle hint at this Homeric precedent, given the obvious links the island has with Odysseus (cf. e.g. *Il.* 2.631 and *Od.* 24.355). It might also be noted that Cephalonia is a rather unlikely stop for one who, like Theron, alleges that he is sailing from Crete to Ionia: it is clearly not mentioned to provide his account with geographical

³⁹ Even in this case Haemus has a lofty precedent: Thetis (or Peleus) hid Achilles on Skyros and disguised him as a girl in order to make him avoid the dangers of the Trojan war. Haemus is not the only novelistic character to follow his example: cf. Achilles Tatius' robbers at 2.18.3, and especially Cleitophon at 6.1.1-3.

⁴⁰ See also Nicolini, Chapter 7 in this volume.

⁴¹ See e.g. Lazzarini (1985) 159-160.

⁴² See Graverini (2009).

⁴³ On this, see more thoroughly Graverini (2014).

verisimilitude. So, the pirate Theron is presented as a sort of Odyssean character in these chapters. His Odysseus is closer to the ragged old man who tells false short stories in the second half of the *Odyssey* than to the great hero and narrator of the rest of the poem; he is a partial and provocative, but not preposterously implausible reinterpretation of an epic hero who was, after all, a sort of patron saint of all liars.⁴⁴

Is this parody? Not at all – there is certainly no trace of humour in this passage, and the epic characterisation of Theron only adds to the pathos of the episode. Of course there is a great distance between Theron and Odysseus; but the same is also true for Chaereas, the main character. He is a descendant of Odysseus too, so much so that, for example, his final reunion with Callirhoe at 8.1.17 is celebrated with a quotation of *Od.* 23.296, where the epic hero is finally welcomed by Penelope in their old bed. Yet, nothing could be more different from Odysseus than the irascible, violent, undecided, and even suicidal Chaereas of the first books of the novel. One might even say that Callirhoe is a better epic character than Chaereas: appropriately enough, she gets the honour of closing the first book with going to sleep, in the manner of Homeric heroes.⁴⁵ Again, selection of features and preference for secondary traits, gender shifts, a subtle balance of correspondences and differences: this is the working of the novel, its way of adapting epic models to a new and different narrative world.

To sum up, there are important elements of continuity between Apuleius and the Greek novels in their characterisation of robbers. One cannot deny, however, that the connection with epic literature is more prominent, consistent and sophisticated in Apuleius than in most of his Greek counterparts; this is especially clear if we consider that most of the robbers' epic features are concentrated in parts of the novel that are supposedly Apuleius' additions to the plot he found in Lucius of Patrae's lost *Metamorphoseis*.⁴⁶ If *Onos* 21.3 reproduces well enough the lost in the

⁴⁴ Cf. Lucian, *VH* 1.3: "The founder of this school of literary horseplay is Odysseus, with his stories at Alcinous' court of winds enslaved and men with one eye..." Already in the *Odyssey* he can tell "many lies that look like truths" (*Od.* 23.203); he perfectly symbolises and anticipates the novel's new narrative world, where verisimilitude rules instead of myth.

⁴⁵ On this topic see e.g. Harrison (2003).

⁴⁶ It seems to be impossible to define precisely how much (if anything) of the three robber stories in Book 4 Apuleius found in his lost model, but scholars usually emphasise Apuleius' originality in this part of the *Metamorphoses*. See Loporcaro

Greek original, for example, there we find an unnamed robber who could have provided a model for the ambiguous characterisation of Haemus/Tlepolemus we have examined above. He is only very rapidly sketched as a “big, tall, formidable-looking youth”: a turn of phrase that is perhaps capable of reminding the reader of such figures as the epic heroes mentioned above or Alexander the Great,⁴⁷ but this young bandit cannot certainly compare to Apuleius’ elaborate and allusive description of Charite’s fiancée we have analysed above. Increased complexity and a special emphasis on epic models are indeed a signature of Apuleius’ literary technique.

2: The Old Woman

Lucius’ kidnappers have a decrepit and drunken old woman in their service (4.7.1); she is entrusted with the important task of taking care of her masters’ *salus atque tutela* (“health and upkeep”), but they clearly show her no respect or gratitude. They address her very rudely as a useless lazy old crone at 4.7.2-3; both the wording and the contents of their apostrophe introduce her as a comic character.⁴⁸ She is never named, and usually stays within the confines of the very subordinate role she has in the Pseudo-Lucianic *Onos* (20-24) and probably in the lost Greek original as well: she is ordered to guard and console Charite, a young girl kidnapped by the brigands, at 4.24.2; she tries in vain to prevent Lucius and Charite from escaping from the robbers’ den at 6.27.1-5;⁴⁹ she ends up by hanging herself for fear of retribution at 6.30.6, and the robbers rid themselves of her corpse unceremoniously by dropping it from a precipice.

Besides these analogies, and excepting Apuleius’ usual tendency to

[(1992) 75-77] for a survey of the literature on this subject; Mason (1994) on the relationship between the three ass-novels.

⁴⁷ *Onos* 21.3: for the epic heroes see above, p. 90f. For Alexander’s formidable physique see *Historia Alexandri*, Rec. E 38.7. In the mosaic at the Museo Nazionale di Napoli, originally from the House of the Faun at Pompeii, the great general is represented as a youth still growing a partial beard.

⁴⁸ See *GCA* (1977) 63-66; May (2006) 252-253.

⁴⁹ A slapstick scene, whose theatrical qualities are almost explicitly pointed out at the end: 6.27.4-5: *illa uirgo captiua... uidet hercules memorandi spectaculi scaenam, non tauro, sed asino dependentem Dircen aniculam* (“the captive maiden... saw before her, by Hercules, a scene from a memorable show: an aged Dirce dangling from an ass instead of a bull”). The two final words might supply the title of a mime: cf. Graverini (2006) 13.

expand the narrative and dialogues he found in his model, there are two main differences between the old woman in the *Onos* and the corresponding character in the *Metamorphoses*.

2a: The old woman and her *anilis fabula*

The first difference is the fact that, while in the *Onos* (22.1) the old woman only guards Charite, Apuleius also makes her tell a long story to console the young captive girl: so, she becomes the narrator of *Cupid and Psyche*, the longest and most important secondary tale in the novel (4.28.1-6.24.4). This is not the place to investigate the meaning of this tale, its sophisticated literary texture, and its relevance in the narrative structure of the novel;⁵⁰ we will rather focus on the paradoxical fact that such a meaningful, sophisticated and important tale as *Cupid and Psyche* is told by such a lowly narrator as a drunken old woman.⁵¹ This paradox might appear even more important if we consider that, in fact, many of the inserted tales in the *Metamorphoses* are narrated by such a lowly narrator as a donkey; and that the whole novel, in the end, is the narration of a character who has been so foolish as to let himself be transformed into a donkey.

The text itself seems to point out that there is some deep parallelism on the narratological level between *Cupid and Psyche* and the novel that contains it, and therefore between the old woman and the main narrator of the novel: several scholars have noted the striking resemblance between *sed ego te narrationibus lepidis anilibusque fabulis protinus auocabo* (“but right now I shall divert you with a pretty story and an old wife’s tale”), the words with which the old woman introduces her tale at 4.27.8, and *at ego tibi... uarias fabulas conseram auresque tuas... lepido susurro permulceam* (“but I would like to tie together different sorts of tales for you... and to caress your ears into approval with a pretty whisper”), the beginning of the Prologue.⁵² In fact, entrusting lowly and unreliable narrators with important and meaningful narrations is a literary technique frequently adopted by satiric literature.⁵³ The *Metamorphoses* inscribes itself in this tradition: satiric self-belittlement is an important feature both

⁵⁰ See e.g. Zimmerman et al. (1998) and *GCA* (2004).

⁵¹ This has often struck readers and interpreters as strange and unrealistic: cf. e.g. May (2006) 251.

⁵² Winkler (1985) 53; see Graverini [(2012b) 30-31] with further references.

⁵³ See Graverini (2012b) 95-131; Graverini-Keulen (2009).

of the main narrator of the novel and, which concerns us most here, of the drunken old woman who narrates *Cupid and Psyche*. It is worth noting that this is not a common practice in the Greek novels: from this point of view, the old woman marks a departure from the models provided for Apuleius by the Greek narrative tradition. For example, in Chariton 1.11.1-2 Callirhoe and her kidnapper Theron are in a very similar situation to that which begins the story of *Cupid and Psyche* in Apuleius. The girl is in despair, and the pirate “consoles her, trying to deceive her through inventions of various genres”.⁵⁴ The usual consoling, entertaining, and deceiving power of narrative is clearly implied both in Chariton and in Apuleius; but there is no hint in Chariton that Theron’s ‘inventions’ have any particular importance or literary sophistication, and in fact they are only mentioned in passing and not fully reported.

Indeed, the case is different for *Cupid and Psyche*, although the old woman is certainly not a more dignified narrator than the pirate Theron. The key to understanding this paradoxical situation is the fact that the story is introduced, in the old woman’s own words, as an *anilis fabula*. Now, ‘old wives’ tales’, in all ancient literature from Plato onwards, is a derogatory definition for narratives that have no useful scope or meaning, and whose only goal is to offer entertainment. Satiric literature, however, often takes a self-ironic stance, and labels as ‘old wives’ tales’ stories that are, in fact, meant to provide some kind of useful, though usually very generic, moral or philosophical teaching: the best example is probably the celebrated tale of the two mice in Horace’s *Satire* 2.6, introduced at vv. 77-78 as *anilis... fabellas* told by the poet’s neighbour Cervius.⁵⁵

What is really striking in Apuleius’ treatment of this literary topos is that *Cupid and Psyche* is the one and only *anilis fabula* in ancient literature that is actually narrated by an old woman:⁵⁶ Apuleius, as it seems, turns the secondary character he found in his model into the narrative embodiment of a metaphorical expression.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ This statement might be compared to the Prologue’s programme in Apuleius, *uarias fabulas conseram auresque tuas... permulceam* (1.1).

⁵⁵ On all this see Graverini (2012b) 105-118.

⁵⁶ Cf. Graverini (2012b) 110.

⁵⁷ For other instances of this process in Apuleius see Keulen (2003b) 167-168; McCreight (2006) 125 and *passim*; Plaza (2006).

2b: *Delira et temulenta anicula*

The second difference is that in the *Metamorphoses* the old woman is described as a drunkard: this is first stated by the robbers at 4.7.3, and then stressed again by Lucius at 6.25.1 (*sic... delira et temulenta illa narrabat anicula*, “so ran the story told... by that crazy, drunken old woman”). The first passage is part of the initial introduction of the old woman as a low-life comic character, but the second, where madness is also added to the picture, might have a more specific function. Those words are Lucius’ comment at the end of the tale of *Cupid and Psyche*, a story allegedly told only to console Charite, which is apparently nothing more than a folk-tale, but which also shows many signs of high literary refinement and has some unmistakable epic features.⁵⁸ Since *furor* and inebriation are traditional features of the epic poet, Lucius’ comment could be read as summarising for the reader the complex nature of this tale by pointing out the poetic madness and drunkenness of the narrator.⁵⁹

Needless to say, this old woman cannot be on a par with Homer or Ennius: but perhaps she is not as distant from Horace’s satiric description of *uinusus Homerus* (“Homer the winebibber”) or of Ennius, who “never sprang forth to tell of arms save after much drinking”.⁶⁰ Again, this old woman makes us look at satire, a literary genre that, like the novel, lives and thrives by absorbing, metabolising, and bringing down to earth nobler genres.⁶¹ Her characterisation, in particular, might serve as an implicit assessment of the features of the tale she tells, and of its relationship with its literary models: as Stephen Harrison points out, the very choice of the narrator of *Cupid and Psyche* contributes to “transforming the lofty world of the epic into the more dubious domain of the novel”.⁶²

3: Conclusions

The novel is indeed a dubious and complex domain. Its characters live in a no-man’s land in ancient literary space, and frequently cross the borders of several genres such as epic, tragedy, historiography, comedy, satire – not to forget, of course, the ‘real’ world. In fact, one might say that their

⁵⁸ See e.g. Harrison (1998).

⁵⁹ Cf. Graverini (2003) 214-215.

⁶⁰ Hor. *Epist.* 1.19.3-8.

⁶¹ On the satiric features of Apuleius’ novel see Zimmerman (2007); Graverini (2012) 118-131.

⁶² Harrison (1998) 53.

complex literary patina helps to underline their fictionality, and to create that delicate balance between claims to truth and creative invention that is typical of the ancient novel.

One cannot deny that there is a high degree of artificiality to such an elaborate construction of characters, an artificiality Apuleius often seems to enhance in comparison to the Greek novelists. While they usually (although certainly not always) try to make discreet use of the tricks of their trade and to create a more harmonious blend out of different literary ingredients, Apuleius tends to show off his literary sophistication; he almost seems to invite his “careful reader” (cf. 9.30.1 and 11.23.5) to visit his workshop and admire the quality and variety of tools at his disposal. This can sometimes result in humorous and comic contrasts, but as we have seen one should not overestimate this aspect of novelistic writing. What is constantly there, instead, is certainly a tendency towards literary refinement, and a display of literary culture we could appropriately label as ‘sophistic’.⁶³

⁶³ For the ‘sophistic’ aspect of Apuleius’ career and production see Harrison (2000).

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